

Draw From The Well

Chapter Three

You Have Not Chosen Me

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Jesus said many things to the twelve at what we call 'the last supper'. All four gospels have a record of that passover meal, but only John records so much of what Jesus said. To these 'last words' of Jesus before his crucifixion, John devotes almost the whole of chapters 13 to 16, nearly 20% of his gospel.

Like you, perhaps, I have read these chapters many times. But recently, from amongst the many things there, one statement seemed to pop out in the middle of other messages and seem rather like a statement out of context. It's when Jesus said this to the twelve: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you"*. (John 15:16 ESV)

It brought a question into my mind. What was Jesus really meaning? Was he simply meaning, "Let's get something quite clear here - I chose you, you didn't choose me." Or was there more to it?

There were a number of things that Jesus knew were in their hearts and minds at that time. For instance, there was an issue between them over who would be the greatest of them after Jesus left. There were troubled hearts at the thought of him leaving them. There was uncertainty about where he was actually going and how they were supposed to follow when they didn't know the way. Some, at least, seemed to feel there was a mystery about who God was and what he was like.

As well as many things in the hearts and the minds of the apostles, there were many things in Jesus' heart and mind also. There were things he wanted to make sure they

understood. For example, he told them that their love for one another would be the sure sign to everyone that they were his disciples. He wanted them to draw comfort from knowing that he would send the Spirit to be their counselor and comforter. Among other things, he also shared with them that one of them would betray him. So, I wondered, why, in amongst all those things, did he say, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you"?

What opened up to me was the possibility that he was telling them something like this: *"There's a lot more to your calling than just the simple fact of whether I chose you or you chose me. It's a bigger thing than me just calling you to follow me. You have been called by me and by my Father to a higher calling. And it's not just a decision you might have made because you saw things in me that won your heart and you wanted to be with me always. That would just be you choosing me. No – when I say I have chosen you, it's a calling to a higher purpose. It's as though God has said, "I have a job to do – and I have called **you** to do it!"*

What do we know about why Jesus did choose them? In a way, it seems that we know almost nothing about why Jesus called who he did to be disciples and apostles. On the other hand, it seems we know everything that matters.

I thought, for example, about Jesus choosing Saul of Tarsus. We know a great deal about who and what Saul was before he surrendered to Jesus. Based on his background, human reasoning could come up with a number of 'good' reasons why God may have called Saul into his service.

We might say one good reason could be that Paul was learned in the scriptures. Another reason could be that his life and reputation according to the law was unspotted and full of zeal (albeit misguided zeal). Or we might think that because he had a high profile in the Jewish religious world he would make a high profile convert.

We know that every conversion is a miracle, but because Paul's conversion seems such an extraordinary miracle, we could argue that it would make a great impression on people in his day (just as it makes a great impression on us still). And so we could go on finding 'good' reasons for God to call Paul.

But what about the other apostles? For some of them we have a brief account of Jesus calling them. For others, it seems we know very little other than their name. So, no matter if we wished to, we can hardly even begin to speculate about why Jesus would have called them - from a human point of view that is. And what's important here? Is it to know **why** he chose them, or just to know **that** he chose them? It seems to me that it's for God to know the **why**. If he puts his hand on you or me, is it for us to know why? Or just **that** he chose us?

So, whilst on the one hand we know little about why Jesus chose his apostles, in another way, can we say, we really do know everything we need to know about why Jesus called them? And that was because Jesus (or God), for his own reasons, put his finger on them and said "I have a job to do – and I'm calling **you**".

It was just up to God or Jesus to call those they wanted for whatever purpose or task they had in mind for them. It didn't have to pass any scrutiny of a selection panel. It didn't have to

satisfy any analysis by human reasoning. It's God's work – and it's God's choice. He doesn't have to explain his reasons to any man or woman.

What would I do if God did tell me the reasons for his selections? I'd like to think I would meekly accept his reasoning. But would I? Maybe not, because pondering what I would really do has caused me to think about what some of God's best actually did when God put his finger on them and nominated them for a task. And I know that if I am attentive enough, I can learn from these lives in the Bible.

God has preserved the record of quite a few for whom he had a job to do. Some of them would not have chosen themselves for the job - but God told them, "I have chosen you" - and we can read of, and learn from, their responses.

Abraham and Sarah – God's 'impractical' plan

God had a job for Abraham and Sarah to do – to be the father and mother of a great nation – numbered, he told Abraham, like the stars of the heavens. But it was not just any nation – it was to be God's nation, his own peculiar people. It was an awesome task – and he told them "I have chosen you".¹

It tells us that God told Abraham first and Abraham believed God and God counted his belief as righteousness. But later, when Sarah overheard the plan repeated to Abraham through God's sent messengers (were they angels?) Sarah laughed because she thought she was too old - and by any human measure she was.

¹ This part of the story of Abraham and Sarah is told in Genesis 15-17

More years went by, and the promise was still not fulfilled, and they were both getting older. God then repeated his promise. How did Abraham respond this time to God's promise? He also laughed at the idea of such an old couple having a child. Now, they both had laughed at God.

They thought the idea seemed ok, but also thought, it seems, that God had overlooked some important facts about their age and their natural capacity to bear children – and chosen the wrong couple - or left it too late.

What should God have done when they laughed at him? What would you or I suggest God do to people who laugh at his plans? Should God have moved on and chosen someone else? Should he have punished them?

Maybe we can understand this by going to an example of what Jesus' disciples thought should happen to people who did not wholeheartedly endorse Jesus' plans. Luke tells us about such an incident when Jesus was traveling towards Jerusalem, just before his trial and death:

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”² But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.” Luke 9:51-56 ESV

James and John wanted severe punishment for those who didn't fit into Jesus' plans at that time. That probably tells me how my human mind would react also - it would want to punish those who appear uncooperative with Jesus. Jesus had a different mind. How grateful I am for that different mind. I know only too well that if Jesus sent consuming fire when, even temporarily, I've held back, I would have been burnt up long ago.

That Samaritan village wasn't punished, but they did deprive themselves of the blessing of a visit from Jesus. And I can only expect the same, to miss out on a blessing if I'm reluctant to fit into Jesus' plan.

To our minds, it may seem that Jesus chose the wrong village. What he had in mind for that village didn't happen – but he didn't change his plan, he was still heading steadfastly towards Jerusalem.

God didn't change his plans either when Abraham and Sarah tried to tell him he'd chosen the wrong couple. He could have 'sent fire from heaven' in an instant of anger when they laughed at his plan – but he didn't. God put them back in 'school' - God's school of experience, where they could learn that when God said “I have chosen you” he meant “**I have chosen you**”. And where they could also learn that being chosen by God for his purpose includes the promise of God that, “I will go with you – and provide what you need to do the job” because that is the way that God reassured a reluctant Moses and others throughout the scriptures.

Abraham and Sarah were sympathetic to God's plan – but, with their human limitations, also aware of what they thought

² Is it any wonder what David said in 2 Samuel 24:14: “I am in great distress. Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man.”

to be its impracticality and impossibility. They thought that it just wouldn't work. Have you ever thought, as I have, that sometimes it seems God's plans are impractical?

After all, how practical was it for God to choose a young, unmarried woman to be the earthly mother of his Son? How practical was it to choose another couple, also 'too old' to have children, to be the parents of John the Baptist? How practical was it to tell the disciples to take one boy's lunch and feed 5000 men with it? How practical was it to lead a multitude of maybe around two million unarmed people into a no-escape situation with the sea in front of them and the Egyptian army behind them? And perhaps most of all, how impractical was it to choose such imperfect sinners as you and me, fated to earthly and eternal death, and promise that we would one day attain to eternal life and the image of his Son?

But then I have to remind myself, "Guess what – God doesn't need to be practical – because he can do miracles". It doesn't matter if his plans, and his chosen agents, seem impractical. If he has an 'impractical' plan and an 'impractical' choice of person to fulfill it – he can work the miracles to make it happen. He can do it with you and me just as he did with Abraham and Sarah. With God, nothing is impossible. As we are told: *"And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible."* (Mark 10:27 KJV)

I like to think of the time between God's promise to Abraham and the fulfillment of that promise as 'learning' time. And it seems that Abraham and Sarah learned the lessons well. It

wasn't all easy going - and that was mostly because of what they brought on themselves. They thought they were too old to have a son and when their faith in God wavered for a time, they decided that a more practical plan was for Abraham to have a son through Sarah's maidservant, Hagar.³

That's how Ishmael came into being. Ishmael was Abraham's son, but God hadn't chosen Abraham and Hagar for the son of promise, he had chosen Abraham and Sarah. Yet, God didn't change his plan because Abraham and Sarah had implemented their own 'solution'.

Abraham and Sarah had to 'learn' their way through difficult experiences relating to Hagar and Ishmael, experiences that brought them stress and heartache and family strife. Perhaps these are feelings we have experienced when we have put our plan in place instead of waiting for God's time and for his plan.

The wonder of it is that although Abraham and Sarah wavered, God never wavered. God reassured them again of his plan, and, in God's time, God blessed them with the miracle he had chosen them for - the birth of Isaac.

Then, when Isaac, the son of promise, was well grown, God came to see how well the lessons had been learned. For the examination, God came to Abraham with another 'impractical' plan. God asked Abraham to sacrifice their miracle son.⁴ How was God's promise about fathering a great nation to become a reality if the son of promise was sacrificed? But when God put the test to Abraham this time, Abraham never blinked. He just went right ahead with the plan.

³ This part of the story is told in Genesis 21

⁴ This part of the story is told in Genesis 22

On the journey to Mount Moriah, Isaac, who must, it seems, have been familiar with sacrificing lambs, said, *“Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.”* Genesis 22:7-8 (KJV). Once again, Abraham, without knowing how it would happen, never blinked. He just said, in faith, *“God will provide himself a lamb”*.

When it came to doing the job God had chosen him to do, Abraham had learned in God’s school to have a wonderful faith. “Impractical” and “impossible” meant nothing now to the man who had once laughed at God’s plan. He understood that when God said “I have chosen you”, his plan not only included selecting Abraham for the job, but every provision from God that he needed to do it.

After what seemed laughable, isn’t it amazing to see the depth of faith Abraham had? Despite what had once seemed impractical, what a vision he had that, “God will provide himself a lamb”. I find it very moving that when Isaac asked, “Where is the lamb?” that Abraham didn’t say that God will provide **us** with a lamb - he said “God will provide **himself** a lamb”.

And isn’t it true, that so much of what seems impossible and impractical in God’s plan for salvation and eternal life for you and me has become the reality because God has given us the Son of Promise - and “God has provided himself a lamb”. God didn’t give you and me something to sacrifice for our redemption, he gave himself a lamb, his only Son, as the sacrifice. John (and similarly Paul) put it:

“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice) for our sins” 1 John 4:10 (KJV)

God needs someone for a tough job in Nineveh

The book of Jonah begins by telling us:

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” But Jonah rose 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 on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.” Jonah 1:1-3 (ESV)

God had a job that he wanted done in Nineveh, and he told Jonah, *“I have chosen you”*. When God spoke to Jonah, off Jonah went. The trouble is, when we look at the map we see Nineveh was cross country to the east. Tarshish, where Jonah was headed, was across the sea to the West. It seems like he couldn’t face the task of preaching God’s judgment, to a city of about 120,000 people who were not only dreadfully wicked, but heathens as well.

And probably, in the same situation, you or I would have done exactly what Jonah did - gone the other way. It was one thing for Jonah to flee Nineveh by going in the opposite direction, but the text tells us he wasn’t just fleeing Nineveh - he was trying to flee *“away from the presence of the Lord.”* We know that that is something none of us can do.

If Jonah had been in a sporting team, they would have dumped him and brought in a replacement. If he was an employee, he may have been sacked. If he was a diplomat, the government would have sent out a press release saying, “Jonah is needed for an urgent and highly sensitive confidential mission to other parts” – and then sent someone else to Nineveh. If he was in the army, he would have faced a

court martial and possibly been shot for desertion. So what would we expect God to do?

God didn't dump Jonah, he didn't sack him or shoot him and he didn't send someone else. God didn't change his plan. He had chosen Jonah to go to Nineveh – and that was that. What God did do was put Jonah back in 'school', just like he did with Abraham. He sent Jonah to God's school, where he knew Jonah would learn the lessons and acquire the qualifications he needed to do the job – so he could do the job with confidence – not in himself, but with confidence in God.

The scripture continues with the story – or should we call it God's syllabus?

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. Jonah 1:3-10 (ESV)

This passage contains so many lessons for me: It tells me that I could make it stormy for others by running away from what God has for me to do. The sailors throwing the cargo overboard to survive the storm is like me trying to solve a problem that God has sent and that only God can solve. If, as Jonah did, I sleep the sleep of denial and irresponsibility I might threaten the safety of others. And what a shameful testimony I would have if others, as was true of the sailors, "*knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord...*". I don't think I've ever admitted that in words, as Jonah did - but I think I may well have told it by some of my actions.

These, we might say, were all 'negative' lessons, teaching us things to not do. Maybe at this stage of the story, as we reflect on Jonah's actions, we could be thinking God **has** chosen the wrong person. But what do we see as we read on?

"Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the Lord, "O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." Jonah 1:11-17 (ESV)

Were there some 'positive' lessons from Jonah's actions at this time? I think there were. The sailors realised that even their

hardest rowing was not going to save them, and instead of continuing to call on **their** gods they, “...called out to the Lord ... and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.” Isn’t this the kind of change that God is looking for - that we would cry the more to him, and sacrifice more willingly and make more committed vows as he leads us through experiences?

Then, Jonah told the sailors, “...Pick me up and hurl me into the sea...”. Notwithstanding Jonah’s failures, in his heart he had the spirit of the Saviour - he was prepared to lose his life to save others. We know God never makes mistakes, and could we say that the ‘heart of the Saviour’ in Jonah confirms to us that God didn’t make a mistake in choosing Jonah either.

Yes, we might say, perhaps justifiably, that Jonah was slow to accept responsibility, but who of us hasn’t delayed in stepping forward? We thank our gracious, patient God who has given us more time when we have been slow to drink the cup he has chosen for us. And who, as he did with Jonah, has given us the time and the experiences to bring us to willingness.

They weren’t easy lessons. But think of the qualifications they gave Jonah. If he had gone when God first sent him, what qualifications would he have? He would have been a preacher sent by God with a message from God. We could say, “surely that’s adequate qualification”. And yes it is, but think of how God enriched that message by Jonah’s learning in God’s school.

After what he’d been through, Jonah could now go to the people of Nineveh and speak from experience. He could speak of the storm experience - telling how he lost his own peace through disobedience – and was a peace-breaker for

others. He could share with others that, like the Saviour, he had to be prepared to lose his own life to save the lives of others (the sailors). He could tell of the fish experience – how he had no place to turn to but God and no way out unless God delivered him and no way of that happening unless God heard his cry for mercy and deliverance. And he could tell of God’s deliverance from hell and the grave⁵ - when there was nothing left for him to do but throw himself on God’s mercy and grace.

A preacher spoke about Jonah a few years ago and said they felt that the whole story turned out exactly as God intended. I think that’s a wonderful insight. If you’re like me, we tend to think in little bits. We think of Jonah being disobedient, so God sent a storm - and that’s one bit. We then think of Jonah sleeping to avoid his responsibility and God stirring up the crew against him. That’s the next bit. Then we think that Jonah was going to perish in the sea so God sent the fish - that’s the third bit. Then we think of Jonah in such a hopeless situation he had to cry to God, and how God answered his prayer. And so on.

But what if we could take in that the whole experience of Jonah was what God had planned before the moment he said to Jonah, “*Arise, go to Nineveh...*”. It wasn’t just an incident by incident series of events. It wasn’t just as if God made up the next bit depending on what Jonah did. It was a whole package planned by God before it all started.

Often our own experiences seem like this bit and that bit. May God help us to remember that he has a plan for the job he wants us to do. It might include lessons in stormy, threatening and desperate experiences. But if we put ourselves in his

⁵ Recorded in Jonah’s beautiful prayer, 2:2-9

hands, it will all fit together just as He planned it to – and one day we'll understand, just as Jonah did.

If the book of Jonah finished at the end of chapter 3, we could say that, whatever went before, it is a story with a happy ending. It would be an ending rather like that of a traditional 'fairy story', many of which end saying, "And everyone lived happily ever after".

But the book doesn't finish there. There is chapter 4. Maybe God's work in Nineveh was finished, at least for the time, but it seems God's plan for Jonah was for his work to continue.

It reminded me of Job's experience. In chapter 23, Job was at a low point. He felt distressed that he didn't know where to find God. He was conscious God was working, but whichever way he looked he couldn't see where God was. Nevertheless, in the midst of his anguish he confirmed his trust in God: *"But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold...he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind."* Job 23:10-14 (ESV)

For all that he didn't understand, Job knew that God had a plan for him - and he knew the overall outcome - he would be brought out as gold. Job understood that God had many things in mind for him, and that God was unchangeable. But he also knew that whatever God had in mind for him, God would complete his work.

Jonah chapter 4 tells us that Jonah had a negative reaction to God withholding his judgment from the people of Nineveh when they repented. It seems as though Jonah felt a bit let down by God - that he had expected to see God's judgement visited on Nineveh, not just mercy.

But it also seems that the book of Jonah isn't just mainly about God's dealings with Nineveh. Rather, it seems that, as with Job, God had "many such things in mind" for Jonah. And so we see in chapter 4 that God was continuing to work with Jonah, teaching him more about God's nature. He was impressing on him again that he was a God of mercy, just as Jonah had so recently experienced for himself.

And it seems to me that if I want the benefit of whatever God has in mind for me, if I want him to continue the refining process to produce the gold, I need to be willing for the experiences of the "many such things he has in mind".

And by the way, how do we know all this about Jonah, with everything about him laid so bare? I guess Jonah told the story on himself, in the book of the Bible that bears his name!

God chooses a new commander for his army

Chapter 5 of Judges, after recording the victory song of Deborah and Barak, ends with with one short sentence describing this lovely picture, *"And the land had rest for forty years."* Judges 5:31 (ESV).

What happened after the forty years of rest? In sad contrast, chapter 6 begins with these words:

"And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.

So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel.

Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains.

So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it.

So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD. Judges 6:1-6 (NKJV)

God's people were a crushed, defeated, impoverished, starving people, crying out to God. So how did God answer?

When the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage. And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. And I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed my voice." Judges 6:7-10 (ESV)

We see then how God answered their cry - by sending a messenger to deliver a strong message. And we see how they responded to God's message - they didn't take heed. So, could they and should they expect any more help from God? I wonder what they were thinking. What would you and I be thinking? Were they thinking, "Is that all that God is going to do, preach at us?" What else, in fact, was God going to do?

We have the privilege of knowing the whole story, but the people who were actually there didn't have the Bible to check out the rest of the story - they were living it. So they didn't know that a merciful and gracious God was also doing something more than sending a message – he was looking for a new commander for his army – someone he could use to make his people victorious again. And he had been watching Gideon.

"Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, "The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor."

And Gideon said to him, "Please, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian."

And the Lord turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?" Judges 6:11-14 (ESV)

What do we make of it that Gideon's efforts to have bread were being watched by an angel? Could we imagine that an angel might be watching you and me to see what we are doing to make a difference? Maybe we think, "No way". Maybe we think we are too insignificant for anyone to take any notice, let alone an angel - or even God himself. That's what Gideon thought, too.

The angel of God was watching Gideon and gave him two messages from God that he could hardly believe. First he told

Gideon, *“The Lord is with you ...”*. The strong message from the prophet to the people of Israel could have created the impression that God had withdrawn from them – indeed, Gideon himself thought that was the case. But here’s the angel telling Gideon, *“God hasn’t withdrawn – God is with you”*.

Secondly, he referred to Gideon as *“... O mighty man of valor.”*. It was as though the angel was saying, *“God has respect for what you are doing and the way you are doing it”*. Even though it was little, and was in secret, and maybe, to Gideon, no more than his duty, God noticed and God respected his courageous effort.

Perhaps we can sense battle weariness, even despair, in Gideon’s reply: *“And Gideon said to him, ‘Please, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.’”* Judges 6:13 (ESV)

It no doubt seemed like a fair question to Gideon. And I don’t know about you, but I know that in those circumstances I might well have asked the same question. And I have asked such questions when things were tough. But the angel didn’t say God was with the “us” – just that “God is with **you**”. It was an individual message.

Isn’t it always? When Jesus was speaking to the apostles at what we call the last supper, he said, *“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.”* John 14:23 (NKJV) This awesome promise Jesus made was what Gideon was experiencing. I can’t help noting that Jesus made his promise to individuals – *“If anyone ... My Father will love **him**, and We will come to **him** and make Our home with **him**.”*

The angel didn’t take up Gideon’s battle weary reply. He just passed on God’s message – *“Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?”* God was telling Gideon, *“I’ve chosen you - go in this might you have – you’re the new commander of the army”*.

What did the angel (i.e. God) mean by *“Go in this might of yours”*? What was Gideon’s might? Wouldn’t it be this – *“The Lord is with you ...”*? What greater might could any of us have? What excuse could we have to not go forward if we had that reassurance that “The Lord is with you”?

Well, as it happened, like me sometimes, and maybe like you, Gideon had his excuses. What was his response to God choosing him? Gideon replied to the angel: *“And he said to him, ‘Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.’”* Judges 6:15 (ESV)

Gideon might well have started with saying, “Manasseh is not even a complete tribe”, but he didn’t need to. His view of his himself and his extended family was demeaning enough. He saw his clan as the weakest in the whole tribe and himself on the bottom rung of the whole family. He must have felt he didn’t amount to anything. He likely thought that nobody took any notice of him and nobody wanted his opinion. He could have felt that he was doing the job no one else would do – and seen himself almost like the family slave.

Did you ever feel like you were nothing and totally inadequate when the call came to fill a place of God’s choosing? I can remember experiences when I have felt like that – and sometimes I’ve even wanted to be in that ‘I’m useless’ position. Sometimes I’ve even wanted to remain in that position - be a bit of a ‘martyr’ and with some self-pity thrown in. It’s a hole

I've dug for myself a few times - but I'm thankful that God led me out of those holes with renewed hope and commitment.

Gideon may have felt he was nobody and nothing and no one took any notice of him. He may have even thought that what he was doing was his lot in life, that he was in his place and he should just fill it faithfully (which he was doing) and remain unnoticed. Perhaps he would have identified with the hymn:

*"It may not be my part in the conflict with sin in the front ranks of battle to fight,
But unhonoured, unknown, where he wants me alone, I can faithfully stand for the right."*⁶

But Gideon wasn't going unnoticed and unknown. God was watching and chose him to take over the army of Israel!

How did God respond to Gideon's low assessment of himself and his clan? He didn't tell him he shouldn't think like that. He didn't try to build him up. God just said, *"But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man."* Judges 6:16 (ESV)

God being with him was part of the deal. And he would defeat the Midianites as though they were just one man – because one man who has God with him is always a majority.

Gideon then asked God for a sign to prove that he had found favour with God. What a miraculous change. A few minutes ago he thought he had favour from no one – not even himself. He saw himself as the least in his family and his family the

least significant in the tribe. Now, he's speaking with God and on the verge of believing that he's found favour with the very God of Israel. He knows God has said to him *"I have chosen you"*. He's not shrinking from that anymore. He's in God's hands.

Yes, he is going to ask again and again for reassurance that God will provide everything he needs to accomplish the job God has given him to do.⁷ And over and over again God is going to give him the reassurance that he asks for. But saying to God, "Please give me reassurance of your presence and help" is very different to saying, "I'm not the person you need".

And I believe God will give assurance to you and me also. When we are in the job for which God has said, *"I have chosen you"*, he will equip us, and he will be with us, and he will reassure us just as often as we ask – just as he did for Gideon, the nobody who almost instantly became the commander-in-chief of God's victorious army.

Sometimes we may think we belong to the 'wrong' family and that we have little standing even within our family – and think that somehow matters to God (like it often does to the people around us). The story of Gideon tells us otherwise.

⁶ "Hymns Old and New": 337

⁷ See Judges 6:36-40

God chooses the crown prince

When Samuel was old and his sons that succeeded him corrupt, the children of Israel petitioned Samuel for a king.⁸ Samuel was upset that they would want a human king instead of God as their king. He spoke with God about it, and God used Samuel to warn the people and make them think carefully about what they were really asking for. Then we read:

“Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, “No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” And Samuel heard all the words of the people, and he repeated them in the hearing of the LORD. So the LORD said to Samuel, “Heed their voice, and make them a king.” 1 Sam 8:19-22 (NKJV)

So God let them choose a king and guided Samuel to induct Saul. He was a man of very different background and standing to Gideon. We read: *“There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish . . . a Benjamite, a mighty man of power. And he had a choice and handsome son whose name was Saul.”* 1 Sam 9:1-2 (NKJV)

Not that we should be persuaded to one opinion or the other by Saul's family background and personal attributes, but human nature leans to “respect of persons” and perhaps Saul's background reflects what the people wanted – a king like the nations around them that they could be proud of. Could we imagine the people wanting a king with such a lowly

standing as Gideon - the man who thought his family was the least in the whole tribe and he was the least in his whole family? But, praise God, he is not a respecter of persons, otherwise where would any of us be who are not like Saul, the choice and handsome son of a mighty man of power?

As events unfold, we know that for a while things seemed to go well for the children of Israel under Saul's kingship. However, we would have to think that God, who knows all things from the beginning, knew how it would eventually go with Saul. It makes for very sad reading.

As Saul's life unfolded (and unraveled), there came a time, even though Saul was still the king, when God moved to have the king **he** chose. So he sent his faithful servant Samuel to anoint God's choice of king:

“The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” And Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.” And the Lord said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’ And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you.” Samuel did what the Lord commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, “Do you come peaceably?” And he said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.” 1 Sam 16:1-5 (ESV)

⁸ Recorded in 1 Samuel 8

I find it's easy to read the account of these things with a rather familiar approach and not pause to really consider the enormity of what was happening. When I do think about it, I think, here is God moving directly to ordain the crown prince. This is not a crown prince ordained by birth and inheritance, whose succession is, for years in advance, an obvious inevitability to all – as we are used to with our British royal family. Nor is this a crown prince ordained because his father was a conquering hero as we see with many kings of history, including several we read about in the Bible, and where it's obvious the crown is going to pass from one generation to the next. No, this is a crown prince that God is ordaining, chosen without kingly background, without any clue as to who God might choose, “out of the blue” as we might say.

So God spoke directly to Samuel and identified the family of Jesse – but not who he had chosen in that family. Samuel, at God's instruction, arranged a worship meeting (based around a sacrifice, just as our times of worship are based around the sacrifice of Jesus). It would seem the local elders and Jesse and his sons were there, and Samuel set about the process of anointing God's choice for king.

“When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord's anointed is before him.” But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen these.” 1 Sam 16:6-10 (ESV)

Samuel was just as human as the rest of us - he judged by what he could see. He looked at the height and stature of Eliab and felt sure he was the one he should anoint. But God said, *“No, because the Lord doesn't see as man sees”*. So Jesse next called his second son, Abinadab - based on seniority, but not based on what God was looking for. Samuel now seemed to be more tuned in to God's prompting and said no to Abinadab. And likewise to Shammah. And to four more in succession. And Samuel said to Jesse, *“The Lord has not chosen these.”* So what now?

“Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.” 1 Sam 16:11 (ESV)

With the benefit of the Bible record, we already knew the answer to Samuel's question *“Are all your sons here?”*. We knew there was still David. But where was David? He was minding the sheep. Didn't they have any servants or neighbours who could mind the sheep so David could also be at this so important meeting? It seems no one thought that David's attendance **was** important.

In the case of Abraham, Jonah and Gideon, their response to God choosing them was something like, *“You're choosing me?”* In the case of David, it was more like Samuel, and the elders, and Jesse and his sons, saying, *“You're choosing who?”* But we often don't see things the way God sees them, as God told Samuel, *“For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”* 1 Sam 16:7 (ESV).

We could ask, what was David doing that kept him from the meeting with Samuel – and what was it that God valued as an important mark when he chose the crown prince for his kingdom? One answer is that David - like our Prince and Great Shepherd - cared for the sheep. At this time, it was his natural father's sheep. But David's care for his Heavenly Father's flock was so evident at that later time, when God was angered by David numbering the people, and God sent severe punishment amongst his people.

We read how David pleaded with God: *"Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking the people, and said, "Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house." 2 Sam 24:17 (NKJV).* Like our Shepherd, he took the blame and volunteered for the punishment in order to spare the sheep.

David had a beautiful spirit when Samuel came to anoint him. He didn't focus on the practicality of God's choice in the way that Abraham did. He didn't protest his poor background and inadequacies as Gideon did. He didn't try to avoid the responsibility like Jonah did. He just accepted that God was choosing him, and accepted the role that God chose him for, without pride, without any show of false humility, without fear and without taking offence that he wasn't included in the time of worship and sacrifice. Like the chorus of the hymn "I Must Have the Saviour With Me"⁹:

*"Then my soul shall fear no ill,
Let him lead me where he will,*

⁹ Redemption Songs: 9 also Hymns Old and New: 85

*I will go without a murmur
And his footsteps follow still"*

As the Lord "looked at the hearts" that day he saw in David what he told Samuel he was looking for (1Sam 13:14) and what he testified in his own words that he had found in David, "a man after his own heart" (Acts 13:22).

The day of the anointing of the crown prince, it seems as though it never entered anyone's head, including David's, that God's choice would be David. But we can only look on the outside – and God was looking in the hearts. And I want to remember that if I'm questioning why God has chosen someone for a job he has, or someone is questioning why I'm doing the job God has given me, that "men have looked on the outside - God has looked on the hearts".

When we think of David as a type of Christ, and that he wasn't invited to the meeting with Samuel, it reminds us of Isaiah 53:3 prophesying of Jesus, *"...we esteemed him not..."* David wasn't 'esteemed' to be at the meeting with Samuel.

Nor was he 'esteemed' to be at the war when God's children faced the Philistines and Goliath. His father, Jesse, sent David to the battleground to see to the welfare of his older sons. God sent David to the battleground to fight Goliath and save His people from defeat. God had a role for David that neither Samuel nor his father nor his older brothers saw.

I feel this same line of thinking can apply to Jesus. Human reasoning would never have put the lowly man of Galilee in the role of the Saviour of all mankind - but God did.

God's Choosing is with Purpose - and at His Time

This chapter started with the words of Jesus: *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.* John 15:16 (NKJV)

It tells us the purpose for which Jesus chose them – so that they could bear enduring fruit. Isn't this so true of lives like Abraham, Gideon, Jonah and David? God chose them. Maybe they, or others, thought at the outset that God didn't get it right. But God never makes mistakes, and fruit takes time to germinate and grow. These lives, tended by the Husbandman, became very fruitful lives – and their fruit has "remained" right into our day – and we're still feeding on that fruit as we read and meditate on the Scriptures.

I'm sure God is still choosing people for the same purpose – that there would be fruit and that the fruit would be enduring. Maybe we won't understand at the time. Maybe we will never fully understand why God favours us with his choosing. When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, Elizabeth didn't understand why she was so favoured. She wondered at the magnitude of her privilege, saying: *"And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"* Luke 1:43 (ESV). But God chooses you or me or whoever to fit his plan - not to fit our reasoning.

As Paul expressed it: *O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!* Romans 11:33 (KJV). Even the moment

'when' God chooses us may well be beyond our comprehension. Maybe we sometimes think (and it's surely a good thing to think) we should be ready, so that if circumstances arise where we could help, then God can use us.

But it may not be just at the time the need arises, as we see it, that God chooses us. God told Zechariah, *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John... and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb"* Luke 1:13-15 (ESV) This message tells us that God chose John the Baptist before he was conceived. It was the same with Jeremiah. God told him, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* Jeremiah 1:5 (ESV)

And maybe God has already chosen you or me. Maybe it's for something we are aware of, maybe it's for something in the future that only God knows about, as was the case with Jeremiah.

.... and God Will be with Us

The thought that we have been chosen, or may be chosen, for a God assigned role could be very daunting. But there is something very comforting and reassuring in what God told several whose choosing by God is recorded in the scriptures.

Moses felt his inadequacy to speak for God: *"But Moses said to the Lord, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since*

Draw From The Well

*you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” Then the Lord said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and **I will be with your mouth**¹⁰ and teach you what you shall speak.” Ex 4:10-12 (ESV)*

Jeremiah relates what God said to him when he expressed his inadequacy for the role for which God chose him. He tells us what he said to God and how God answered him: *“Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’ for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, **for I am with you to deliver you, ...**” Jeremiah 1:6-8 (ESV)*

Gideon thought of himself as the least in his family and his family as the least in the whole tribe. Nevertheless, he was God’s choice, and God made that clear in the message from the angel: *“And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, “**The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor.**” Judges 6:12 (ESV)*

After his resurrection, when Jesus sent the apostles to take the gospel into the whole world he told them, *“**And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**” Matt 28:20 (ESV)*

When the Jews were making things very difficult for Paul in Corinth, God sent him a message: *“And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, **for I am with you...**” Acts 18:9-10 (ESV)*

May God give us all the faith and courage to take up the task he has chosen us for. May we, like Gideon, *“Go in this might of*

yours” - the might and power of knowing and believing the reassurance God gave to others - **“I am with you”**.

Finally

What can be said in conclusion? For me, thinking back over the thoughts in this chapter, and their message for me, moved me to prayer. What did I pray? Well, in my experience, prayers are a thing of the moment and I’ve found it’s seldom that I can recall exactly what I said in prayer. Nevertheless, I find that the theme of a prayer, the key petitions and the feelings, can remain for a long time, sometimes permanently. So I’ll conclude by sharing what I can recall of the theme of my petitions in relation to “You have not chosen me ...”.

I felt moved to thank our God and Father for the reassurance that we are his children because he has chosen us and called us. I felt I needed to pray for humility and courage to accept what he wants to call me to, whatever it may be. Then, I felt the need to pray for faith to believe that God will be with us and equip us for the task he has called us for. Finally, to pray to be fruitful, because Jesus said that was the purpose for calling those he called.

¹⁰ The emphasis in this and following passages is the writer’s