

Chapter 4

A few significant case-histories

When medical students are learning about pathology, they are taught to think about the microscopic and anatomical causes of an illness and their usual effects. If they can meet and examine someone affected by a particular disease, the subject is then fixed more firmly in the mind. From this early stage of my education I still remember the name of the first patient I met and wrote up. Many years before, she had caught scarlet fever and was now in heart failure due to a damaged mitral valve. I had only just started seeing sick patients in hospital but the encounter literally brought to life a condition that might otherwise have been remembered as just one more lecture or anatomy demonstration.

Having thought about the background and possible symptoms of spiritual ill health, it is now time to think about how it affected a few famous people of old, and what happened as a result. It will be better still if we learn to apply the lessons they offer.

God's chosen people have to learn to trust and obey

Generations came and went after the Fall, with more highs and lows in the Genesis report, until the sudden arrival of a married couple in Ur of the Chaldeans (probably today's Southern Iraq) – Abraham and Sarah. Abraham heard the voice of God personally, calling him out of his homeland and repeatedly promising that he would become the founder of a great nation. Indeed, through him would come many nations and great blessing to the world. This would be despite the great age of both the man and his wife and their chronic state of childlessness. Scripture records that Abraham 'believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.'^{1,2} Centuries later, his simple faith in the promises of God would become an example for others to follow.³

As years went by with no sign of pregnancy, Sarah stopped trusting what God had said, just as Eve had done before her. She urged

Abraham to father a child through her Egyptian maid, Hagar, as her surrogate. There was no suggestion that they asked God about it. Perhaps Abraham argued that even if he were to father a new nation as God had promised, his wife Sarah had not been clearly identified as the mother. It is all too easy to misinterpret God's will without double-checking. Sarah, not God, suggested the union with Hagar. From that was born Ishmael, who years later would father the Arab races. It was many years more before the promised son, Isaac, was born to Sarah. By then they were very aged parents indeed.

As an outward sign of a renewed covenant with God, both boys and their father were circumcised. This was to be a constant reminder of God's promise to be with them if they walked in his ways. Yet the two mothers fell out. Sarah sent away Hagar and Ishmael. The young man still bore the sign of the covenant, as do his Arab descendants, but this split between the two sons of Abraham would finally end up as the Arab-Israeli conflict of today.

These stories are not just history but are also recorded for our learning. The lesson for us is that to doubt God's word and run ahead of his purposes is a form of disobedience. We must learn from Abraham's experience to trust God's promises and wait patiently for his perfect timing in keeping them. Otherwise the results can be big trouble that will affect others for a long time to come.

Total commitment can mean great personal cost

It is not clear how old Isaac was when Abraham faced the crisis recorded in Genesis 22. He believed that God was asking him to sacrifice this long promised, dearly beloved son. Although human sacrifice was not unusual in that culture, it would later be forbidden for God's people, so this seems a very strange request. By now, though, Abraham knew and trusted the voice of his God and at once set out to obey. At the last moment a male sheep was provided and sacrificed to take Isaac's place – but not before Abraham had clearly shown his desire to obey God, whatever the cost. Today we find this a strange story, interpreted by Jonathan Sacks (a Jewish former Chief Rabbi) as the way that Abraham had to learn that Isaac was not his property,

but God's gift to him (and still the proper attitude to be held towards all children). Another message to Abraham, and now to us, is that however much we treasure someone or something, the first place in our hearts belongs to God, the giver of all good things.

After this God renewed the promise to Abraham that it would indeed be through Isaac that blessing would finally come to the world. Here was a hint, centuries beforehand, that God intended great blessing to come to all people through his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Both Abraham and Isaac (but not Ishmael) feature in Jesus' family tree as recorded by Dr Luke.⁴ We shall consider later what cost this blessing would involve. The story of the ram that took Isaac's place on the altar foreshadows how God's own Son would finally pay an even greater price to save the world from spiritual death.

God's ways can perplex us but he has purpose in them

Isaac and his wife eventually had twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Jacob was later known as Israel. God's original promise was renewed to and through him. His twelve sons became founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph, Jacob's favourite, was undoubtedly rather conceited and tactless, causing his older brothers to hate and almost murder him. Instead, they sold him into slavery and he was taken away from Canaan to Egypt, a miserable change of status for him in every way.

Yet God was faithful to Joseph. Despite a false accusation leading to many years in prison, he finally became premier of Egypt; a long, slow process that transformed a self-important teenager into a wise and generous statesman. He had learned humility, but only through times of much hardship and delay. As prime minister, Joseph was able to move his father and brothers from a famine in Canaan to Egypt where, thanks to God-given wisdom, he had stored up plentiful supplies of life-saving grain.

The book of Genesis ends after Joseph had graciously expressed forgiveness towards his brothers, themselves now very sorry for their part in his sufferings. God had overruled and in the plenty of Egypt had saved them all. Yet the old promise to their forefathers that God

would establish his chosen people in the land of Canaan was now on indefinite hold.

Like Joseph, a Christian known to me is enduring a long sentence in a foreign prison. He, too, was declared guilty of crimes he had not done. Joseph's story can be an encouragement to him and others whose faith is tried by different kinds of long and painful constraint.

Many people in training have had their career prospects cut short or permanently cut off, perhaps by political interference, false rumours, personal illness or family responsibilities. Sometimes they have simply failed to be appointed to a much-desired job and felt badly let down. For any of us, a big disappointment can fill our minds with gloom. But God is often painting a much brighter picture that may later be made clear. Our part is to make up our minds to trust to his timing. Perhaps, like Joseph, this confusing experience will help us to develop more patience and humility.

Disappointment can lead to God's appointment

When our lives seem to be going out of control, perhaps through no fault of our own, they are never out of God's control. As with Joseph, a good end can in time follow a bad beginning. Later, as we look back on an unhappy experience, we may realise that the time of waiting on God was part of our training, possibly to prepare us for greater responsibilities ahead, but certainly to encourage our spiritual growth. We will then be able to say with Joseph, 'God intended it for good'.⁵ To have learned that means that the time of waiting was not time wasted.

A Christian doctor I knew spent years only one step away from a senior post yet application after application for a consultant post failed. He did not complain or give up, but spent the waiting time getting more experience and sharing his wisdom both with junior doctors and young people in his local church. In due course he was appointed to what became a chair in a university city. He had the honour of becoming physician to royalty when the reigning monarch visited his adopted country. In the years that he had waited faithfully

on God, this position was being prepared for him and he learned the truth of the old statement, ‘God was thinking yesterday of your tomorrow.’ Many others, from Old Testament days onwards, have looked back and seen how true this is and that God honours our faithful trust.

For further thought

- It has been said that the answer to ‘Why?’ is ‘Wait’.
- Good things can follow even after a long time of unwanted waiting.
- Have you had any personal experience of this, or seen it happen to others?

Further resources

- Sacks J. *The great partnership*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991
- Kendall RT. *God meant it for good*. Fort Mill: Morning Star Publishers, 2001

References

1. Genesis 12:1-3
2. Genesis 15:3-6
3. Galatians 3:6-9
4. Luke 3:21-23, 33
5. Genesis 50:20

