

Touching

THE LIVES
OF SOME

MEN & WOMEN

OF THE
HOLY
BIBLE

BISHOP YOUSSEF

Touching The Lives Of Some Men And Women Of The Holy Bible

Bishop Youssef

Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

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His Holiness Pope Tawadros II

118th Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch
of the See of St. Mark

About The Diocese

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III is the 116 Successor of St. Mark the Evangelist. His Holiness' era was marked by a remarkable growth in the number of Coptic Churches abroad. To address the needs of these churches, His Holiness felt the urgency to establish dioceses abroad. Thus, the first Coptic Orthodox Diocese to be established in the United States is the Diocese of the Southern United States. In 1993, H.H. Pope Shenouda III appointed His Grace Bishop Youssef to oversee this Diocese.

The Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States is comprised of the following states:

* Alabama

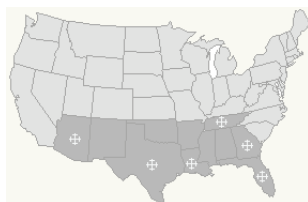
* Arkansas

* Georgia

* Mississippi

* Oklahoma

* Texas



* Arizona

* Florida

* Louisiana

* New Mexico

* Tennessee

There are currently 39 priests serving the 32 churches, and 26 Coptic communities located in the Diocese.

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Chapter One



Sarah

The First Matriarch

*A Strong Personality Accepted before God,
Nurtured in a Marriage of Mutual Love*

The Holy Bible has quite a number of female figures who have contributed to the making of human history, and played a role in the plan of God's salvation for mankind. However, none of them was up to the title of "matriarch". Like her husband, the patriarch of patriarchs, Sarah, though no explicit mention of her name, was the first woman in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:1). Sarah, a woman of loveliness and character manifested in her faith, faithfulness, determination, problem solving, reliance on God, and many other attributes, is the subject of this article.

Sarah in History

The Old Testament account of the beautiful woman Sarah begins with her marriage to Abraham; when he and his brother Nahor both "took wives". Sarah was married to Abraham in the region of Ur of the Chaldees, commonly recognized as Southern Iraq today. According to the Holy Bible, the story of Sarah took place during the staunch patriarchal times, when women were generally oppressed and their needs often disregarded. In the days prior to the Mosaic Law, marriage was mainly for convenience and reproduction, often taking place between family close relatives; a custom permitted by law and tradition, during the patriarchal times.

Sarah and Barrenness

The immediate and striking news following Sarah's having been "*taken as a wife*" (Genesis 11:29) is the Old Testament account of one of the most intimate and private husband-wife experiences. "*Sarah was barren; she had no child*" (Genesis 11:30). Sarah's fertility; a meaningful measure of a fruitful, successful marriage was

questioned—and had become a predominant focus on her family life and subsequently a sore point.

Sarah and Tradition

Offspring, especially male, were regarded essential for the sake of lineage continuity, as well as an outward manifestation of and reward for living an obedient godly life. Generally speaking, throughout the Hebrew history, women who could not bear children “for their husbands” were considered within their community as either forgotten or frowned upon by God for some untoward deed in their life.

Traditionally, along with marrying close relatives, having another woman conceive for a barren one was perhaps one of the traditions to which the Israelites acclimated from the surrounding nomadic cultures and idolaters while on their way to Canaan. After all, the surrounding environment did influence culture as proved in the Sodom and Gomorrah catastrophe resulting in Lot’s wife becoming a pillar of salt. Further back in retrospect, prior to Abraham and Sarah, Noah had one wife and three sons (each had one wife only) aboard the Ark.

Sarah and Hope

Sarah was not to bear children the first ninety years of her life. Much speculation must have gone quietly throughout their community as to why she could not provide Abraham with a child. Yet, Sarah was not depressed or incapacitated. She did not clothe herself in black, whine to Abraham in tears each day, nor revert to idol worship forsaking God. Her strength of character

is unspoken, and the reader of the Holy Bible account is very much aware that Sarah is not the typical wife. We can presuppose that, like any woman with maternal instinct, she desired to bear children. We can also presume that was Abraham's desire as well. In fact, God had already repeatedly promised to make Abraham and Sarah "*a great nation*" (Genesis 12:2).

Sarah and Her Problem Solving Approach

By the time Sarah had reached her mid-seventies; she surmised that she would never bear a child. She then made a decision that was to affect her rights and privileges in her married life. Having been instructed by his wife to "use" her servant Hagar (an Egyptian, not a Jew), to bear him a child, Abraham went ahead and did as he was told.

Scholars believe this to be an acceptable practice in the history of ancient Israel, noting the absolute necessity for continuing the family lineage. In forethought, certainly an Egyptian would most probably not be a threat to Sarah's standing as Abraham's wife, her position in the family, and her Jewish descent. Although Sarah's decision denotes weakness in her faith; yet, it reveals her genuine concern over the existing problem, and hence her daring, courageous spirit in taking desperate measures, most probably against her innermost desire, just for the sake of providing an acceptable diversion. Out of love for her husband, she wanted to ensure Abraham of descendants. She did not lie down and give up to depression or to her age; nor did she murmur or despair. Sarah took a step and action.

Sarah and Determinedness

In spite of some scholars' dispute over Sarah's "hasty" action as having subsequently incurred discontent with her choices; yet waiting for sixty or seventy years to bear a child is certainly patient enough, thus, making endurance a strong attribute in her character. Certainly, in God's sight, what Sarah lacked at that point was not so much forbearing with her circumstances as much as trust in Him.

Sarah's suggestion and Abraham's subsequent concession certainly leaves the ground open for constructing the blueprint of Sarah's character. Having her own maid and property as a surrogate mother to bear a child by her husband would challenge both fortitude as well as dogged determination. Yet, she went ahead and saw to it that her husband carried it out.

Sarah and the Ego

As soon as Hagar got pregnant by Abraham; "*her mistress became despised in her eyes*" (Genesis 16:4). It infuriated Sarah to see her slave exhibit such a demeaning behavior. "*The Lord judge between you and me*" (Genesis 16:5) were her words to Abraham. Why was Hagar's behavior so upsetting to Sarah; this is Sarah whom we know to be patient, strong, and proactive? Perhaps, the here-and-then confirmation of Abraham's fertility and hence the ultimate conclusion of her being otherwise, had now been pronounced clearly and publicly. Perhaps, Hagar's loyalty to Sarah had long been questioned—given the signs of her disdain. Hagar was Sarah's personal handmaiden, and therefore most probably had known what bearing a child from her own, womb would mean to Sarah.

Abraham's response to Sarah's outburst was in her favor. It is apparent that he had no great sympathy, nor did he try to understand the feelings of the one who was to bear his first born son. Could Abraham have simply seen Hagar as a handmaiden service provider? Abraham reminded Sarah that she had the right to discipline Hagar as she saw fit according to the custom of the day. Sarah dealt harshly with Hagar, so harshly that Hagar ran away and only the Angel of the Lord could return her to Abraham's camp where she bore Ishmael. This certainly reveals the suppressed feelings Sarah must have concealed within herself regarding her inability to bear children.

Sarah and Calamities

Two important focal events occurred during Sarah's traveling with her husband Abraham to Canaan which highlighted God's graciousness and mercy upon her as well as her integrity, faith, and long-suffering. Both incidents revolve around Abraham's concealing her true relationship to him as his wife, revealing only her blood kinship to him. Such half-truths had put her safety on the line right away; making her life vulnerable to suffering dire consequences. However, God intervened on her behalf at the right time. The first intervention by God on Sarah's behalf occurred in Egypt when Pharaoh desired to take Sarah. God inflicted Pharaoh's household with plague and disease; inevitably revealing the true nature of Abraham and Sarah's marital relationship. Thus, was Sarah rescued from Pharaoh's lustful desire for her! And Pharaoh ended up sending them away freely.

The second incident of God's gracious intervention occurred when Abraham again denied his marital bond to Sarah before

King Abimelech for fear of death and of Sarah's abduction because of her beauty. God intervened, revealing to the king Abraham's true status as God's prophet, promising that Abraham would pray for him, his wife, and his female servants to bear children; God ordered the king to release Abraham and Sarah. Evidently, "the Lord had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. After relenting, the king released the two. Thus, Sarah escaped adultery through God's continuing care for her.

Sarah and Faith

After witnessing God's past overt protection over her, and His timely intervention to deliver and save her from adultery and harm, one would wonder why Sarah laughed in disbelief after she had been told the good news of conceiving within a year from that time. Had she forgotten God's intervention on her behalf? Nevertheless, her laughter can be interpreted in her favor. It could be that her laughter sprang from her practicality and down-to-earth view of things. The Holy Bible tells us, "*Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'*" (Genesis 18:11-12).

If the Holy Bible itself states that Sarah had passed the age of childbearing; she too might have conformed to this fact as well, with her laughter being a reflexive response rather than one of sarcasm. Indeed, when confronted, she denied having laughed, thus, proving her eagerness to see the three men's prophecy come true. An argument in her favor is that Sarah had never

seen the three men before; naturally she found it difficult to take strangers at their word. Also, evidently, Sarah did not intend for the male visitors to hear her laughter, nor did she realize she was eavesdropping upon their conversation. After all, eavesdropping, springing from her naturally curious human nature was not the best thing to do. After they had acknowledged her laughter; she might have feared having been heard. We are not told that Abraham heard her laughter.

At the threshold of her nineties, Sarah was told that within one year she would have a child. Ishmael was a teenager when Sarah gave birth to Isaac; and so a whole nation was thus begotten. He grew up and befriended his older brother Ishmael, Hagar's son. When Isaac was three, Sarah discovered Ishmael teasing his half-brother, Isaac. This ignited Sarah's rage bringing about unjustifiable consequences disproportionate to the deed done. Also, Hagar's disdain might have brought forth the suppressed feelings Sarah must have harbored for some time. In anger, Sarah urged Abraham to send Hagar and her son to the desert, though legally Ishmael was Sarah's child; yet, she did not develop maternal instincts toward him. In fact the opposite must have occurred.

Sarah and Dominance

Abraham was not certain that driving Hagar away with his son was the right thing to do; because he cared for Ishmael, his first son, and because he, by law, was required to divide his inheritance among all his acknowledged children. However, Sarah was determined to secure Abraham's inheritance to the

son she had born; convinced that she was only instrumental in the conception of Ishmael. God intervened again on behalf of Sarah instructing Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham, though displeased with the request, listened to what Sarah had to say; keeping to himself the need to obey the Word of God first and foremost. The Holy Bible did not record any dispute over supremacy, threats, bad language, neither mild nor detrimental between the husband and wife. It was understood and taken for granted that the final action was Abraham's. Thus, Ishmael was sent away.

Sarah and Wifehood

- *Love*

Abraham, with all the riches that had made answerable all his heart's desires loved his wife Sarah so wholly that he did not recognize any women for any function other than that they had been owned or hired for serving her. We can surmise the fortitude of the love bond between Abraham and Sarah through which Abraham listened to his wife. With all his wealth and possessions, Abraham loved only one woman, Sarah, while she was alive. He considered her wants and desires and usually succumbed to them if they did not challenge his sense of right and wrong with neither explicit nor implicit male chauvinism.

Unusual for the era in which Sarah had lived, she felt free to express her feelings to her husband without fear of repercussions, even through some unprecedented actions. Her strength of character was evident at times while at others it

was not. Sometimes, she insisted upon her way without much contemplating on the consequences of her actions and how they would affect those subservient to her. Her humanness and certainly her weaknesses were on display most of her adult life. However, she would not allow them to cripple her; nor would she use them as excuses. Rather, she carried on with her life, frank with her feelings, and trying to compensate for her weaknesses by putting her husband and her son before all earthly concerns.

- ***Submission***

Sarah worshipped God without interfering with her husband's relationship with the Almighty. She willingly took command from her husband concerning food preparation for the visiting three men and with immediate compliance. She called her husband "lord" with a personally affable sense known only to both. Her fortitude, personality, and character play a more distinct and prominent role in her life than did her beauty which remained with her even through her old age. Abraham must have considered the strength found with Sarah appealing, or else, according to the law and custom of the day, he could have simply set her aside because of her barrenness.

- ***Obedience***

While outwardly, strong Sarah was inwardly soft-hearted and obedient to her husband. St. Peter addresses Sarah's obedience to her husband which may have fortified and consolidated their marriage, "*Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with*

any terror?" (1Peter 3:6). The magnitude of Sarah's natural intrinsic strength of character extended to cover her both inwardly and outwardly. She was equally strong in her obedience to her husband as she was in her order to him to send Hagar away. She followed Abraham from Ur to the land that God was to show him without fear or misgiving. When Abraham identified her as his sister, she did not contradict nor correct him. There is no documentation that she ever publicly confronted her husband with disapproval of a deed he had done. These are the concrete evidences of Sarah's obedience to and respect for Abraham. Anyone who wonders what and where is the secret behind this successful married life, should come to realize that it lies within this miraculous, yet essential capacity of "understanding" each other. This "understanding" of one another is essential for a marriage to succeed and flourish.

- *Selflessness*

Abraham's life and relationship with God was not deterred by his wife's actions. He understood Sarah and her needs, although sometimes unjustifiable. Sarah understood his needs as they related to serving God. God intervened in this harmonious marriage, turning around tests into testimonies in the course of their married life. Although Sarah is recorded as a woman of loveliness, unlike women of all ages, she never boasted about it nor used it as a tool to hurt others' feelings. On the contrary, her willingness to allow her maid to bear a child by her husband and have another woman's features printed on that child was definitely a sign of great selflessness and forthcoming. As a result of this selflessness,

God protected Sarah's beauty from defile or malice, especially when it appealed to the Egyptians and their king.

Sarah's submission to her husband is clearly seen at the encounter with Pharaoh. Although she was in a position to defend herself overtly by duly contradicting her husband and revealing her true identity as Abraham's wife, yet, the Holy Bible did not record any response from her. In faith, she kept silent allowing God to run the course of actions. Such is the behavior of a woman who does not seek her own wisdom or understanding but that of God.

Trial and Reward

Always trusting God's mercy and deliverance from evil and pain, as well as the inherent quality of mutual understanding that belonged to both spouses right from the inception of their marriage, served to increase Abraham's faith and devotion to the Lord and prepared him for the test God would later call upon him to take, that of offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Certainly, such mutual respect and understanding within a marriage will always stand the test of time. Abraham remained faithful to Sarah till she died at a time in history when such performance was the exception, not the standard. He desired only one woman and that was his beloved wife, at a time when marriage could easily be mingled with concubines and children of concubines. We do not read in the Holy Bible that Abraham ever insinuated taking another woman for the sake of bearing him children. Although Sarah's barrenness was a reason, strong and acceptable enough for Abraham to set her aside, he did not even threaten to do

so, nor did he ever treat her with disdain or disrespect although this was not totally unseemly for barren wives during that era. It gradually becomes apparent that Abraham had been content in his marriage and loved his wife dearly.

In conclusion, while many marriages cannot overcome the smallest of hurdles, Abraham and Sarah's marriage survived the most difficult of challenges, both traditionally and culturally. They not only survived, but thrived and grew in respect and love one for the other. Their marriage is not only an example of mutual love and respect, but one out of which unsurpassed blessings sprang because of their union and oneness of heart.

It can thus be concluded that Sarah's strength of character sprang from her readiness to face circumstances honestly and proactively with a serving but not subservient readiness, firmly but not stubbornly. That is perhaps why God was in her favor and showered her with His blessings. Sarah lived happily to the age of one hundred and twenty-seven years. After death, she was buried in the Machpelah cave near Hebron which Abraham had purchased especially as her resting place. In the genealogy of Abraham, came forth the great prophet, King David, and the paramount of blessings, the Lord Jesus Christ.

May we all learn from the character of the woman and matriarch whom God so abundantly blessed; that through her strength she became the mother of nations, brought forth of her aged womb kings and patriarchs, and whose namesake is still carried by so many saints in all generations.

Chapter Two



Moses the Prophet

The Lord Knew Face to Face

*Holy Old Testament Books Authored by Moses: Genesis, Exodus,
Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*

“But since then there has not arisen in Israel, a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, in all the signs and wonders which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt before Pharaoh, before all the servants, and in all his land, and by all that mighty power and all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel” (Deuteronomy 34:10-12).

Moses the prophet was born into the Leviticus tribe of the Israelite nation. His father was Amram and his mother Jochebed. Moses grew up during a time of turmoil when the Israelites were in bondage and slavery to a formidable Egyptian nation. Through years of harsh servitude, the Israelites had grown out of favor with God, forgotten their origin, adopted shared religious beliefs and worship of God, and were suspicious of all things to which they had become accustomed. It was during such an era that a humble and reluctant leader named Moses had been destined for greatness.

The Lord God manifested Himself to Moses in the wilderness as a burning bush that was not consumed, and spoke directly to Moses saying,

“I am the God of your father-the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6).

Thus, Moses got in touch with the experience of the utmost fear; as he was afraid to look upon God. According to traditional belief at that time, it was fatal to look upon divinity as it meant unequivocal death. *“You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live”* (Exodus 33:20).

Moses did not aspire to be a leader as he was far from being immediately motivated to do when God had asked him

to lead the Israelites out of Egypt across the Sinai deserts into Canaan the promised land. Initially, Moses lacked ambition and determination. He did not believe he could be the one chosen for this leadership role for the Hebrews to follow him; nor did he desire such a role. Furthermore, it is not known whether Moses, as a young adult, showed any special interest in religious matters.

God did choose Moses and provided him with signs of divine power, handing down to him the Ten Commandments from which was derived the Israelite Law named by scholars as the “Mosaic Law”. In addition, God the Almighty gave Moses divine instruction and appeared to him in the Tent of Meeting to give advice or hear prayers. In this way, God had shaped Moses for greatness; as it is clear that greatness was not his ambition nor was strong faith his asset. Despite his lack of political or religious ambition, Moses was loyal to his people and defended them in unjust situations as seen in two biblically recorded incidents: one being when he witnessed an Egyptian beat a Hebrew and the other when he intervened in a fight between two Israelites. Reared into wealth, education, and leisure of the Egyptian ruling class, he was not taught to defend the helpless; rather it was his gift that God would reveal to Moses in paramount proportions in His own time.

God both created a leader in Moses and formed unity within a nation in the desert. Moses proved to be a leader of a certain amount of intolerance to unfairness; and yet would put his people before himself. Moses taught the Israelites how to care for themselves. Rather than keeping the power and glory to himself, he appointed seventy elders and asked the Lord to appoint the

next leader of the Israelite nation. It is to be speculated that the leadership appointment could have been one of ability rather than religious fervor, as the leader did not come from Aaronic priesthood.

However, in spite of all of Moses' great and inspiring accomplishments, he was not allowed to enter the promised land of Canaan. Moses never crossed the Jordan River banks to enter into the land flowing with milk and honey. For a man who, through divine intervention, could predict plagues, part the Red Sea, witnessed manna rain from Heaven, delivered the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, and could mold slaves into a devoted nation to God and the Law, Moses was still denied the promised land due to a single fit of disobedience.

Instead of speaking to a rock to produce water for the thirsty Israelite nation in the desert, Moses struck the rock twice. The consequences were severe and dire.

"Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them'" (Numbers 20:12).

Near death, Moses again asked of the Lord to allow him to enter the promised land of Canaan. However, God refused to grant it.

"I pray let me cross over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, those pleasant mountains, and Lebanon.' But the Lord was angry with me on your account and would not listen to me. So the Lord said to me, 'Enough of that! Speak no more to Me of this matter. 'Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift your eyes toward the west, the north, the south, and the east; behold it

with your eyes for you shall not cross over this Jordan” (Deuteronomy 3:25-27).

Moses knew the Lord face to face, held the Ten Commandments in his hands which written by the finger of God, and was buried by the Lord himself. Through divine inspiration, Moses the prophet wrote five books: the first book of Moses-Genesis, the second book of Moses-Exodus, the third book of Moses-Leviticus, the fourth book of Moses-Numbers, and the fifth book of Moses-Deuteronomy.

Moses talked with God face to face and God knew Moses in person. Although Moses’ punishment was not to enter into the promised land, perhaps with God, Moses was living its fulfillment long before he could reach it.

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Genesis | Creation of the world, the First Covenant with Adam and Eve, the Flood, and Abraham’s descendants |
| Exodus | Escape from Egypt, the Ten Commandments |
| Leviticus | Holiness and Worship |
| Numbers | Census, spies entering Canaan, Balaam, and Joshua assumes leadership from Moses and prepares the Israelites to enter Canaan |
| Deuteronomy | Moses the prophet’s farewell speech before the Israelites move toward and into the land of Canaan |

The Law Moses established through God became known as the Mosaic Law. Moses is mentioned in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament prophet. The Transfiguration with the Lord Jesus Christ talking to Moses and Elijah is recorded in three New Testament Holy Gospel accounts.

While Moses' single display of disobedience prevented his entrance into the promised land, his greatness far outweighed his punishment—as it must have been intended by God. A leader by God's design, a law maker by God's will, and a sinner portrayed by his human weakness made known before the nation he led, Moses persevered to the end and his love to God never failed.

“It is neither the faith, nor the love, nor the hope,
nor the endurance of one day; Rather, ‘he that
endures to the end will be saved...” *St. Clement
of Alexandria* (c. 195).

Chapter Three



Joshua the Leader

Sealed by the Spirit

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid; nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

Author of the Old Testament book named after him, Joshua, son of Nun, was from the tribe of Ephraim, born in Egypt, and disciplined by Moses the prophet. Since Moses the prophet and leader authored the first five Holy Books in the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, it seems only natural that Joshua, his assistant and successor, would also author his own Holy Book as the leadership role of the Israelites was destined to pass on to him.

Suffice it to say that while Joshua was Moses' successor, he fulfilled what Moses the prophet could not fulfill. Moses crossed the Red Sea "on dry land". However, he was not able to cross the Jordan River. Joshua not only crossed the Jordan River, but entered into the promised land, thus, completing the task Moses had ardently desired to do.

Moses could not assist Joshua in his leadership; nor could he even follow the new leader into Canaan. Actually, he had to first disappear completely from the scene in order for Joshua's leadership to begin. While Moses must have been disheartened for having been denied entrance into the promised land flowing with milk and honey; his sadness did not embitter his relationship with the new leader. In fact, prior to his death, Moses gladly ushered Joshua in and announced him as his successor in the presence of the high priest and all the assembly.

"And the Lord said to Moses: 'Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and inaugurate him in their sight.

And you shall give some of your authority to him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient. He shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire before the Lord for him by the judgment of the Urim. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, he and all the children of Israel with him-all the congregation.’ So Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation. And he laid his hands on him and inaugurated him, just as the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses”

(Numbers 27:18-23).

What is the reason behind Moses’ benevolence and good feelings towards Joshua, his former student but now the Israelites’ leader, about to usher them into the promised land? The reason might very well be because Joshua did not desire to usurp Moses’ authority. He did not speak ill nor critically of Moses the prophet. Joshua was an example of humanity at its best; most faithful both as a servant and as a leader.

Joshua was a man the children of Israel followed unquestionably without nostalgia for their “own” leader. It appears that the Israelites were most satisfied with God’s choice of leaders. Joshua must have embellished strength as he was not affected by the unrighteousness surrounding him; nor did he hide his strong convictions in the Word of the Lord.

Joshua did not fear the evil awaiting him to conquer in Canaan. He was not set up for defeat; but rather set about the business of preparation for the must-be-fought battles both spiritually and mentally. What made Joshua such a renowned victorious leader?

Firstly, Joshua believed the Word of God without doubt, wavering, nor questioning. God was with Joshua and told him so:

“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:5).

Secondly, Joshua was a man of character, strong convictions, and firm faith allowing himself to be taught by another upright and godly man. God told Joshua, *“Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go”* (Joshua 1:7).

Thirdly, Joshua did not deviate from the exact letter of the Law. Not even once, did he allow himself in indifference, tiredness, lack of compassion, nor favoritism to overlook any portion of the Law. Joshua did not treat the Law halfheartedly. He respected it, made it his life’s work, meditated upon it, and observed it both by example and in exercising his authority. This is evident in and documented by God Himself in his words to Joshua:

“This Book of Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Joshua 1:8).

The Holy Book of Joshua encompassed battles, preparation for tribal territories, tribal divisions by land, and a call to “choose Whom you will serve”.

Divisions of the Holy Book of Joshua

| |
|---|
| Spiritual Wars and Victories |
| Preparation for the Inheritance |
| Middle Division |
| Southern Conquest |
| Northern Conquest |
| Division of Land |
| Cities of the Levites and Place of Refuge |

In summary, Joshua was a Biblical writer, most popular particularly as the conqueror of the Battle of Jericho. The Holy Book of Joshua is an eyewitness account of his conquests. Joshua's faithful heart and unsurpassed adherence to God's teachings helped close him off to the external detrimental influences of the carnal pagan life surrounding him. By closing himself off to the interference of ungodly communication, thoughts, and provocations, Joshua became sealed by the Holy Spirit Who lived and abode within him.

“In Him you also trusted, after you heard the Word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in which also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians 1:13).

The Holy Book of Joshua is considered one of the Historical Biblical Books. It entails new leadership, new lands for the twelve tribes, and accountability among those who believed in God. The Holy Book of Joshua covers approximately thirty one years after

the death of the prophet Moses, and Eleazar as well as six years following the death of Joshua. Those six years following the death of Joshua are attributed to the writer Pinehaus.

In Exodus, we first read the name “Joshua” in Rephidim where he led the battle against Amalek. It was a benediction of things to come:

“And Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.’” (Exodus 17:9).

Joshua, son of Nun, became a great servant, a great conqueror and a great leader for the Israelite nation.

“The government of the earth is in the hand of the Lord, and over it he will raise up the right leader for the time. Human success is in the hand of the Lord, and it is He who confers honor upon the lawgiver”
(Son of Sirach 10:4-5).

Chapter Four



Deborah the Judge

Godliness Produced Strength
of Character and Modesty

The era of the judges was marked by sin and more sin. The Israelites reverted to the ways of the ungodly in their midst and to idol worship. The pagan people they allowed to remain in Canaan after the conquest proved to cause turmoil in their life by their living amongst them and their association with them. It is apparent that God allowed the Israelites through their ungodly actions and deeds to become so oppressed by the pagans with whom they assimilated, to experience so much overwhelming distress, that they were forced to turn back to Him and pray for relief. An age old lesson for us all is that we knowingly and unknowingly take on traits of those we with whom associate ourselves.

When the Israelites earnestly turned back to God, He raised up a judge from among them, who was strong, who would lead the Israelites, and who continue to keep them faithful to the Lord their God. Deborah was this judge. Deborah would become the only woman to judge Israel. Not just a woman, Deborah was also described as a prophetess and a wife.

A Prophetess and Wife

We first read about Deborah in the Holy Book of Judges as a...

“Prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, was judging Israel at that time”

(Judges 4:4).

Apparently according to this verse, being a prophetess and wife are considered the two most important characteristics and roles of her relationships. *First*, Deborah is characterized as a prophetess.

In Deborah's Song, her love for the Lord is described as "*like the sun, when it comes out in full strength*" (Judges 5:31). Most probably this is the reason why God chose Deborah to communicate His Will to the Israelites. Deborah was considered by the people as God's spokesperson and this helped to establish her respect among them. Though Deborah was the only Israelite woman to become a judge, other Israelite women were prophetesses such as Miriam and Huldah.

Second, Deborah is described as the wife of Lapidoth. Though most the Old Testament women were denoted as belonging to the household of a man, the implications here may have been two - fold. It is important to consider that Deborah's husband played no role in her judgeship which is directly identified in the Holy Bible. He was not chosen by Deborah to play a role in the story of the victory over the Canaanite people. In fact, nothing is known about Lapidoth, not even the tribe from which he belonged. Therefore, it is important must be important to understand that while Deborah was a prophetess and a woman of great respect, she was also a woman and a wife. Deborah belonged to a household and we can rightly surmise it was a household of faith.

We read of no conflict between her and her husband with the role God had selected for Deborah. We do not read that Lapidoth had a problem with her putting God first rather than himself, nor do we read that he hindered her service to God in anyway or was resentful of it. Rather, we can infer that because Deborah was a wife, she was of good character and had many social roles as a wife which she capably fulfilled. Also due to

her position and love for God, she must have encouraged her husband to be godly, and thus, she ultimately won the Israelites' respect for her husband as well.

A Judge and Leader

Deborah was a judge that mainly settled disputes “*sit under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim*” (Judges 4:5). Being a prophetess must have helped Deborah to solve these disputes spiritually rather than simply politically or just officially. Also, we can presume that because she was a prophetess, the people who came to her in order to settle their disputes which could not be resolved locally, would respect her opinion regardless of the outcome of the dispute. Being a prophetess and a judge could have aided her as in her role as a female judge in a patriarchal society in a positive perspective as both a woman and a judge by both the male and female population of Israel.

Deborah was not a military leader nor, did she pretend to be one, to assert her judgeship or standing in the eyes of the Israelites. She was historically not characterized as one who demanded authority or as one who always insisted upon her own way. She had a mission to conquer the King of Hazor who had commanded 900 chariots of iron. While the 900 chariots sounds ominous, the Israelites had not learned to work with iron; therefore, the number of chariots and of what they were composed forced the Israelites to go to battle by sheer faith in God.

Deborah called upon Barak, a known military man, in the name of the Lord to lead the Israelites in battle against the Canaanites

of Hazor. She then passed down to him the instructions given to her by God. Barak willingly accepted the role of military leader with one provision, that Deborah would accompany him. She relented to his request as she desired to carry out the will of God and destroy the Canaanites. She was disappointed in Barak's lack of faith in God alone, and that his faith needed bolstering by her presence at battle.

Barak, described as a military man not a spiritual man of God, needed her presence at the battle. Why? She must have represented someone whose relationship with God was so supreme that they knew God would not allow anything to happen to her or to them. Deborah's relationship with God must have been so great that it was recognizable to all those around her and so strong that they were willing to go to battle with her no matter the odds against them. Her womanhood must have been viewed as secondary to her love for the Lord.

The battle of the Israelites against 900 chariots of irons was a decisive one. The Israelites defeated King Hazor and he was killed while seeking refuge from the battle. The defeat was so strong that the city of Hazor fell within a few short years thereafter. The Israelites, under Deborah's strong leadership, would come to enjoy forty years of peaceful times.

Strength of Character not Personality

Deborah's relationship with God was first. She was also a wife, perhaps even could have been a mother, and she was a judge. She balanced many roles, but with each role, we are not ever told that she did not have "the time" to fulfill a any obligation. She served

God faithfully and God provided Deborah a way to balance all her roles according to His calling.

Deborah did not have a strong personality. She did not manipulate, nor use strong language or a loud voice to exercise her authority. She is not described as tough in her judgment of others. Worldliness was not a part of her lifestyle as she did not mix with the Canaanite culture, environment, or desire anything of their way of life. We can construe that her background and education was centered upon the teachings of the Lord.

Deborah's spirituality, power, and inner peace were not disturbed by either adversity or prosperity. She was stable and of strong character.

“For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edge sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart”

(Hebrew 4:12).

Some descriptors of good character are putting away worldly things and placing God first in your life. Instilling habits that will assist you to guard your emotions from worldly teachings and desires will help us to avoid the emotions associated with heartache and pain. Emotions help to shape how we are known by others. Emotions shape our thinking. Deborah is historically described as a woman who had a special relationship with God not a woman who allowed her emotions to overtake her.

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Strength in character opposes sinful ways and does not enter into them. We can deduce that Deborah's strength of character

helped her to overtake King Hazor who had earlier been defeated by a man, Joshua. But this man had not completely conquered King Hazor as he had regained power and rebuilt his army. Deborah's defeat was total destruction.

Modesty

With all the respect, acclaim, and power that go along with the denotation of prophetess and judge, Deborah remained modest. She was an obedient servant. She willingly, without hesitation, carried out the will of God. She was godly and used discernment of leadership. We are not told that she flaunted or "dressed up" to do the job. Rather, her perspective was one of a spiritual nature. We do not read that she usurped authority in her own home or that her home life was negligible.

Rather, Deborah one can conclude that through the guidance of the Lord, Deborah balanced her roles as only one that walked with the Lord could do. She used her gifts and talents as directed and it was not written that she failed at a single task. Rather, Deborah served the Lord competently, with capability, and in confidence of her abilities.

We also learn from Deborah's example that the role of prophetess and the role of judge were more significant than the role of military leader or fighter. Deborah agreed to settle disputes but she would not lead the army. Maybe this demeanor is due to the confines of women's roles in the Old Testament times or perhaps because Deborah neither needed nor wanted any credit for a battle victory to sustain her. These facets may have helped to maintain the modesty within her.

Deborah was reluctant to go to battle with Barak, knowing that God chose Barak to lead the army. She may have been even uncomfortable with the role as a woman. Deborah would have preferred that Barak trusted in God and went off to battle without her. Maybe God's choice of Barak also indicated that women were not appropriate for every type of leadership role. Regardless of Deborah's personal felt limitations, she accompanied Barak and when the battle was won, in her song, "The Song of Deborah", she gave credit to God and the battles leader Barak omitting any role she may have played in the defeat of the Canaanites of Hazor.

May we all look to Deborah's example of her love for the Lord, using her gifts and talents, and the end product of her obedience to the One she loved above all.

Chapter Five



Samson the Nazirite

Samson was a great man and a great judge. God entrusted him with many responsibilities, in particular to lead the children of Israel at a critical time. But this great Judge had one desire that he could not discipline. This desire troubled him all his life and made him face many problems until his demeanor became ungodly.

God appeared to Samson's parents and told them that they would have a child, and this child would be a Nazirite. Therefore, Samson's parents, before his birth, were given a revelation from God concerning his birth. Prior to this, his mother had been barren and did not have any children.

A Nazirite is one who is devoted to God. According to the customs of the Old Testament, Nazirites vow part of their lives, or their entire lives, to God. Samson was a Nazirite from the womb of his mother. He was not only consecrated for a certain period of his life, but he was consecrated all of his life, even prior to conception, to God.

As a Nazirite, Samson had to honor three standards:

- 1- He could not touch a dead body.
- 2- He could not drink wine, nor touch grapes.
- 3- He could not shave the hair of his head.

Samson could not touch a dead body or anything that was unclean, because as a Nazirite, he was totally consecrated to the Lord. Thus, he had to keep the purity of his body as well as his spirit clean. During the 'Fraction' of the Divine Liturgy, we also conclude with, 'Purify our bodies, our souls, and our spirits.'

The first point was to keep the purity of his body indicates that he was trying to keep the purity of his soul and spirit as well. That

is why during the Divine Liturgy, prior to choosing the Lamb (bread offering) and before the prayers of the consecration and calling for the Holy Spirit to come upon the bread and wine, the priest washes his hands. Why does the priest wash his hands? This body purification is an indication that he cleansed his heart, his soul, and his spirit, and that they are as pure as his body.

Each time the priest washes his hands, he doesn't only think about the purity of his body, but he also thinks about the purity of his heart, his spirit, and his soul. This was the reasoning behind why the Nazirites couldn't touch a dead body. It signified that he was living a pure and divine life. He did not touch anything that was defiled or unclean.

The second point was that he could not drink wine. Why? The Nazirite should not only avoid getting drunk, but should be even more cautious by not drinking any wine at all. This was symbolic of self-discipline and self-control. He had control over his desires. Another point was that usually people drank wine to celebrate or rejoice. But with the Nazirite, his real rejoice should be in the Lord. He chose the Lord to be his joy and happiness. The commandment was very precise and clear, not only to avoid drinking wine, but even to the instruction of not eating grapes. He should not touch the grapes, in order not to be tempted by them.

The third point concerning the Nazirite was that he could not shave his hair. This, of course, would make him look different. Not shaving his hair had two connotations:

First, he would appear different, so he would be recognized as a Nazirite. Sometimes people ask, why the Coptic Orthodox clergy insist on wearing the priests' distinct black garments because almost all other church denominations don't wear this specified

clothing anymore, even some other Orthodox churches.

The only Orthodox Church that maintains this tradition is the Coptic Orthodox Church. When we look different with this attire, we can explain to others that we are the people of God—who are the servants of God. Perhaps, this may open a spiritual dialog with others. This may help us to evangelize and spread the Good News of the Holy Gospel. Many people when they see Coptic priests, ask why are you wearing this long black robe? Where are you from? What is your religion? In much the same manner, the Nazirite, by looking different, could be questioned as to his appearance and could then initiate a dialog with others about God.

Another point related to not shaving his hair was that he did not focus on his outward appearance. What he cared more for was the inward appearance. Unfortunately, people waste a lot of time caring about their outward appearance. Many people foolishly waste their time in front of mirrors, styling their hair, coloring it, applying make up or nail polish, thus, wasting precious time.

With this lost time in mind, how much time do we spend reflecting on enriching our spirits and our souls? Unfortunately, many people care more about the beauty of their physical appearance than that of their souls. St. Peter, in his First Letter said, “*For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves*” (1Peter 3:5). They were adorning themselves with the virtues of the Holy Spirit. So, the Nazirite had to keep three vows: never to touch a dead body, not to shave his hair, and also not to drink wine.

Samson was filled with the Holy Spirit, “*And the Spirit of the LORD began to move upon him at Mahaneh Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol*” (Judges 13:25). This is a very powerful verse. According to

other translations, “*The Spirit of the Lord began moving him,*” which meant that the Spirit of the Lord was directing him, or leading and helping him to make decisions. He could not take a step in his life without the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, Samson also had a very weak point in his life. One weak point in a person could destroy his entire life, if he were not aware of this particular weakness. One single weak point in your life could destroy all your life. Samson’s weak point was that he couldn’t discipline or subdue his desires. More specifically, he was not able to control his sensual desires. In this case, Samson’s undisciplined desires was speaking to his relationships with women.

In the Holy Book of Judges, chapter 14, this weak point is explained, “*And Samson said to his father, ‘Get her for me, for she pleases me well’*” (Judges 14:3). Because he insisted upon this marriage, his parents agreed, and he married this woman.

This marriage was wrong in the sight of God for three reasons. First, Samson married a foreigner. According to the law of the Old Testament, the children of Israel could not marry from among foreigners. Foreigners, here, denoted Gentiles, those who did not believe in the God of Israel. Thus, a foreigner also meant a foreigner in faith. For Israel, the foreigner in faith denoted a foreigner in citizenship as well. The same rule also applied in the New Testament. A marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian was prohibited. Today, we also do not allow marriages between different denominations for the same reasons. If there are different doctrines and different beliefs, how can one keep the unity of the family? This doctrine that prohibits marriages between different faiths is not a new one, but an ancient one.

These are the reasons why Samson’s parents asked him, “*Is there no woman among the daughters of your brethren, or among all my*

people, that you must go and get a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" (Judges 14:3). His father emphasized the word "uncircumcised," because circumcision was the sign that person was from God's people. When his father emphasized the fact that she was the daughter of the uncircumcised Philistines, this meant that they did not worship the God of Israel. Samson, being a Nazirite, should have known better, but he insisted on getting married to this woman. So, this was Samson's first mistake.

What was Samson's second mistake? The decision of marriage was based only on physical attraction. He told his father: "*Get her for me, for she pleases me well*" (Judges 14:3). The decision of marriage was based solely on physical attraction and not on any sort of spiritual grounds. After a few months, within this kind of marriage, the physical attraction may wither and then that person will be faced with the reality of the lacking spirituality. Marriage cannot be simple physical attraction. Marriage is much more complex, involving the body, soul, and spirit. So you cannot quickly make your decision based only on physical attraction, as Samson said, "*She pleases me well*" (Judges 14:3). This was not a wise or a spiritually made decision.

This brings us to Samson's third mistake. He dishonored his parents and he didn't listen to them. Samson didn't get the blessing of his parents for this marriage, and he insisted upon his desires. There are many verses in the Old Testament and in the New Testament emphasizing the importance of honoring our parents and obeying them. St. Paul said, "*Honor your father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise*" (Ephesians 6:2).

Sometimes it is very hard to imagine how young men and young women make the decision of marriage without the approval or the blessing of their parents. If we receive the blessings of our

parents, all our lives will be blessed. When I desired to enter the monastery, in the beginning, my parents didn't approve of my decision. My confession father told me not to desire to become a monk until those at home approved. This was an important lesson for me. A person should take the blessing of the family and that of the parents in particular, even before making a decision to dedicate his life to God.

Samson didn't get the blessings of his father and mother, yet he insisted upon his decision. So his parents yielded to his desire. Many times, we force our parents to agree with our decisions, though they are not willing to bless these decisions. This was the case with Samson's father and mother. *"But his father and mother did not know that it was of the Lord, that He was seeking an occasion to move against the Philistines. For at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel"* (Judges 14:4). Of course, this marriage was not of the Lord, because it was against the commandment given and the prohibition that the children of Israel were not to get married from among the Gentiles.

Although this marriage was not according to the will of God, who was merciful enough, transformed the situation into furnishing an opportunity for Samson to defeat the Philistines, for the Philistines, at that time, had dominion over Israel.

At a certain point and time; God delivers us to the consequences of our wrong decisions, as He did with Samson at the end. But we will see how many times God defended him, despite of his wrong decisions. A person can make wrong decisions in his life, and God defends him. Abraham lied and said that Sarah was his sister. God defended him. But, if the person doesn't learn, once, twice, three, four or even five times, then God will let him be, and he has to bear the consequences of his wrong decisions. St.

Paul the apostle said, “*Not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?*” (Romans 2:4).

God demonstrated patience towards Samson more than once, until at the end, He delivered him into the hands of his enemies. Because of one weak point in his life, Samson started to break his vows. The Holy Bible also says, “*So Samson went down to Timnah with his father and mother, and came to the vineyards of Timnah*” (Judges 14:5). As a Nazirite, he shouldn’t have gone to the vineyard at Timnah, because the vineyard had grapes. A Nazirite was not allowed to touch or eat grapes, and Timnah was a city full of vineyards. So, he began to break his vows, one after another.

“*And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion apart as one would have torn apart a young goat, though he had nothing in his hand*” (Judges 14:6). What was the message that God wanted to give to Samson? He gave Samson the power to tear the lion apart, though he was empty handed. God wanted to teach him the lesson that when the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, he was able to kill a lion. Look at this beautiful expression, “*He had nothing in his hand*” (Judges 14:6). The lesson to learn here is that if we surrender our spirits to God, He can give us the power to kill the lions in our lives.

Everyone of us has a lion in life. This lion could be your temper, or your anger. Some people will say, “I can’t control my anger”. Maybe that is your lion! For others, the lion is drinking; for another, the lion is smoking. For others, maybe it is Internet addiction, or pornography.

Samson’s weakest point was his desires and his lusts. Before he went down to this woman, God allowed him to tear the lion apart. This was to tell him, that he was not weak, and not to say

that he could not discipline his desires, not to say, that he had no control over his soul. No. He most certainly did. ‘My Spirit is upon you’ (Isaiah 59: 21). So with. With the same power that you killed the lion, you could discipline your desires and your lusts. But, he was blind. He didn’t understand the lesson. If Samson surrendered his life to the Lord, he could kill the lion in his life (the desire and the lust) which he had difficulty in subduing.

Every Christian should say with St. Paul, “*I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me*” (Philippians 4:13). Not through his own power, but through the power of God. This expression “I can’t” should disappear from our lives’. ‘I can’t control my anger’. ‘I can’t stop smoking’. ‘I can’t stop drinking’. ‘I can’t stop watching TV.’ This word ‘I can’t’ means that person is weak. This means that person can’t use the Holy Spirit who is within him.

Samson didn’t use the Spirit who was moving him to subdue his desires. This is why at the end, Samson was destroyed. This woman he desired, deceived him, for she gave the answer of his riddle to the Philistines. “*That he told her all his heart*” (Judges 16:17). So rather than making the right decision, to leave her, and say this marriage was not according to God’s will, Samson gave her the answer she sought because she pressed him. And again, God didn’t leave him, as we read in verse 19, “*Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily, and he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of their men*” (Judges 14:19).

Then his father-in-law took his wife away from him. “*And Samson’s wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man*” (Judges 14:20). He gave his wife to his friend. “*I really thought that you thoroughly hated her; therefore I gave her to your companion*” (Judges 15:2). Samson failed in his marriage due to three mistakes:

- 1- He didn't take the blessings of his parents.
- 2- He based his decision on physical attraction.
- 3- He married a foreigner of foreign faith.

Samson wanted revenge against the Philistines. God protected him as the Philistines burned his wife and her father. God gave Samson one opportunity after another to repent and to learn how to discipline his desires. In verse 18, we read for the first time about Samson praying, *"Then he became very thirsty; so he cried out to the Lord"* (Judges 15:18). Samson cried to the Lord because he was thirsty, a physical need. He didn't cry when she pressed him. He didn't cry to the Lord when he was making the decision of marriage. He only cried when he was thirsty, *"You have given this great deliverance by the hand of Your servant; and now shall I die of thirst and fall into the hand of the uncircumcised"* (Judges 15:18). Again, God was merciful to Samson, and gave him water to drink.

Did Samson learn his lesson? No. The Holy Bible says, *"Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there"* (Judges 16:1). This was the second woman in his life. *"And went in to her"* (Judges 16:1). Again, this was Samson's weakest point. He should have developed power over it. But, he refused to cry to the Lord to deliver him, not from thirst, but from his desires. Samson, who was so strong, and so mighty, was so weak before women. This weakness came from within him. This weakness came from his desires. Again, the Philistines knew that he was laying with this woman, the harlot, and wanted to kill him. But God, who is good, once more delivered him, giving him another chance.

Then, the third woman appeared in his life, as we read in verse 4, *"Afterward it happened that he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah"* (Judges 16:4). You will discover that he lied to

her several times; and whatever he told her, she passed on to the Philistines. But, they couldn't keep as one word or connect with a hyphen Samson. More than once, did Samson know that Delilah was taking his secrets and giving them to his enemy to kill him. Despite this, he insisted to live with her. You know the saying, 'Love is blind', and this was true in Samson's situation. Here, 'Love' was desire. When a person is enslaved in his lust and his desire, he becomes blind, and Samson was indeed blind.

The story of Samson continues until this day. Young boys and girls live together. This is wrong, for it is destroying their lives exactly like Samson. Then God must have finally said, 'if I protect him again, Samson might lose his eternal life. It is better for Samson, to suffer the consequences of his wrong decisions. I protected him several times, but now I care more for his eternal life'. So, the Lord said, 'who would awaken him? Samson must be confronted with his behavior to know that what he is doing is wrong'.

Again, what happened with his first wife, happened with Delilah? *"Then she said to him, 'How can you say, I love you', when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and have not told me where your great strength lies"* (Judges 16:15). Wake up Samson, now your soul is vexed to death. Leave her. But, instead of making the right decision to leave her, what did he do? He told her about his hair. He became so upset, that he wished to die. *"So that his soul was vexed to death,"* (Judges 16:16). Instead of leaving her, what did he do? He told her everything. And Delilah knew very well his weakest point.

Now there was a problem. She knew the secret of his strength. She knew that when his hair was shaved, he would lose his power. The Holy Bible explains in verse 18, *"When*

Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying, 'Come up once more, for he has told me all his heart! So the lords of Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hand' (Judges 16:18). She extensively thought about the most vulnerable situation in which she would be able to lull him. She thought that Samson would be very weak when he lay on her knees, because that was his weakest point. So she set up the scene and called a man to shave his head. *"Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him"* (Judges 16:19). He had lived with her and told her all his heart, and she was the first one to torment him.

This is the torment of sin. The sin that we sometimes love, and prefer over our God, is the first to torment us. She started to torment him, and his power departed from him. *"Then the Philistines took him and put out his eyes"* (Judges 16:21). Sin blinds. As previously mentioned, Samson was spiritually blind. Now his physical blindness is an affirmation of his spiritual blindness. If he were not spiritually blind, he wouldn't have become physically blind. His desires had controlled him. His desires prevented him from seeing what she was doing. Actually, when the Philistines came and put out his eyes, his physical blindness was originally there, because of his spiritual blindness. That was the first point. Sin made Samson blind.

Then the Philistines bounded him with bronze fetters. But before they bound him, he was bound by his desires. Before he was physically bound, his desires and lusts bound him. Sin doesn't only blind a person but also makes him lose his freedom. He was a slave to sin. He went to the woman in Timnah. He saw the adulterous woman, and he went to her, and he went to Delilah. He was bound. This powerful and great man was in

bondage and a slave to sin. The blindness of his heart resulted in his physical blindness; also the bondage of his hands was a result of his spiritual bondage in sin.

And he became a grinder in the prison, living in a vicious circle. His desires and lusts controlled him, for he was going from one woman to another looking for satisfaction in vain (living in a vicious circle). He should have allowed his spirit to be by the Spirit of God to control him.

They also mocked Samson. *“So it happened, when their hearts were merry, that they said, ‘Call for Samson, that he may perform for us’. So they called for Samson from the prison, and he performed for them. And they stationed him between the pillars”* (Judges 16:25). People about 3,000 men and women were on the roof watching him perform. Samson prayed for the second time, but this prayer was a prayer of repentance. It was a prayer of awakening. He was alert to his weakest point.

“Now the temple was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there - about three thousand men and women on the roof watching while Samson performed” (Judges 16:27). And God accepted his repentance, answered his prayer, and gave him power. In the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, St. Paul said that Samson was a man of God, *“And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to fight the armies of the aliens”* (Hebrew 11:32-34).

Samson was a very strong person, but he had one weak point. This weakness made him blind and bound and also made his life

empty (grinding in prison living in a vicious circle). We all need to examine and to search ourselves to determine our weakest points, because sometimes our weakest points are our lions. Weakest point means that I am weak before it, or before this sin, and that is why this sin is like a lion to me. But, remember that God helped Samson to tear the lion apart. So, God can set us free from our lions, if we surrender ourselves to Him, and if we pray as Samson prayed, *“O Lord God, remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once, O God, that I may with one blow take vengeance on the Philistines for my two eyes!”* (Judges 16:28).

God is willing to give us strength. God is willing to help us to kill the lion in our lives. But, He will not do this unless we call upon His Holy Name and ask Him to help us. So, before we suffer the dire consequences of our sins, let us try to eliminate these lions. If Samson had listened to the different lessons that God tried to teach him, if he would have opened his eyes to God's messages, he wouldn't have had to suffer in this manner. God was very compassionate with Samson, just for him to awaken. At the end when he chose not to wake up, God had no choice but to submit him to his enemies, in order to save his soul.

May God give us all the strength to slaughter our lions through the prayers of Samson the Strong and all His holy and faithful saints. Glory belongs to God forever. Amen.

Chapter Six



Ruth

Godliness Due to Her
Mother-in-Law's Influence

Ruth was not a Hebrew. She was a Moabite who married an Israelite. Ruth's husband's family had left Judah during a famine and traveled to Moab where Ruth resided, apparently met and married her husband, Mahlon. His brother Chilion married Orpah, another local Moabite. In a nation that prided itself on being the chosen ones of God, both sons had married outside the Israelite faith. It is left to speculation as to whether her husband's parents, Elimelech and Naomi, were pleased or displeased with the marriage.

The story of Ruth took place "*in the days when the judges ruled*" (Ruth 1:1). It was to be in Moab that all the men of this Israelite family, who ventured there for food, were also to die. The death of all the men left Naomi (Ruth's mother-in-law), Ruth, and Orpah (Ruth's sister-in-law) widowed, helpless and without support. In the Old Testament, women were not allowed to own property; therefore, as widowed women, they had no means by which to support themselves.

Knowing that destitution was a possibility, Naomi advised her daughters-in-law to return to their fathers' households where they could find support until they married once again; since both were childless and young enough to bear sons. It could be that Naomi was encouraging remarriage as a means of staying viable once their fathers died. Such was the Old Testament planned way of life for women.

While Orpah returned to her father's household, Ruth forfeited the promoted quality of life and remained with Naomi to care for her on her journey back to Judah where, by this time, the famine had ended. Both women loved Naomi; for when Orpah

left, she wept. Naomi, as a mother-in-law, to have earned the love and respect of both her daughters-in-law, and in particular Ruth, a Moabite of another culture, and one that did not believe in God, must have been the ultimate example of a family position. It served her well when her husband, Elimelech, died.

Mother-in-Law's Love of God

Naomi loved God. Upon the death of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion, when she decided to return to Judah, she told her daughters-in-law, “*The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband*” (Ruth 1:9). Naomi had relatives in Judah and perhaps she thought if she made the journey there, she could seek assistance from them. But this was not to be the case; Naomi did not receive help from her relatives and no one offered to care for her and Ruth.

A journey, alone in the Old Testament days, did not promise a widow safety. Yet, we are not told she showed fear of the future, lamenting what would happen to her then, nor becoming depressed. She had a goal according to which she set a plan and set about carrying it out. This shows that Naomi lived a godly life and placed her trust in the Lord. Naomi lived her life to the fullest because she remained faithful to God and to His will for her life. It is apparent she did not worry for herself or cause others to worry on her account.

Mother-in-Law's Personality

Ruth, as a Moabite, grew up to know and love her mother-in-law, Naomi. Naomi must have been a kind and giving person,

certainly thinking of others' needs before her own. Ruth was drawn to her generous nature and chose to stay with Naomi and care for her following the death of her husband. Ruth's personality must have been drawn to the personality of Naomi. The young woman forsook the advantages of returning to her father's house and remained loyal to someone elderly, and who lacked any means of support.

When Ruth made the decision to stay and care for her mother-in-law, she realized that she was also making a commitment to Naomi's people and Naomi's God. Perhaps her husband did not expect such a commitment from her as a Moabite living in Moab. We do not know the circumstances. But we do know that Ruth, having been drawn to Naomi's generous spirit, desired to adopt this style of life as well and would have difficulty living in Judah outside the Hebrew faith.

We are not told that Naomi tried to talk Ruth into believing in God. We are not told that she sent Ruth home following the death of her son, Mahlon, because she was a non-believer. But with loving-kindness, Naomi shared advice, counseled Ruth, and led Ruth through her own love of God, to the Lord. Ruth acknowledges this when she says,

“Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me” (Ruth 1:16-17).

Mother-in-Law's Counsel

Once Naomi had returned to Judah; she did not desire to keep Ruth all to herself. Ruth had cared for her mother-in-law along the way to Judah. Upon arrival, she worked hard in other people's fields gathering food for her mother-in-law and herself and accepted the standing of being a poor person who had no choice but to glean just like the destitute and those who did not own land. *"When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands"* (Deuteronomy 24:19).

Gleaning was not an easy job for Ruth; as it required working from morning until late day. Certainly, Naomi could not do such work to support herself. Naomi, poor and with no husband, did not take measures to ensure Ruth's perpetual presence at her side. Naomi continued to encourage Ruth to marry; but this time, it was to be to another relative, not a Moabite.

Ruth's reputation surpassed her in Judah as all in the small town knew of her qualities and her unfailing loyalty toward her mother-in-law. Her reputation caused many to take notice of her and to admire her. One such person was Boaz, who owned one of the fields in which she gleaned. When Boaz first met Ruth he said,

"It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth and have come to a people whom you did not know before" (Ruth 2:11).

Taking an immediate likeness to her commitment to values, Boaz showed Ruth special favor in his fields. When Naomi learned of Boaz's behavior, she encouraged Ruth to continue to work in Boaz's fields and Ruth obeyed her mother-in-law. As a near relative, Naomi had been aware of Boaz's capacity, not only to marry Ruth, but to also regain the lands of Naomi's husband according to the Law. Naomi advised Ruth how to pursue and marry Boaz. Ruth took Naomi's advice and eventually married Boaz.

By positioning Ruth into a marriage to a close relative, Naomi also ensured perpetuation of Ruth's faith in God; thus, ensuring an everlastingly growing faith. A mother-in-law's wisdom was a powerful influence in leading and committing Ruth to God for the remainder of her earthly life.

A mother-in-law's impact upon family life should never be minimized as the story of Ruth illustrates. Naomi was an example of a godly woman and a mother-in-law. Ruth's admiration of her mother-in-law's life was exemplified by her care and loyalty towards her. Through Naomi's quiet life style, Ruth learned about God and accepted him as Lord, a thing that did not occur during her marriage to Mahlon. Through Naomi's advice, Ruth married a second time from within her previous husband's family. Through Naomi's teachings concerning God and marriage to a godly man, Ruth lived the remainder of her years a happy and blessed life.

One might think this is a grand ending to a story of an indigent widow that found God through her mother-in-law. Not only did Ruth find God, remarry a Hebrew godly man, but Boaz and Ruth would be blessed with a son, Obed. Obed, was not just

simply the son of Boaz and Ruth, but the father of Jesse, and the grandfather to David the king and prophet.

Some thousand years later, the Lord Jesus Christ would be born a descendant of Obed. And yet, Ruth's story was not final. Ruth, the indigent widow who cared for her mother-in-law and listened to her advice, would be blessed even more by the Lord as she would be one among only four women listed in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ according to St. Matthew, chapter one. A woman who gleaned the barley fields of Judah would come to be written among the lineage of kings.

May we all learn from Ruth's inspiring example of "showing more love for Naomi than seven sons" (the symbol of perfection).

Chapter Seven



Esther

A Daughter's Respect for Her "Father"

Esther was a Jewish girl born in Susa the capital of Elam. She was orphaned at an early age and raised by a close older Jewish relative named Mordecai. Mordecai's family had been taken captive from Judah (many years prior to Esther taking residence in his home) after the fall of Jerusalem, to Nebuchadnezzar, some speculate about 586 B.C. Mordecai continued his care of Esther all her days until her marriage and he became as a father to her.

Through the Holy Book of Esther informing us that Esther and Mordecai were Jewish; we can guess that they were faithful to God, and be reassured that they remained faithful to God. The Holy Book of Esther demonstrates hers and Mordecai's faithfulness to God and to the Jews who worshipped God.

Mordecai was a known palace official under King Ahasuerus that represented the Jewish people of his kingdom. King Ahasuerus was thought to be "mad" during his reign. By today's standards, he would have probably been diagnosed with multiple mental illnesses. The king was feared for his brutality, his erratic decision making, inaccessibility, inability to sleep, and most of all his un-predictability. Even marriage to King Ahasuerus did not safeguard a wife.

King Ahasuerus' once principal wife, Vashti, was a very beautiful woman who refused to dance before the king and all his drunken friends at a banquet, leading to his rapid dismissal of her. King Ahasuerus could have been fearful of her assertive behavior and had an urgent demeaning need to make her an example for all the other wives in his kingdom that they must do whatever acts their husbands demanded of them and whenever the husbands demanded such acts of them.

Esther Heeded Her Father's Advice

Following the outing of Queen Vashti was where the story of Esther became a legend. Esther's Jewish name was Hadassah, meaning myrtle. "Esther" was a Persian name derived from the word "star". Mordecai continued to advise Esther not to tell anyone of her Jewish origin. She did as she had been told, retaining her Persian name and hiding her ancestry's origin. Esther was a young lady described as "*beautiful and lovely*" (Esther 2:7). Through Mordecai's palace connections, she honored him further by taking up his advice; and was trained in the arts of women which made her demeanor even more pleasant to behold.

By having taken her surrogate father, Mordecai's wise recommendations for her life, Esther captured the king's heart from her first appearance before him for King Ahasuerus "*loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins*" (Esther 2:17). The king immediately made Esther his next queen. We can be sure Esther was to have a difficult marriage based upon the history of King Ahasuerus' previous marriage to Vashti and his personality.

Esther Did Not Forsake Her Father for Royalty

Throughout her reign as queen, Esther remained in contact with Mordecai, the only real father figure she had known. The contact would come to be through notes and quiet communication; as the king did not know she was a Jew and faithful to the advice of Mordecai, nor did Esther tell him.

Not long after Esther's move to the palace, Mordecai, while there, overheard the conversation of two soldiers planning to murder the king. He passed the soldiers' plotting quietly along to Esther who in turn told the king; and consequently the two palace guards were hung. While Mordecai had saved the life of the king, he soon fell into dire straits with the grand vizier of King Ahasuerus, Haman, by refusing to bow to him as he passed before him. Most probably Mordecai only bowed before the Lord his God. This single act infuriated Haman so much that he vowed not only to kill Mordecai but the entire Jewish population of the kingdom he represented.

With the king's blessing, a date was set for the annihilation. But impatient, Haman could not wait for that date to have Mordecai killed; so, he had huge gallows erected to hang him. When he went to King Ahasuerus to receive his assumed blessing once again for another killing, God intervened. The king, having difficulty sleeping, was having the royal journal read to him and discovered that Mordecai had saved his life, but had never been adequately rewarded for his deed.

When Haman entered the king's chambers to receive permission for the hanging of Mordecai, the king asked him, "*What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?*" (Esther 6:6). Haman, thinking the king meant rewarding him, responded that a royal procession in his honor should be held. King Ahasuerus commanded Haman to order a royal parade in honor of Mordecai "*the Jew who sits within the king's gate!*" (Esther 6:10). Now rather than to request Mordecai's death by hanging, Haman was responsible for suggesting a parade be held in Mordecai's honor.

Esther Honored Her Father

Earlier, Mordecai had told Queen Esther of Haman's plan to rid the kingdom of the Jewish population and that she had to intercede with King Ahasuerus on the Jews' behalf. Esther bravely and wisely decided to take his advice. With forethought, she requested that Mordecai gather the Jews together for three days of fasting. By this single act, we can learn many things about Esther. First, through the prayers of the people, Esther desired God to give her strength and courage to approach such an unpredictable king, and to do what she must do in an acceptable manner unto Him. It further tells us that Esther was more than capable of making her own decisions by agreeing to enter into the king's presence. In addition, she honored her father by willing to sacrifice her life for her father and her people.

Esther courageously requested to have dinner with the king twice. It should be taken into account that the king had not called for Esther in the last thirty days prior to her request and certain death could be imposed upon someone who approached King Ahasuerus without him first having sent for them. This must have been a terrifying, as well as difficult, position for a wife.

Esther Honored Her Heritage through the Teachings of Her Father

It was at the second dinner that Esther revealed her Jewish identity to her husband. She then quickly explained that Haman was behind the massacre planned to kill her people. The king overcome with rage left the dinner and the room to contemplate a

fate for Haman. On returning to the room he discovered Haman at Esther's feet begging for forgiveness. Quickly misinterpreting the action, the king assumed Haman to be attacking his queen and ordered him to be hung on the gallows Haman had earlier prepared for Mordecai upon which to be hung.

Most probably in response to Esther's braveness, her quite manner of bringing the plot to his notice, and her honest openness regarding her heritage, induced the king to defend her and her people. King Ahasuerus rewarded Esther with all of Haman's estate, made Mordecai the grand vizier even though he was Jewish, and revoked the decree to kill all the Jews that resided in his kingdom.

What brought about such saving grace for the Jewish population? Firstly, Esther did not begin to do anything until after steadfastly seeking God's help in her undertaking through three days of Jewish fasting. Secondly, Esther honored her father in her daily life, keeping his teachings and godly belief system within her; and when the appointed time to defend them had come, Esther did so.

May we all show respect and honor to our earthly fathers of faith that raised us up. May we utilize our childhood godly teachings with wisdom and patience as did Esther in carrying out God's special purpose for our lives. As Esther had accomplished, may we defend our faith by putting our trust in God.

Chapter Eight



Hosea the Prophet

“A vulture (Assyria) is over the House of the Lord, because they (the Israelites) have broken My covenant, and transgressed My Law.”

(Hosea 8:1).

Hosea the prophet lived during the tragic and devastating final days of the Northern Kingdom. He is thought to have prophesied around the eighth century BC with his ministry following Amos the prophet. Amos was the prophet who threatened God’s judgment would come upon Israel at the hands of an anonymous enemy whom Hosea would later adamantly proclaim as Assyria (Hosea 7:11; 8:9). Scholars believe Hosea prophesied for approximately 38 years.

Hosea’s prophesies can be found first among the minor prophets in the Biblical division of the prophets. The Major and Minor Prophet division of the Holy Bible does not denote the importance or rank of the writing prophets, but the length of the Holy Books which bear their prophecies.

Hosea was the only writing prophet known to have originated from the Northern Kingdom. We know during the days of Hosea that six kings following Jeroboam II reigned within the course of about 25 years (II Kings 15:8-17:41). Four of the six kings suffered devastating deaths (Zechariah, Shallum, Pekahiah, Pekah) were murdered by their successors while on the throne, one captured in the midst of battle (Hoshea) for disloyalty, and only one to reign as king long enough to be succeeded by his son, Menahem. Why did such tragedy continually occur during the ministry of Hosea?

We are told that these earthly kings were selected by God “in anger” and then were taken away “*in wrath*” (Hosea 13:11), and that

they floated away “*like a twig on the water*” (Hosea 10:7). We are further given this visual description of the era, “*bloodshed upon bloodshed*” (Hosea 4:2). It is of no great pondering why the Northern Kingdom saw its end during the era of Hosea.

“They set up kings, but not by Me, They made princes, but I did not acknowledge them. They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:4,7).

Hosea ardently warned the Israelites of the external threat of Assyria. Did they listen? He predicted that the Israelite Nation would be plunged into certain anarchy! Did they listen? Hosea further fervently preached that all these impending troubles and political unrest was related to the Israel’s betrayal of the nations’ covenant with the Lord. Did Hosea’s dire oracles immediately bring about repentance? No, political unrest would ensue for some time.

Not only did Hosea live during the time of political turbulence but in the first part of the Holy Book of Hosea, we learn that the prophet himself was ordered by God to marry an adulterous wife, Gomer. The prophet’s marriage would serve to be a strong reflection of Israel’s transgressions. “*Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing the Lord*” (Hosea 1:2).

Not only was the faithful prophet Hosea forced to marry an adulterous wife, but she moreover, bore the prophet three children of whom were given foreboding names to carry. The firstborn was a son named “God Sows”. The second child, a

daughter was named, 'Not Pitied'. The third child was another son who carried the name, 'Not My People'. All the names were to emphasize Gods' separation from His chosen people, Israel.

Further family turmoil was to be encountered when the children were instructed to drive the unfaithful mother from their home. Yet, the obedient prophet with all this marital discourse was ordered by God to continue loving and caring for his wife. Hosea was instructed to buy back his wife from her paramour for 15 shekels of silver, chastise her, and once more, offer her his love and support. How could all this be?

God was using Hosea (under very disturbing circumstances and mayhem, for especially a prophet) as a symbolic representation of the time to illustrate a lesson about His relationship to Israel. When the children drove their mother from the household, it was for her benefit, not just simply for cruel punishment. Reform and a change in behavior were sought in the manner appropriate for that day. The prophet was ordered to continue caring for his wife and not to discard her permanently, but to take her back into his home and place her in isolation for a period of time (Hosea 3).

How was this symbolism related to the Israelites? They had been disloyal to God by worshipping Canaanite gods. The Israelites went through exile. The Lord, through all of this though, continued to keep the Israelite nation in His heart and took them back as Hosea took Gomer back. The Israelites' exile would not be a final act of God.

Tertullian, a fiery Christian writer from Carthage North Africa (c.200) said,
“The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment is idolatry.”

The second part of Hosea’s prophecies called for repentance. Israelites’ survival depended upon repentance; they must forsake their idols and return to the Lord, their God (Hosea 6 and 14). Hosea envisioned the basic problem of the Israelite nation was that they, as a people, failed to recognize God (Hosea 4:6; 13:4). Israel was at an extreme in spiritual adultery. They worshipped Baal and sacrificed at pagan sites, associated with pagan prostitutes at the sanctuaries (Hosea 4:14), and worshiped the calf image at Samaria (Hosea 8:5; 10:5-6). Materialism was rampant among the Israelite Nation.

History records that in 721 BC, the Assyrians captured the capital of Samaria after a three-year stronghold and the Northern Kingdom existed no more.

Chapters 11 through 14 speak of God’s love and mercy for the exiled people of Israel. In the Holy Book of Hosea, we are told that God’s love is so great that even the infidelity of Israel was forgiven. This is a faithful love—a Fatherly love. Unfaithfulness of the nation was punished, yet, Israel was restored in the heart of God after their repentance. The major issue of Hosea’s prophecies was to proclaim God’s compassion on a nation so prone to condemnation of itself.

When we refuse to be children of God, just as Hosea prophesied, there are consequences to our actions. Hosea warned his listeners to change their ways. They refused to respond to the call of God and had to be brought to repentance.

Is there a lesson to be found in the Holy Book of Hosea for us as well today? Do we fail to listen to the voice of God? In the busyness of life, with full calendars, with an active family life, are we too weary to hear the call? Are we praying from our hearts during the Divine Liturgy or do we easily become distracted or tired? Do you take family time in your home for daily Holy Bible readings and prayers from the Agpeya's or does seeking the material and worldly things become more important? Just as the Israelites were taught the consequences of their actions, we are also taught that there will be consequences of our own.

Let us not be too busy and have too many things in the world to do so we can experience the wholeness of life by putting our Lord first. The Lord Jesus Christ came into the world not to condemn us but to save us all (John 3:16-17).

Chapter Nine



Jonah

The Lord, his God

“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into Heaven, You are there; if I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me” (Psalm 139:7-10).

According to Hebrew tradition, Jonah was the son of the widow, whom Elijah the prophet, rose from the dead at Zarephath of Sidon (II Kings 17:10-24). He was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel around 825-784 BC. Therefore, Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Samaria (II Kings 14:25).

The Holy Book of Jonah in the Old Testament tells the familiar account of Jonah, the fleeing prophet. Forty-eight verses comprise the entire narrative. This is a story of a legendary character with a nature similar to our own. Jonah, a contemporary of the prophet Amos, had faults, shortcomings, and weaknesses.

The Lord chose Jonah the prophet despite his faults and used his weaknesses to make him stronger. The Lord worked through him, in him, and with him to give him guidance and to teach him. Mentally and spiritually, Jonah benefited from many lessons acknowledged in this Old Testament Holy Book. Let us more closely examine why perhaps the Lord loved Jonah.

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.’ But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (Jonah 1:1-3).

As you know, Jonah attempted to flee from the presence of the Lord. En route to Tarshish, a mighty and powerful wind came upon the sea. So strong was this wind that the ship was threatening to break into pieces and sink. Jonah and his troubles were discovered to be the cause of the tribulations upon the mariners of the ship. After much contemplation, prayer, and the casting of lots, Jonah was finally thrown overboard into the raging sea.

Here God's care for Jonah becomes very evident. Events do not happen without divine providence. God sent the great winds and strong gales to show His displeasure with Jonah's disobedience. Even so, the Lord also sent Jonah a place of safekeeping in his oppression. Jonah could have met death as he was tossed over the ship. But the Lord in His Goodness chose to protect Jonah. Why did God love Jonah?

Perhaps the answer lies within the belly of the great fish that swallowed Jonah. God sent a fish beside the boat to swallow Jonah. Jonah, while inside this fish's belly, was most probably in darkness with the exception of when the fish surfaced for oxygen. He was most probably tossed about constantly with the diving and swimming motions of the fish. Furthermore, one can imagine the salty water ever present and immersing most of his human body. As Jonah underwent all of these perils within the fish, we are not told of anything negative he said against the Lord.

I am quite sure Jonah realized the God of the sea received him and protected him. The fish was Jonah's shelter and not a punishment. It would take a very wise man to rationalize this

message under these dire circumstances. He was given a place of safekeeping—not death. For three days and three nights, he remained in the belly of the great fish.

Perhaps God loved Jonah for his inspiring faith even while captive in the fish.

Inside the belly of the great fish, Jonah the prophet blessed the Lord. He called upon the Lord in his affliction. Jonah did not demonstrate fear nor are we told he appeared troubled. There is no documentation that he grieved his circumstances. With wisdom, Jonah knew the Lord created this great fish that consumed him. He knew the great fish's life and direction were both guided by the Lord. Perhaps God loved Jonah for his trust in the Unseen.

Within the belly of the fish, Jonah returned to his senses. He knelt down and prayed to God. He beheld the Lord 'his' God and rejoiced in His presence. He returned once again to his prophetic rites. He returned to an obedient God-loving man, believing in His holy promises. Jonah offered thanksgiving. Perhaps this nature of Jonah during hardship was what made God love him so.

Previously, Jonah called the Lord, "God of Heaven," but in oppression, "The Lord His God." Jonah realized the Lord was the Savior of the oppressed and the sufferers. Just as Jonah came upon this realization, we should also. Jonah is a symbol of our weaknesses, which by knowing this, can also help to make us stronger.

The waves did not suffocate Jonah. The great fish caught him

up and he did not perish. After three days and three nights, the Lord commanded the fish to “*vomit Jonah onto dry land*” (Jonah 2:10). His salvation came from the Lord.

As the billows and waves of life also encompass us, let us follow Jonah’s example and trust in the Lord. Remember Jonah’s fish and be assured of our God’s long-suffering. Be careful of your complaints. Jonah’s example of blessing your circumstances and having faith preserved his life.

The great fish can come in many disguises in the contemporary world of today. As Christians, we need to take on this spirit of wondrous faith and assurance of the Unseen. Jonah was given another chance. I believe our God is long-suffering. He does not hastily abandon or become angry with those servants who fall by the wayside.

Let us pray that we will all learn many lessons from Jonah’s example inside the belly of the great fish. Let us draw closer to the Lord “his” God realizing through his Biblical example that this also makes Him the Lord “our” God.

Chapter Ten



Anna the Prophetess

A Wonderful Example to the Elderly

On the eighth day of the blessed month of Meshir, the Coptic Orthodox Church commemorates the presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ to the temple, a Jewish tradition of blessing, carried out forty days following a child's birth; and also a tradition the Coptic Orthodox Church follows in offering baptism to forty day old male infants.

Present in the temple at the time our Lord Jesus Christ was brought, was Simeon of Jerusalem, a devout, just, elderly man. Simeon was said to have been waiting for the “consolation of Israel”, the indescribable joy of the prophesied deliverance that the Messiah, Who had long been awaited, would bring to Israel. Through the Holy Spirit Who was upon Simeon of Jerusalem, it had been revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's (God the Father's) Christ. Encumbered with old age and poor vision, Simeon came by the Spirit into the Temple. Seeing the Lord Jesus Christ, he took the Infant Child into his arms and blessed God, St. Joseph, and St. Mary.

But the advanced in years, Simeon, was not the only one led by the Spirit to the Infant Lord Jesus. There was another elderly and devout person also anticipating and prepared to meet her Messiah...

“Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day” (Luke 2:36-37).

According to Hill (1993), prophecy (of the prophets and prophetesses) in the New Testament is the “reception and

subsequent communication of spontaneous and divinely given revelations; normally those who were designated ‘prophets’ in early Christianity were specialists in mediating divine ‘revelation’ rather than those who prophesied occasionally or only once.” Anna was a prophetess who followed in the company of such prophetesses as Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah in the Old Testament.

Living in the Temple, Anna the prophetess had served the Lord faithfully and actively with fasting and prayer day and night for many years. She did not excuse herself with the frailty of old age; nor consider herself too lonely or too old to actively serve the Lord. Anna the prophetess may well have been over one hundred years old; some Biblical scholars have speculated. It is important to note that she was documented as a member of the tribe of Asher which had not completely lost its identity by the time St. Luke wrote his account of the Holy Gospel. The godly of the Israelite tribes at the time of the “Presentation in the Temple” had gone south of Judah prior to the 722 BC deportation of most in the northern tribes to Assyria. Not until St. James, will New Testament writings again, in depth, specifically address all twelve tribes of Israel (James 1:1).

One can try to imagine how rich the life of Anna the prophetess was at over one hundred years of age. The most spiritual and faithful people in the Holy Bible were those whose life was filled with fasting and prayer. For people such as Anna, the power of her prayers kept her service to the Lord truly active. According to the prophet Isaiah, “...*those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint*” (Isaiah 40:31).

“...*Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; all your waves and billows have gone over me*” (Psalm 42:7). Thus, David the psalmist has expressively pictured immense and intense trials and tribulations. In her life, Anna the prophetess went through a lot of hardships. As a widow, Anna could have possibly been stricken with poverty. Her residing in the temple is yet a vivid sign of great need. In addition, having lost her husband only seven years after their marriage must have been a hard experience of grief over the loss of a beloved one. Anna the prophetess, according to Biblical accounts and historians, must have seen many of the remaining tribe of Asher (her family and/or extended family) migrate out of Jerusalem.

Nowhere is it recorded that the prophetess became despaired with her poverty and multiple losses; nor are terms of hopelessness or depression mentioned. Instead, she continued to fervently dedicate her life to the power of prayer and fasting, feeling the mighty assurance and great results of her prayerful life and continuous faithful service.

Anna’s life of constant prayer and fasting led to yet another bigger and more glorious blessed experience of evangelism, happiness, and thanksgiving. At the Dedication Service, Anna the prophetess seized the occasion and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving and had the honor of happily carrying the news of the Child, the Lord Jesus Christ, to “*all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem*” (Luke 2:38); to the faithful remaining in Jerusalem. This might possibly have included, not the entire tribe of her people, but also what was left of the tribe of Asher and her people in Jerusalem.

Tertullian (c.210) provocatively said,
“Show me your authority. If you are a prophet,
foretell something for us.” Certainly it can be
said that Anna the prophetess foretold much
more than “something”; as she foretold of
the Redemption of Jerusalem.

In our daily evening prayers, we continue to confess and confirm in our hearts and minds that the Lord Jesus Christ is *still* today the salvation, God has prepared for all people, that the Lord Jesus Christ is *still* the Light to the Gentiles, and that the Lord Jesus Christ is *still* the Glory of Israel in the same manner as Simeon the just elderly man had spiritually proclaimed and for Whom Anna the elderly prophetess had given thanks unto God and carried the pertaining Good News.

May we all consider carefully the inspiring example of continuous prayer, fasting, thanksgiving, and evangelism personified in and by the very aged Anna the prophetess. May we all, including the elderly among us, follow her footsteps in actively serving God in the many wonderful ways available in anticipation of the glorious eternal life.

Chapter Eleven



St. Mark

Steadfast and Strong from Youth

St. Mark was one of the seventy apostles appointed by our Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 10:10). He is distinguished as one of the four Evangelists. St. Mark authored the oldest canonical Gospel used by both St. Matthew and St. Luke, and probably also by St. John. Many believe the account of the Holy Gospel according to St. Mark to be dated shortly before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The Evangelist, St. Mark, is the founder of the Coptic Orthodox Church. This apostle visited Alexandria, Egypt in the year 61 AD to preach the Holy Gospel in obedience to the Holy Spirit. St. Mark was the first missionary to Egypt and succeeded in founding the See of Alexandria. He is regarded as the first pope of an unbroken chain of 117 patriarchs, to date.

Therefore, the Coptic Orthodox Church can claim the blessing of apostolicity from its inception. An apostle who was specifically chosen by our Lord Jesus Christ founded the Coptic Orthodox Church. This is historically recorded within “Ecclesiastical History” written by Eusebius. Much has been written about the propagation of the Orthodox faith due to the missionary work of the Evangelist, St. Mark.

I would like to examine the childhood and spiritual development of the saint in whose mother’s home, the Passover was celebrated and imparted. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself chose this home and instituted the Holy Eucharist in its upper room. In what type of home did St. Mark grow up for the same home to have been the meeting place for the apostles following the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ, an upper room in which the Holy Spirit descended upon those gathered at Pentecost, and is today recognized as the first Christian Church?

St. Mark was of Jewish descent of the tribe of Levi. He was born “John Mark” and lived in Pentapolis on the Northern African coast, west of Egypt. His family lived in Cyrenica. During St. Mark’s early childhood, nomadic tribes referred to as barbarians, attacked the region in which he was living. With this attack, St. Mark’s parents suffered the loss of most of their possessions.

Following this, troublesome event, his family migrated to Jerusalem. John Mark was provided with a very good education and was fluent in both Greek and Latin in addition to Hebrew. It is believed that St. Mark’s cousin was Barnabas, and his father’s cousin was St. Peter.

Insight into John Mark’s personality can be obtained through this very well-known story involving his travels in the mountains near Jordan:

Once a lion and a lioness appeared to John Mark and his father, Arostalis, while traveling in Jordan. The father begged his son to escape while he distracted the wild beasts and awaited his fate. The father was filled with fear. He had not yet become a Christian.

John Mark assured his father that the Lord Jesus Christ would save both of them, and he began to pray. John Mark stood firm to meet the lions. He made the sign of the cross over himself and then over the attacking lions. Suddenly the two animals became quiet and slowly moved to sit at his feet. As a result of that miracle, the father immediately believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Due to his steadfast and strong faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, St. Mark calmed two wild beasts while a youth. Due to his steadfast

and strong love for the Lord, his example led to his father's belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Due to his steadfast and strong belief in the power of the cross, he overcame fear. St. Mark, as a youth, demonstrated great steadfastness and strength. His young heart overflowed with love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

It could be that while growing up in Jerusalem, his faith was made even stronger being where the Lord Jesus Christ lived and taught, and that through contact with Him, St. Mark's steadfastness and strength were conducive in sharing in Christ's ministry and embracing His way of life. His steadfastness was evident even until adulthood as St. Mark was always associated with the Lord. St. Mark's presence at a number of events with the Lord Jesus Christ can be found in the Holy Scriptures.

St. Mark was present at the wedding of Cana in Galilee. He was the man who was carrying the jar when the two disciples went to prepare a place for the celebration of the Passover (Mark 14:13-14, Luke 22:11). St. Mark was also the man who fled naked before the crucifixion (Mark 14:51-52). Due to these passages, the Coptic Church calls St. Mark, the "Theorimos" meaning the "Beholder of God".

This chosen apostle's steadfastness and strength were to become more evident through his evangelism efforts. St. Mark started preaching the Holy Gospel with St. Peter in Jerusalem and Judea. He accompanied St. Paul and St. Barnabas on their first journey to Antioch, Cyprus, and Asia Minor. He went to Cyprus with St. Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41).

Following the death of St. Barnabas in Cyprus, St. Mark went with St. Paul and preached in Colossi, Rome, and some

believe in Venice, as well. It is said that his real labor took place in Africa. After he left Rome, he went to Pentapolis, and then to Egypt. St. Mark left Alexandria for Berce, then Rome where he met St. Peter and St. Paul. He remained there until their martyrdom.

St. Mark then returned to Alexandria where he found the Christians had multiplied in number and had built a Church in Buacalis. As soon as he returned, the growing number of Christians entreated him to write down for them the teachings of the “New Way.” In response to their request and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel according to St. Mark was written.

The apostle’s zeal increased as his missionary work flourished. St. Mark’s steadfastness and strength from childhood had developed with maturity into one that was uncompromising and soon to become heroic. His zealousness angered the pagan nobles of the city and they decided he must be stopped at the feast of Serapis. In 68 AD, the nobles incited the crowds against St. Mark during this feast. They seized St. Mark at the Church and tied a rope around him. He was inhumanely dragged from street to street and then thrown into prison, badly beaten and near death.

While in prison, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him and said, “Be strong, O my Evangelist, for tomorrow you shall receive the Crown of Martyrdom.” The next morning the pagans again dragged St. Mark through the streets until his head separated from the rest of his body. The chosen apostle was steadfast and strong until death.

St. Mark's blessed relics rest in a reliquary built under the altar of the St. Mark Cathedral on Abba Roweiss ground (formerly Abba Roweiss Monastery), in Abbaseya, Cairo.

Thus, the youth whose love was steadfast and strong, grew up to be a chosen apostle who received three crowns: the Crown of Discipleship, the Crown of Evangelism, and the Crown of Martyrdom.

May the steadfastness and strength of St. Mark's love for the Lord Jesus Christ inspire us all and may we keep ever before us the example of those who endured to the end.

Chapter Twelve



St. Matthew

The Galilean “Gift of Jehovah”

“And He said to him (Saint Matthew), ‘Follow Me,’ So he arose and followed Him.” (Matthew 9:9, Mark 2:14, and Luke 5:27,28).

The Lord Jesus Christ was in His own city of Capernaum in which he had restored the health of a paralytic whom displayed great faith. Following the departure of the healed paralytic taking up his bed and returning to his house, the Lord Jesus Christ continued onward. Next, the Lord then encountered a despised publican, a Galilean Jew, in his customhouse.

During the time of St. Matthew, Roman overlords assigned specific locations to Jewish publicans or tax collectors to collect unfair and unpopular taxes for the Romans. The publicans were also free to collect extra revenues for their own profit and routinely did so. Often collaborators with the Gentiles, these tax collectors were commonly known to be dishonest and fraudulent. Other Jews immensely hated the tax collectors and referred to the tax collectors with contempt and called them “unclean”.

The Jews despised the “unclean” tax collectors so much that most refused to allow family members to marry into a family that had a publican among its members. The wealth of a tax collector was not influential among the Jewish population. Many publicans were also banned from religious worship and community affairs. No society gatherings nor commerce and trade were conducted with tax collectors.

The Lord Jesus Christ, Who owns with the power to forgive and undo all trespasses and wrongdoing, called out to Matthew the publican, “Follow Me!” St. Matthew immediately and

without question, left all his earthly interests and his occupation and position to become a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Jerome states that St. Matthew saw “a glowing and majesty which appeared in the countenance of the Lord Jesus Christ piercing St. Matthew’s soul and attracting him to follow the Lord. He who called St. Matthew outwardly by His Holy word, at the same time moved him inwardly by the distinctiveness of His grace.”

From St. Matthew’s immediate willingness to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, we can presume he was a man of deep spiritual conviction. This was also evident by St. Matthew’s concern for his former colleagues whom he invited to dinner at his home. The Lord Jesus Christ was the guest of honor at this dinner and we can conclude that St. Matthew’s intent was to lead others to the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Matthew’s discipleship from inception was one of mission that led to the beginning of the Gentile church.

St. Matthew, whose name means “gift of Jehovah”, followed the Lord Jesus Christ through His earthly life and wrote his account of the Holy Gospel according to Christ’s teachings. St. Matthew’s Holy Gospel narrative is often referred to as the “Holy Gospel to the Jews”. The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew was originally written in the Aramaic language of the Jewish converts. Papias, a second century Christian author, preserves this tradition which confers that St. Matthew wrote the sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ in Aramaic, the common language of the Jews at the time of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that others freely translated St. Matthew’s writings into Greek.

Many believe the Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew to be the first written Holy Gospel. St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (AD 67-107), was one of the earliest witnesses to the existence of the Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew. It was thought to have been written during the years St. Matthew resided in Antioch, where the Church was comprised of a diverse community of Jewish and Gentile Christians.

All believe the Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew to contain a large number of quotations from the Old Testament, which demonstrates how the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled God's words to Israel. St. Matthew conclusively corroborates that the Lord Jesus Christ established the New Covenant through His death and resurrection, and will continue to guide the Church until the end of the ages.

After Pentecost, St. Matthew, filled with the Holy Spirit, preached for fifteen years in Judea and then journeyed to preach the salvation taught by "The Great Teacher" (the interpreter of God's Law through the Sermon on the Mount) to the nations of the East and in Ethiopia. The Coptic Orthodox Church venerates this holy evangelist as a martyr though the time, place, and circumstances of St. Matthew's death are unknown.

What we know for certain is St. Matthew's courage in the ministry. St. Matthew immediately left all to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. His heavenly mission kept him focused throughout his earthly life. The Lord Jesus Christ commanded His holy apostles, *"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear*

Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). If the faithful apostles had not been courageous during their generation, the truth and their writings might have been lost among all that was vain. The blood of the martyred apostles watered the seeds of faith they scattered throughout their lands of evangelism.

What are the lessons we can learn from St. Matthew’s example? Spiritual leadership is not inherited, nor is it obtained from a wealthy government position. Worldly glory and material possessions do not advance us in the sight of the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, spiritual leadership is not lost due to old age as there is no retirement in spiritual leadership. Nor is there old age in spiritual life itself.

God is not biased. He can foresee in us complete obedience, great faith, strong love, and a readiness to work in His ministry for His Holy Name. He will prepare us for the spiritual service if we place complete faith in Him, as He said to Joshua, the son of Nun, *“This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you”*, (Joshua 3:7). As with St. Matthew, from the day this saint followed the Lord Jesus Christ, he ardently evangelized starting with whom he was employed.

From his precious life, we can practically learn today that spiritual leadership is not gained solely by attending service meetings, teaching Sunday school classes, reading books, nor by imitating the example of other leaders. It is through God that spiritual leadership is achieved. Spiritual leadership is a divine gift

that comes from God.

“But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ”

(Philippians 3:7).

May we all follow the Lord in faith, love, humble obedience, and a willingness to serve others in His Holy Name, as did the great St. Matthew.

Chapter Thirteen



St. Thomas

*Was His Grief or His Doubting Greater Than
the Grief and Doubt of the Rest of the Disciples?*

After the Lord's resurrection and before His ascension into heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ made a series of appearances to His disciples for the purpose of strengthening their faith, consoling their hearts, and edifying them. How the disciples, in general, and St. Thomas, in particular, reacted and responded to those appearances is the interest of this article. The first glorious post-resurrection appearance occurred on Resurrection Sunday to Mary Magdalene; after which she excitedly sought out the grieving and mourning disciples to tell them of the Lord Jesus Christ's appearance to her. However, they did not believe her at all. "*And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe*" (Mark 16:11). St. John and St. Peter displayed their collective doubt by going to the Lord Jesus Christ's tomb themselves for concrete evidence—only to discover its emptiness. It was then that their grieving lack of faith began to slowly transform into a wondering realization after the apostles had actually seen with their own eyes the empty tomb and the burial clothes and face cloth inside the tomb. The Holy Scripture records that they saw and then they believed.

"Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed" (John 20:6-8).

That very same evening of the discovery of the empty tomb, the Lord Jesus Christ suddenly appeared to ten of the apostles who were locked up inside a room in an undisclosed place (speculated by some biblical scholars to be the upper room in Jerusalem).

They might have locked themselves up seeking comfort in each other out of the deep sorrow they all must have felt following the horrific crucifixion and earthly loss of the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps they were sharing the guilt mixed with grief for not having been bold enough to stand beside the Master together in unison, but instead, fled leaving Him forlorn to undergo all the pain, suffering, and humiliation. In addition, the Holy Bible reveals that the disciples were also afraid of the Jews. All of them were present except one, St. Thomas.

“Peace be with you,” the Lord Jesus Christ greeted His disciples as He stood in the midst of them. Then, *“He showed them His Hands and His side”* (John 20:20). Even before they had a chance to glance in the direction of His wounds, He greeted them and then showed them His holy wounds. The Lord Jesus Christ had to again say, *“Peace to you!”* So great was their amazement; perhaps so little was their faith, and so intense was their grieving and mourning that even after having seen His wounds, a second greeting was required (John 20:19-24). In astonishment and awe, the ten disciples saw and were edified.

When St. Thomas the apostle had heard about the appearance of the Lord, in much the same manner of little faith, disbelief, and denial came upon him. In spite of all the evidences manifested in the testimonies of all ten disciples with whom he had been in continuous company, his personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, being of the inner most circle of His disciples, and despite presumably having heard about Judas Iscariot’s suicide, St. Thomas’ doubt was certainly strongly spoken aloud in his saying, *“Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger*

into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

After eight days, all the eleven apostles, St. Thomas included, were again inside the upper room assembled together; perhaps they were discussing the confounding topic regarding the Lord's appearance to them and trying to convince the apostle Thomas of its unbeatable reality—when another post-resurrection appearance took place. With the doors closed, the Lord Jesus Christ stood in the midst of them and said, "*Peace to you!*" (John 20:26). Was it specifically for St. Thomas' sake? Did the Lord Jesus Christ love St. Thomas enough to come back exclusively for his sake in order to eliminate his disbelief in the glorious resurrection?

Following His greeting, the Lord specifically addressed St. Thomas, "*Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing*" (John 20:27). What an invitation from the Lord, allowing St. Thomas to touch His holy wounds—the wounds that took from Him His earthly breath of life. He was not only allowing but inviting St. Thomas to touch Him.

Who was St. Thomas? What was the nature of the fabric from which his defying, challenging words were woven that had deserved the immediate and exclusive response of our Lord Jesus Christ? Was this "unseen" lack of faith actually any different than that of the other disciples chosen by the Lord Jesus Christ?

What we do know for sure is that St. Thomas was a very committed disciple, willing to stand up and face threatening conditions; and if necessary, give his own life for the Lord

(John 11:15). Surely, the disciples' shortcomings stood conspicuous in some aspects. However, when the Lord Jesus Christ desired to go to Bethany to see the sick Lazarus, St. Thomas could only see stoning and disaster lying ahead. Yet, he was determined to go along with the Lord Jesus Christ, even if it had meant his own life would be at stake; there is no chance for "doubting" this at all.

Going with the Lord Jesus Christ to Bethany could have been easy for someone who had not known that the Jews wanted to stone the Lord; yet, for someone who actually had known and still desired to go forward, was quite exceptional and unique. After all, Lazarus was the Lord's friend, not really his. Perhaps St. Thomas' initial thinking was that it was better to go and die with the Lord Jesus Christ than to be left behind and separated from Him. We do not know; but it has been speculated by some biblical scholars that St. Thomas' great devotion to the Lord may have been equivalent to that of St. John the Beloved. It took real courage and love on St. Thomas' part to venture with the Lord to Bethany. In fact, the disciple's courage was so strong that it might have prompted the other disciples to go along with Him, which they actually did.

For St. Thomas, dying with the Lord Jesus Christ must have certainly been the better choice than separation because in another scenario, out of fear of separation, he had said, "*Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?*" (John 14:5). Perhaps it was his simple way of saying, "if You go Lord, how are we ever going to find the way to You?" Was this as if he was anxiously saying, "Lord I need to know the way in

worry of not being able to bear separation from the One from Whom I had spent some years learning and with Whom I had spent some years traveling”?

Perhaps it was his stubbornness of character in not wanting to let the Lord Jesus Christ die without him. Perhaps, it was his inability to believe in such a miracle. Perhaps, it was simply his inability to explore the great loss he must have felt for a loved one having been crucified so unmercifully. We do not know. We cannot decipher the mood of someone so devoted to the Lord whose worst fears had now been realized that of separation from the Lord, his God. However, we do know that history has recorded his epithet as “Doubting Thomas”.

The special invitation to St. Thomas to touch His holy wounds was an honor granted to none of His other blessed disciples during the Lord’s first appearance in their midst. Had they been offered such a great invitation, would they have welcomed it? Why was St. Thomas favored with such an exquisite invitation? Was it because St. Thomas’ disbelief was greater than that of the rest of the disciples? Or, was it because he had witnessed less resurrection appearances than the others, and hence the doubt?

Even though St. Thomas had adamantly expressed that he must “see and touch” in order to believe, there are many theories that question whether St. Thomas did actually touch the wounds of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Bible does not document whether the wounds were physically touched. It does state, “*Thomas because you have seen Me, you have believed...*” (John 20:29).

“Seest thou that his doubt proceeded from unbelief? But it was before he had received the Spirit; after that, it was no longer so, but for the future, they were perfected” (*St. John Chrysostom's*). Homily LXXXVII on the Holy Gospel according to St. John.

“What is seen gives knowledge not faith” a Homily by Pope Gregory the Great, (Patron's Saints Index, St. Thomas the Apostle, p.4).

“He saw and touched the man, and acknowledged the God whom he neither saw nor touched; but by the means of what he saw and touched, he now put far away from him every doubt, and believed the other. ‘The Lord Jesus said to him, because thou hast seen Me, thou hast believed.’ He saith not, Thou hast touched Me, but, ‘Thou hast seen Me,’ because sight is a kind of general sense. For sight is also habitually named in connection with the other four senses... Hence here the Lord Himself says ‘Reach hither thy finger and behold My hands:’ and what else does He mean but touch and see? And yet he had no eyes in his finger. Whether therefore it was by looking or also by touching, ‘Because thou hast seen Me,’ He says, ‘thou hast believed.’ Although it may be affirmed that the disciple dared not so to touch, when He offered Himself for the purpose; for it was not written, and Thomas touched Him” (*St. Augustine's*). Tractate CXXI lectures

on the Holy Gospel according to St. John).

The main point of this resurrection encounter is St. Thomas' response to the Lord Jesus Christ's invitation, thus, accepting the resurrected Lord, exclaiming, "*My Lord and My God!*" (John 20:28). Then the Lord Jesus Christ said, "...*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*" (John 20:29).

This acceptance had been of a great impetus to St. Thomas' asceticism and celibacy during his missionary life. Six centuries passed and Pope Gregory the Great wrote, "Thomas' lack of faith did more for our faith than did the faith of the disciples who believed."

Tradition alludes to the belief that St. Thomas was martyred by a sharp spear. This was a martyrdom befitting him whose faith came of age after he had seen the wound by the spear in the Lord Jesus Christ's side—befitting an apostle whose earthly greatness is only exceeded by the lesson his personal shortcomings taught each of us, for he is now with the One from Whom he did not want to be separated.

Finally, all the disciples started out by being slow to believe. So, what had set St. Thomas apart? Was it his absence at the first appearance? Was it his outspoken proclamation requiring the visual and physical evidence of seeing and touching His wounds? Or... was it the overwhelming immensity and intensity of his grief that surpassed that of the rest of the disciples'?

Let us pray that we may be counted among those who "*have not seen and yet have believed*" (John 20:29).

Chapter Fourteen



St. Phillip

A Founder of Missionary

The Holy Gospel according to St. John reveals that St. Phillip was the third of the twelve disciples to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. St. Phillip has the great distinction of being the very first that the Lord Jesus Christ directly invited into His discipleship. The Lord Jesus Christ “found Phillip” and with the simple command of “*Follow Me*” (John 1:43) he willingly became the third of the twelve to follow the Lord. The Lord apparently was looking or searching for one such as St. Phillip.

St. Clement of Alexandria states that St. Phillip was the young man who when commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ to “Follow Me” begged to return home first and bury his deceased father. The often quoted reply, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but you go and preach the Kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60) was in response to St. Phillip’s ardent request. St. Phillip did as the Lord Jesus Christ instructed without comment or question, just simply obeying the command, was his willingness to follow the Messiah.

In the first three Synoptic Holy Gospel accounts of the New Testament; there is no further mention of St. Phillip other than in the listing of the twelve apostles which occurs in each Holy Gospel narrative.

St. John the Evangelist portrays St. Phillip the disciple as very devoted, kind-hearted, and sincere—three qualities which may have drawn the Lord Jesus Christ to “find” St. Phillip. There are other times we also know that St. Phillip was very literal in his interpretation of the Lord Jesus Christ’s power and teachings.

St. Phillip was from Bethsaida, a small fishing village on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He was initially a follower of St. John the Baptist. Encouraging Nathaniel (Bartholomew) into the discipleship of the twelve, St. Phillip told him, “*We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*” St. Phillip was well versed in the Holy Scriptures and believed the Lord Jesus Christ’s mission was foreshadowed in the Old Testament. When Nathaniel asked St. Phillip how could something good come from the obscure village of Nazareth, St. Phillip responded with encouragement, “*Come and see*” (John 1:45-46). St. Phillip’s response was not one of irritation at being doubted. Rather, in truth and with kindness and conviction, he believed that Jesus Christ was indeed the Messiah. St. Phillip’s missionary zeal was apparent from the beginning of discovering the Lord Jesus Christ.

After teaching the five thousand near the city of Bethsaida, the Lord Jesus Christ tested St. Phillip’s understanding of His power. The Lord asked St. Phillip how to feed the five thousand. St. Phillip gave the Lord Jesus Christ a very practical answer to this problem, not anticipating a miracle was about to be performed. His reply was, “*Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little*” (John 6:7). St. Phillip’s intellect was apparently impressive by his response, but evidence of his outlook displayed lack of spiritual understanding. While the multitude was not sent away as St. Phillip suggested, there is no biblical evidence the St. Phillip felt or expressed any sort of indignation. St. Phillip’s was a willing spirit, still in spiritual infancy, but willing to grow toward maturity.

At the Last Supper, St. Phillip again displayed an example of one who did not fully understand the Lord Jesus Christ's earthly mission. Following the subtle withdrawal of Judas Iscariot and St. Peter's adamant declaration of not betraying the Lord, St. Phillip earnestly asked for a personal experience to fortify his faith, "*Lord show us the Father and we shall be satisfied.*" The Lord Jesus Christ replied, "*Have I been with you so long and yet you have not know Me? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'*" (John 14:8-9). St. Phillip must have quietly and thoughtfully absorbed this reprimand as the Holy Bible does not tell us St. Phillip contested the Lord's comments in the least.

St. Phillip is identified as one of the eleven who was present in the upper room after the holy crucifixion, prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:13).

St. Eusebius the scholar and Church historian writes that St. Phillip preached the Holy Gospel in Phrygia and died at Hierapolis. A Church dedicated in honor of St. Phillip was discovered in this city. Further supporting this report is writing by Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, to Victor the Pope of Rome near the end of the second century:

"(I speak of) Phillip, one of the twelve apostles who is laid to rest at Hierapolis. His two daughters were unmarried who arrived at old age. His other daughter also, who passed her life under the influence of the Holy Spirit, reposes at Ephesus". Polycrates (c 190).

This cited document refers to two daughters of St. Phillip who had lived in virginity until old age at Hierapolis and mentions another daughter who was reposed in his own city of Ephesus.

St. Clement of Alexandria stated that St. Phillip was martyred under the reign of Domitian the Emperor and was crucified with his blessed head turned downwards.

May we all lead others to the Lord Jesus Christ with the devoted heart and missionary zeal of His disciple whom He sought out, St. Phillip. By quietness of example and kindness of heart, he led others to the Lord, letting the dead bury the dead and preaching eternal life in a world to come for all those who would but only listen. St. Phillip gave his life for his holy testimony; in the beginning, slow to spiritually comprehend, and at the end spiritual, understanding and love consumed his holy life.

Chapter Fifteen



The Woman Who Would Not Stop Bleeding

There is a remarkable story about a woman whose physical disease very closely resembles a spiritual ailment we all feel at one point or another. It is about a woman (recorded in Mark 5) who one day, many years ago, found that she had a strange bleeding which was outside the boundaries of a woman's normal physiological routine. After the initial shock of discovering the problem, she might have assumed that it would soon resolve itself, a stage of denial similar to our defense mechanisms when confronting spiritual dilemmas. But as the days and weeks and months rolled by, her body would not cure itself. Instead of her immune system performing an easy, automatic repair, she found herself feeling worse and worse; ulceration, pain, malaise, were all possible symptoms of this poor woman's condition, including an ever-diminishing store of energy due to the loss of oxygen that always follows an anemic state. The physical illness which seemed might last only a few days was drawn out into years of suffering.

So she did what any sensible person would do: she embarked on a quest to find the greatest physician or greatest healing technique that would rid her of her plight. The first physician she found doubtless expressed confidence that he understood perfectly well about her condition and had the potion or lotion she needed. After that failure, she sought others, one after the next, each time her hopes raising less and crashing down with ever heavier force. But who can blame her? We repeat almost the exact same pattern in our spiritual struggles! We first turn to the easiest "solutions"—coping mechanisms. Drugs, alcohol, self-mutilation, denial, distraction with entertainment, and lazy surrender are all candidates for our "healing". But as each one fails, we turn to the next, until in the end we have no hope left. We

exhaust our mental and emotional resources just as the woman exhausted her money to find a way out.

At the point at which she may have been about to throw up her hands in despair a real turning point occurred she “heard about Jesus”. It is a touching phrase—symbolic of the first step into the light for a person who had been living in a dark cave for twelve years. She had probably heard about many of the ailments which the Lord Jesus had healed—blindness, deafness, paralysis, and insanity. One disease in particular gave her hope; Jesus had healed a man with leprosy. The uniqueness of her problem was that she was declared “unclean” by Jewish law due to her blood flow; and to her physical pains was added the piercing grief of social exclusion. It is likely that not even her “physicians” were willing to touch her, but rather treated her from a distance. But Jesus, she heard, was different, “*Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him*” (Matthew 8:3). “Good heavens!” She must have thought, “such a unique physician must be capable of healing my unique disease.”

She asked diligently where this Healer was teaching and rushed to meet him. Of course, to her dismay, she found a crowd of maybe 20,000 souls (as in the miracle of the loaves and fish) thronging Jesus, each wishing to capture a glimpse of the new Prophet from heaven. She came from behind and, with that particular faith that had lost all hope except in God alone, managed to touch the edge of his robe, and “*Immediately the fountain of her blood was dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of the affliction*” (Mark 5:29). After twelve years, the bleeding is healed in a moment!

Jesus turned suddenly and asked an unusual question: “*Who touched Me?*” (Mark 5:31). If our Pope were to walk among a crowd of a hundred Copts, all pressing to touch him, and he were to suddenly ask, “Oh, who just brushed my arm?” Would not the accompanying bishops be at least mildly surprised? Now here was a mass of 20,000, and the perplexed disciples could only ask the question of why He asked that question. But He spoke for a reason; He knew what had happened. He desired that the woman would make a public testimony of her healing; and her story must have spread very quickly, for the next chapter reports that whenever He entered any village, city, or country, all the sick would beg Him to “*just touch the hem of His garment*” (Mark 6:56); and they who touched Him, were rewarded with the same blessing the woman received.

Our Lord also desired a confession of faith from her, which is an integral part of the spiritual healing process in Christianity. The robe that covered our Lord’s body symbolizes the priesthood who surround the Church (the clergy have been traditionally called “men of the cloth”). It is through their guidance, love, and pastoral care that each one of us is to seek the healing for our spiritual illnesses. The woman’s story shows that confession is not meant to be an “embarrassment session” with the priest, but rather a time to confess, to testify, and to declare the loving-kindness of God in His forgiveness and generosity with me, the sinner. A person who tries to resolve his own spiritual problems without a spiritual father is like a lost sheep which tries to find its way back home without a shepherd and without a path to follow.

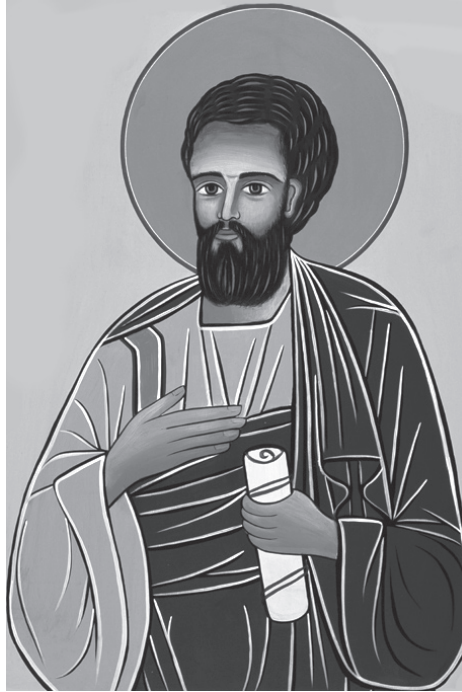
Our Lord's question reveals something deeper. Although thousands came to see and hear Him, she alone came for a reason worthy of His notice. They came mainly out of curiosity, to see the new talk of the town, or maybe just for the social spectacle, but she came to be healed. The numbers give us a startling fact—that when many gather in His name, only few come for a correct purpose, that is, only few come to be healed. A youth Holy Bible study may be packed wall to wall, but who is coming for the small talk and refreshments, and who is coming for the Lord Himself? This question is not an invitation to judge our neighbors in a group, but only to judge ourselves. Thousands surrounded our Lord, but only one received the strength that flowed from Him. The Lord turns no one away, but He grants special grace only to the few who put forth an exceptional effort to reach Him.

The woman came, “*fearing and trembling*” (Mark 5:33), and told the whole truth. These words do not refer to an emotional fright so much as to a feeling of awe and wonder. If a patient in a hospital who had suffered from cancer for twelve years had all his symptoms disappear in an instant of total healing just by touching a holy man, he would probably also feel tremors ripple through his body and his lips quiver as he attempts to thank his healer through his tears.

Our Lord Jesus Christ always practices holistic healing: soul, mind, and body. He said to the woman, firstly, “*Daughter, your faith has made you well*” (Mark 5:34). Thus, He healed her spiritually before He healed her physically. A strong spirit will strengthen every other part of life. “*Go in peace...*” (Mark 5:34). With these words, He restored to her mind—which had been racked with pain, confusion,

and guilt for twelve long years—the psychological balance and well-being that she had sought for so long. “...*and be healed of your affliction*” (Mark 5:34). Finally, the bodily healing she was seeking was received. After many years and many trials, she found that the only real path to total health is a personal encounter with Jesus, even it is just touching the hem of His garment. “*Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you*” (Luke 11:9).

Chapter Sixteen



Nathanael

Under the Fig Tree

“Phillip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote-Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ And Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Phillip said to him, ‘Come and see.’ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!’ Nathanael said to Him, ‘How do You know me?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Before Phillip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’ Nathanael answered and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’

Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.’ And He said him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.’”
(John 1:45-51).

The Lord’s first disciples were St. John the Baptist’s previous followers. These were St. Andrew, St. Peter, St. Phillip, and St. Bartholmew—also known as Nathanael.

First, it should be noted that Phillip brought Nathanael to the Lord Jesus Christ. In seeking Nathanael, Phillip confirmed to him who the Lord was by saying, *“We have found Him...”* Here we see a good friend bringing his friend to the Lord.

Nathanael’s attitude and personality are starkly unveiled in the Holy Gospel of St. John. Nathanael was later to become one of the Lord’s disciples. However, prior to that, encounter, Nathanael was known for his hesitations and doubts. Originating from Cana of Galilee and with affirmed sorely evident prejudices against Nazareth, a town not far from his own, Nathanael skeptically

said to his friend Phillip, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” To Nathanael, the Lord Jesus Christ probably would appear as a man, no more and no less than a son of a carpenter. If “*coming out of Nazareth*” formed a judicial blockage in Nathanael’s mental judgment, most probably planted there from previous generations, “*coming out of Nazareth*” must have also created a greater negative impact in the minds of others as well. But his good friend Phillip’s intention remained undeterred in spite of Nathaniel’s overt skepticism.

No sermon, no arguing, no pleading, not even an ounce of preaching came out of Phillip’s mouth. It was just a simply versed, unadorned, ineloquent yet forceful, insisting and promising invitation to “*come and see*”. This hope-charged, high-spirited, steadfast, entreating, and persisting message convinced Nathanael to seek out the Lord Jesus Christ, if not for his own sake, at least for Phillip’s. The reader can imagine how uplifted, enriched, and elevated this friendship had become through Phillip’s charismatic insistence on Nathanael to “*come and see*” the Lord Jesus Christ. Philip’s care for his friend had shifted from being an earthly transient friendship to a perpetual heavenly one.

Nathanael did according to Phillip’s request and when the Lord Jesus Christ saw Nathanael coming towards him, He said, “*Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!*” The Lord Jesus Christ could have justifiably and duly confronted Nathanael about his biased statement of “*can anything good come out of Nazareth?*”. The Lord simply looked beyond Nathanael’s well-intention, harmless

personality traits intuitively knowing of his goodness and his pure heart.

“See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from Heaven” (Hebrews 12:25).

Immediately, the Lord Jesus Christ recognized in Nathanael the admirable and desirable traits of sincerity and directness with others. *“How do You know me?”* Was Nathanael’s question to the Lord to which He replied, *“I have seen you under the fig tree”*. One would ponder on what Nathanael was doing under the fig tree to make him suddenly accept the Man before him as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the King of Israel? Was he in a spiritual struggle, or maybe in prayerful contemplation asking God to show him His Son? Or was it the Lord’s spiritual complexity, His heart’s divinity, or simply His supernatural foreknowledge of Nathanael hidden beneath an obscure fig tree that convinced Nathanael that the Man before him was actually the Messiah?

“Believing and obeying are in our power”
(Clement of Alexandria c. 195).

As a previous follower of St. John the Baptist, Nathanael was no stranger to biblical teachings having certainly been taught words such as Son of God, Messiah, and King of Israel. Therefore, it was not a mental effort on the part of Nathanael but probably a heartfelt one that led him to acknowledge the

Lord. Nathanael could not easily and readily believe just anyone was the Son of God.

Henceforth, the lives of Nathanael and Phillip took on a new spiritual meaning and complexity and their missionary work abounded.

What lessons are for us to be learned from Nathanael's reluctance to accept Jesus as the Messiah? While a few are listed, it should be recognized that the knowledge that the Man before them was the Lord Jesus Christ was not enough. They obeyed and trusted in what the Lord Jesus asked of them. They spread the word of God. They were full of submission. In a huge, mostly uncharted world, often these friends had only themselves with whom to share their convictions with. However, today, we stand in amazement at their accomplishments.

“God's free will is especially obeyed by the free will of good men” (*Clement of Alexandria* c. 195).

We know the Lord Jesus Christ never forgot Nathanael, because in the Holy Gospel according to St. John (21:2), we are told that Nathanael was among those to whom Jesus appeared at the Sea of Galilee after His glorious resurrection. Nathanael remained with the Lord Jesus Christ even to the end.

“At the beginning, I lay down the fact that there is one definite thing taught by Christ... You must

“seek” only until you have found; once you have “found” you must believe. After that you have nothing further to do but to keep what you have believed... For nothing else is to be believed, and so nothing else is to be sought” (*Tertullian c. 197*).

We pray that the Lord Jesus Christ may spot us even if it were “under the fig tree” as he did Nathanael in order to ease our lives and guide us to fulfill His commandments. Lord, sanctify our spirits, cleanse our bodies, conduct our thoughts, and purify our intentions.

Chapter Seventeen



Salome

Constancy through Grace

“...The first was called Mary, the mother of Salome, the midwife who cared for the Virgin Mary during her virginal birth” (Synaxarium, Meshir 16).

The Coptic Synaxarium leaves no doubt as to the lineage of Salome, her role in the Lord Jesus Christ’s holy birth, and who her relatives were.

“On this day the upright and righteous Elizabeth, mother of St. John the Baptist departed. This holy woman was born in Jerusalem to a righteous father called Matthan from the tribe of levi and from the house of Aaron the priest. Her mother’s name was Sofia. Matthan had three daughters. The first called Mary, the mother of Salome, the midwife who cared for the Virgin St. Mary during her virginal birth. The name of the second daughter was Sofia, the mother of St. Elizabeth, the mother of St. John the Baptist. The youngest daughter was St. Hannah, the mother of the Virgin St. Mary, the mother of the Savior. Therefore, Salome, Elizabeth, and the Virgin St. Mary were cousins.” (Synaxarium, Meshir 16).

Salome’s heritage was one of holy kinship. She would also beget holy lineage as her sons became one of the original twelve disciples chosen and called out by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Most biblical scholars concur that Salome married Zebedee, a fisherman. She did not marry a husband who was a priest, considering her father was of the tribe of Levi—a man neither of great wealth nor a learned religious scholar. Salome was the mother of James and John who were in the boat mending fishing nets when the Lord Jesus Christ called them to “follow Him”.

Certainly the Lord Jesus Christ had the foreknowledge that their mother was Salome who received Him at His birth. It is widely accepted that James the Less is James the son of Alpheus. Joses (Joseph) also must be the son of Alpheus although we do not find him referenced in any other Holy Scripture.

Salome's husband Zebedee must have been a wise father and husband as he did not deny his sons the opportunity to immediately follow the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not think of the fishing nets that needed mending, nor the consequent loss of two experienced fishermen. Zebedee did not even consider the decrease of income or food for himself and his family. It can be assumed that Zebedee was a good and faithful man who most likely had heard the preaching of St. John the Baptist preparing the way for the Lord Jesus Christ's ministry.

Salome was a constant follower of the Lord Jesus Christ in His travels proclaiming the Holy Gospel. She must have cared for the Lord's needs as she did at His holy birth. Devotion, love, and service abounded within her heart, both for her Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, and her sons St. James and St. John. Salome always remained constant in her devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ and to her sons.

"For Jesus Himself, our Master and Lord, when He sent out the twelve to make disciples of the people and of the nations, nowhere sent out women to preach—even though there was no lack of women available. For there were with Him the mother of our Lord and His sisters; Mary Magdalene; Mary the mother of James; Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus; Salome; and certain others..." (Apostolic Constitutions compiled c.390).

It should come as no surprise that Salome, St. Mary's cousin, who had witnessed the birth of the Infant Lord Jesus, would be one of the privileged women to follow Him, and would put forward a special request of having her two sons seated on each side of Him in the Kingdom of Heaven. The urge behind such a request was not arrogance-charged or of personal interest but definitely out of her overflowing love for both the Lord Jesus Christ and her sons and her familiarity with the family.

“Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, ‘What do you wish?’ She said to Him, ‘Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your Kingdom’” (Matthew 20:20 -21).

Salome solemnly and courageously witnessed the holy crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. Along with her were other women who stood bravely and valiantly witnessing the whole scene of the crucifixion including the separation of the temple veil. *“There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome”* (Mark 15:40).

Salome was also present at the sepulcher... *“Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen”* (Mark 16:1-2).

With great courage, these women who loved the Lord Jesus Christ devotedly went to anoint the body of our Lord after His agonizing crucifixion. For this act of mercy, they were given

grace, and were the first witnesses to the glorious witnesses. One would wonder where the scattered disciples were.

Thus, it can be said that through constancy, Salome was not only given the grace to be present at the Lord Jesus Christ's birth, but also a witness of His death, and His amazing resurrection.

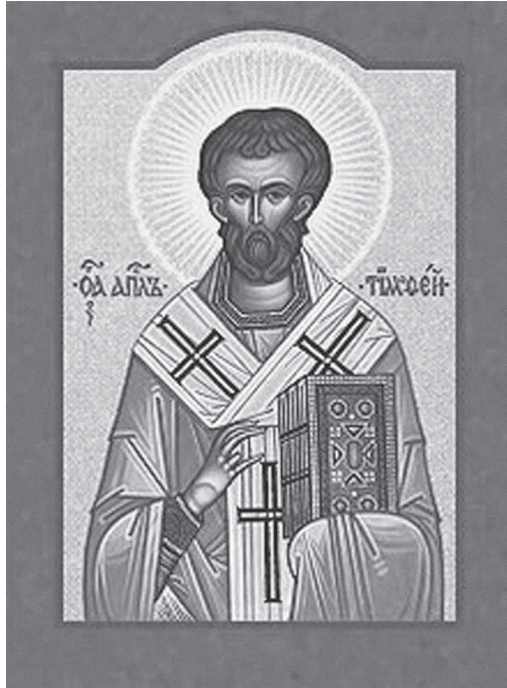
There is not much written regarding Salome, but what is known about her is that she did indeed witness the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Among the first to touch the Holy Infant, she would aspire to be one of the last to touch His holy body by anointing it with spices. As a witness and willing servant to the conception of grace itself, she remained a steady follower of the Lord from conception to resurrection.

It can be further said that Salome was the first servant chosen outside the Holy Family. As midwife to the Virgin St. Mary, she was among the first to bear witness of the miraculous birth of Christ our Lord and to have been given the grace to recognize Jesus as the Christ. She was initially a believing midwife cognizant of the grace bestowed upon her, through the glorious nativity of Jesus Christ. This grace would never elude the life of the blessed Salome. Rather, it became her life, the life of her family, and the life of her apostolic sons.

“Labors that are endured and overcome all the way up until death, cannot fail to obtain a reward... And this reward can be nothing else but immortality” (*Lactantius c. 304-313*).

May we all look toward the constant service of Salome and desire the grace that avails it.

Chapter Eighteen



St. Timothy

Studied Holy Scripture from Youth

It is commonly believed that none of the disciples was closer to St. Paul than St. Timothy.

St. Timothy, the beloved disciple of St. Paul, was a young man from Lystra in Southern Asia Minor. St. Timothy whose name meant “honoring God”, was born into a religiously divided household, with a Jewish mother and a father of Greek descent who worshipped Greek gods. Most likely, because of his father’s lineage, St. Timothy was considered a Gentile rather than a Jew.

It is known that St. Timothy was not circumcised as mandated by the Jewish custom of his time. He was deeply influenced by the faith of his mother and grandmother. Due to his upbringing early in his youth, St. Timothy made the Holy Scriptures his constant study. “ *This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success*” (Joshua 1:8).

St. Timothy, along with his mother and grandmother, were converted to Christianity during the first visit of St. Paul and St. Barnabas to Lystra.

When St. Paul preached in Lycaonia, the brethren of Iconium and Lystra esteemed St. Timothy with such a good report that the apostle took him as his trusted companion. St. Paul was soon to recognize the young St. Timothy’s missionary capabilities and invited him to travel through Asia Minor, and later Macedonia, and Greece. Prior to traveling, St. Paul circumcised St. Timothy at Lystra (I Timothy 4:14; II Timothy 1:6).

Around the time of St. Timothy’s circumcision, St. Paul refused to circumcise another named Titus, born of Gentile parents, in order to emphasize the Holy Gospel teachings and to rebuke

those who continued to affirm circumcision to be necessary regardless of the New Testament teachings. Why then did St. Paul circumcise St. Timothy? Most probably it was because St. Timothy was born of Jewish descent and this would make him more acceptable to the Jews to whom he would preach and also to forestall any early prejudice against St. Timothy.

The act of circumcision was decidedly not a matter dealing with Christian faith as evidenced by not circumcising St. Titus.

Following this incident, St. Paul committed St. Timothy to the ministry of preaching through the laying on of hands and from this time forward regarded him as not only a disciple and most dear son but as his brother and companion in his labors. St. Paul came to speak of St. Timothy as his “*beloved and faithful son*” (I Corinthians 4:17).

St. Paul encouraged the humble and young St. Timothy to overcome his apprehensions concerning his pastoral abilities, his youth, and his frequent stomach ailments. St. Paul positively addresses St. Timothy’s status of youth and stresses the need for self-discipline in the ministry, “*Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, and in purity*” (I Timothy 4:12).

St. Timothy continued to preach directly with St. Paul until St. Paul was imprisoned on a trip to Jerusalem and then taken to Rome. St. Timothy continued in his preaching working with the difficulties in the Church at Ephesus as St. Paul’s emissary. His ardent teachings continued to lead a Church of faith under opposing pressures.

St. Paul wrote his first letter to St. Timothy from Macedonia, and his second letter from Rome, while imprisoned in chains. St.

Timothy came to Rome at the urging of St. Paul who requested to see him once more before he died. “*Do your utmost to come before winter*” (II Timothy 4:21). At some point, St. Timothy was imprisoned himself and then released. St. Paul was to eventually commit to St. Timothy the care of all the Churches in Asia while still a young adult—perhaps about forty years of age.

Tradition says that St. Timothy returned to Ephesus and after becoming ordained the first bishop there, was martyred in AD 97. St. Timothy’s courage was to become contagious as many martyrs were to follow in his example throughout Christianity. “*Stand fast in the faith; be brave; be strong*” (I Corinthians 16:13).

The “Acts of St. Timothy” written by Polycrates, a later bishop of Ephesus, stated that under the emperor Nerva in the year 97, St. Timothy was slain with stones and clubs by the heathens; he was trying to oppose the idolatrous ceremonies on a festival called the Katagogia, kept on January 22, on which day they walked in troops everyone carrying in one hand an idol and in the other a club.

St. Timothy’s courage did not show fear. “*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind*” (II Timothy 1:7).

His relics were transported to Constantinople during the reign of Constantius. The Coptic Church honors the martyrdom of St. Timothy the Apostle, Tobe 23.

May we all prepare our minds as St. Timothy, with constant study of the Holy Scriptures, the knowing that Christians must keep the faith, but not just among themselves.

“*Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel*” (Mark 16:15).

Chapter Nineteen



Phoebe

The Helper of Many

“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also” (Romans 16:1-2).

There are only two verses in the Holy Bible which address Phoebe. Her name appears only once in the Holy Bible. Phoebe’s name is held in esteem by St. Paul himself in both verses, and in both verses, she is described as a helper. Phoebe’s name is further honored as it precedes the greetings to the people of Rome many of whom are found in the traditional list of the seventy-two apostles.

Within these two distinct verses, we have no description of what Phoebe was like. We do not know how old she was. We do not know if Phoebe was single, married, widowed, or a mother. We have no idea if she was poor or wealthy. Apparently, St. Paul did not think any of these things were important in identifying her to other Christians.

What St. Paul probably did consider most important is the fact that she was a helper to him and many others in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the early Church. St. Paul addressed her as “our sister” and “a deaconess”.

Dedicated to Service

The first thing we can surmise regarding Phoebe and the early Church is that she must have truly loved the Lord to have been mentioned in such a way in the Holy Bible and categorized by St. Paul as his “helper”. We know that Phoebe’s love for the Lord extended beyond church attendance to develop into a commitment to mission service. Perhaps Phoebe, being significant enough to

be mentioned in two verses complimenting her helpfulness, did assist St. Paul in his missions. Many biblical scholars believed that Phoebe was delivering a letter from St. Paul to the Romans. It can be ascertained, without a doubt, that Phoebe's depth of commitment to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ and her willingness to use her gifts and talents to serve the Lord were first among her outstanding characteristics.

Trustworthy

If Phoebe carried St. Paul's letter to the Romans, then we can be quite sure that St. Paul had complete confidence in her. We know that St. Paul was in Corinth when he wrote his letter to the Romans. Cenchrea was a small port town approximately seven miles from Corinth. A letter of recommendation was a common practice in the first century for those who were respectable and trusted Church teachers and leaders. Not only was there a letter of recommendation for Phoebe, but an urging to assist her in any business. St. Paul would have never have urged a Church to assist Phoebe in the business at hand if he did not place a great deal of trust in her.

Dependable

As a deaconess and a helper, Phoebe must have served her home church faithfully. Many biblical scholars have speculated that, as a helper, Phoebe could have been offering financial assistance to St. Paul. If so, when St. Paul had asked the Romans to "help Phoebe in what she may require", she could possibly have been collecting financial support for the mission St. Paul addressed in his letter to the Romans chapter 16, "*I shall go by way of you to Spain*" (Romans 15:28).

For Phoebe to have had been recognized with such distinctive church service, she must have been dependable. Dependability has many meanings. A dependable person is one who is reliable, punctual, regularly attends to one's gifts and talents, and is considered always ready to further one's service. St. Paul would have never given her the mission of carrying a letter to the Romans if he had questioned whether she was up to the task.

What can be derived from the two verses concerning Phoebe in the Letter to the Romans? Phoebe, in her service to the early Church, was dedicated, trustworthy, and dependable. This is how St. Paul described someone he had selected and entrusted with the carrying of his letter to the Romans. This is what St. Paul must have considered the greatest among traits required of those who serve the Lord Jesus Christ and the Church. Phoebe was important to St. Paul, not because she was outspoken, beautiful, well-educated, rich, or family-connected. But because she was a helper to many and to him.

May we all seek to serve the Church and others, becoming known as ready, willing helpers as St. Paul illustrated through the servant, Phoebe.

Phoebe, a Servant of the Church

The role of women in the Church has been an interesting and controversial issue among Christians. St. Paul, who is often falsely accused by the Western society of prejudice against women, is actually the one who refers the most to women in the ministry by name. Roughly, one third of the disciples named in chapter 16 of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans are women. The first and one of the most important of the Christian persons St. Paul mentions in his greetings section is a Gentile Christian named Phoebe.

The name Phoebe means ‘bright, radiant, or shining’. In Greek mythology, it means ‘pure’ or ‘radiant as the moon’. Phoebe was from the port city of Cenchrea, the eastern seaport of the city of Corinth. Cenchrea was about nine miles from Corinth. Corinth was on a narrow isthmus that connected southern Greece with northern Greece and the mainland of Europe. The existence of a Church at one of these ports, and presumably in other similar places throughout the area, shows how widely the Holy Gospel had been preached. Temples of various pagan deities were located in this area, among them those of Isis, Venus, and Aesculapius. Phoebe is the only Christian women’s name recorded at that place. She is believed to have delivered St. Paul’s epistle to the believers in Rome at the heart of the Roman Empire around A.D. 57 after traveling about 800 miles from Cenchrea to Rome.

Phoebe our sister: St. Paul calls Phoebe not just a sister but “our sister” emphasizing that she is not only a sister to St. Paul, but the sister of all, a member of the Christian community.

Phoebe the servant: St. Paul refers to Phoebe as a ‘servant of the church in Cenchrea’. The word ‘servant’ comes from the Greek word ‘diakonos’ from which is derived the word ‘deacon’. The verb ‘diakoneo’ means to serve, to wait on, to furnish, and to supply. ‘Diakonia’, the exact word used in this verse, means a messenger, a deacon, a minister of the church. In the New Testament, the word ‘deacon’ used as a verb or noun is translated as servant or minister about 36 times. Phoebe is, therefore, referred to as a servant or a deaconess. In the early Church, the emphasis was made on the service, not on the office, and it was more of an honor to be referred to as a servant than as a deaconess.

In the New Testament Church, a woman was never called an apostle, or bishop, or shepherd, but a servant or a deaconess. Women served as deaconesses in the Christian community in apostolic times. This, however, was not an official clerical rank as that of the bishop or the deacon. The Apostolic Constitutions required that a deaconess either be a virgin or a once-married widow. The primary duties of the deaconess were ministering to women in their houses and assisting at baptisms of women as they emerge from the water. However, anointing the women, the immersion, and the pronouncement of the words of baptism were duties reserved to the bishop or presbyter performing the baptism.

Phoebe the trustworthy: St. Paul desired to visit the Roman saints, so he wanted his letter to be delivered personally to those at the Church in Rome to prepare his way. Phoebe was obviously a woman highly trusted by St. Paul enough to carry his message to the Church at Rome.

The Holy Bible does not mention exactly what kind of business made Phoebe go to Rome. The word business ‘*pragmati*’ in Greek does not only mean material or financial business, but any affair, or matter, or interest that might concern her. She was doing important work for the Church to receive such a high commendation. St. Paul commands the Roman Christians to “receive her in the Lord” meaning to receive her as a faithful Christian, and a member of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ in a religious manner worthy of the saints. She was to be received, with love, honor, and tender affection. St. Paul continues to instruct the recipients of his message to “assist her in whatever business”, which implies that she rendered a whole variety of service. To say ‘whatever business’ shows the utmost confidence

that St. Paul had in Phoebe and his trust in her wisdom, spirituality, and competency as a servant of God.

Phoebe the helper: St. Paul gives good reason for such a warm and appropriate reception Phoebe deserved indeed. She had been a helper of many and of St. Paul himself, as well. The word translated “helper” is the Greek word ‘prostatis’, meaning a patroness, who aided or defended others in their cause; one who undertook to manage the cause of strangers and foreigners. It was, therefore, an honorable title. Phoebe was not only a regular servant but also possible a wealthy woman with money to use for travel and to protect and help others. She devoted her influence and means to the brethren landing at the port of Cenchrea. She probably had shown great kindness in various ways to the apostle and to other Christians—probably by receiving them into her house. She used both her financial means and her own person to minister to the sick and distressed of her city. St. Paul was among those whom she benefited. He showed his gratitude to Phoebe in mentioning her particular kindness to him. She was a useful worker and laborer with St. Paul, and deserved to be noted in the Holy Bible that wherever this epistle is read, her kindness to all is told for a memorial of her faithful service.

May we all men, and women, learn to be servants of the Lord, not seeking an office or a title, but with all humility, serve one another as brothers and sisters—members of the Body of Christ.

Let us pray that the Holy Spirit who indwells in us make us trustworthy to minister to others, to deliver God’s message faithfully, and to be called the helper of all.

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