

Draw From The Well

Chapter Four

Beauty Beyond Imperfection

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Beauty Beyond Imperfection

The line of thought for this chapter began with a dining setting in a holiday cottage. It was made from thick planks of cypress timber, a timber that usually has beautifully contrasting colours and grain patterns. This furniture was no exception. But those features of grain and colour were not the most striking characteristics. What was most striking about the furniture timber was its imperfections.

It might seem strange to speak of 'imperfections' in furniture because, usually, furniture timber is the most select grade. Some timber species are, of course, more highly prized as furniture timber than others. Even so, when a log of a select species is sawn into sections, some bits are obviously only good for firewood. Other pieces are suitable for use in a building, but only if they are hidden inside the walls. There will probably be some sections that are fit to be seen in the finish of a nice home. And finally, if the miller is fortunate, there will be some of furniture grade. This timber will be set aside, firstly because it is flawless and then secondly perhaps because there is some special figuring in the grain.

In the case of this dining setting, however, the furniture maker had deliberately used some sections with obvious flaws. In some places, knots were missing. Some of the chair backs had more than a few small cracks in them. One of the chairs

had a piece missing from the front of the seat. The most striking feature, however, was in the table top.

The table top was a single slab of wood cut from the middle of the trunk. In one dimension, the two opposite edges were straight where the slab had been cut across the trunk. The other two sides followed the shape of the sides of the trunk, that is, with just the bark removed.

The top was beautifully figured with the pattern of the grain and the contrasting shades of colour in the heartwood and sapwood. The clear lacquer finish brought out the beauty of the grain. Anyone who loves timber like I do, would have seen this table top as a thing of great beauty - if they could overlook the obvious flaws.

That's how the furniture finished up. But, of course, it wasn't always like that. Think for a minute what the furniture maker went through. Experience may have given him¹ some inkling of what the log may reveal. But he wouldn't really know what the timber would be like until the tree was cut down, the trunk sawn into lengths, the lengths sawn in to planks and the selected planks shaped and machined and polished. We can understand how the anticipated beauty would be progressively revealed at each stage of the process. Then, when the piece was finally finished, the furniture maker knew what he really

¹ I'll stick to 'him' for the furniture maker but of course it may just as well been 'her' or 'them'

had - the beauty that God had put there, and that God knew all along was there to be revealed.

I like to think of that as a parable for human lives. God has put beauty within us who have become his children - the beauty of his Son. Perhaps we feel, like the timber whilst it's still in the log, that not much of that beauty is evident. But as the Master Craftsman works in our lives, he can bring out the beauty that speaks of himself and speaks of Jesus - the beauty of the new life within.

As I mentioned, there was something unusual about the table top. It was the most striking feature of the whole setting really - and it wasn't the beautiful colours and patterns in the grain of the table top. It was a cavity in the otherwise solid slab. The hole was almost big enough to lose half a sandwich - or catch half a cup of spilt coffee! It didn't go through the top. It was closed at the bottom, open at the top and surrounded by bark. In sawing the plank, the edge of the bark was cut so as to form a dark ring in the otherwise pale sapwood. The effect was to immediately catch the eye.

One can have all sorts of thoughts about including such imperfections. Couldn't the furniture maker have chosen more carefully - chosen stock with less flaws? Couldn't he have at least sawn the edges to a neat line and cut off the hole? Or was he right to use the sections just as they were - just as God made them? Because that's what this furniture maker did, used the tree just as God made it.

If you are like me, we'd like to avoid the flaws, wouldn't we? Cut them out and show only the perfect bits. Fill the holes and cracks ever so carefully to look like they were never there.

I don't know about you but that's what I have sometimes wished for the life I bring to God. Or wished that's what my Christian profession and service would do for me - remove the flaws - make me seem like the most select grade of person. The furniture maker, though, worked with the timber just as God made it. And isn't it a beautiful and peace producing truth to know that, like the furniture maker, God wants to take us up, flawed and imperfect, and work with us just as he made us.

As we noted, the furniture maker wouldn't know what he was getting until the timber was chosen and dressed. Then both the beauty and the imperfections would be revealed. The furniture maker worked around the flaws to bring out the beauty, working until the beauty transcended the imperfections.

It wasn't that the imperfections themselves were the beauty. Rather, it was that the imperfections were not hidden, or avoided but accepted. And the beauty was not diminished because of them. The maker didn't cut them out or try to disguise them, just let the beauty show around them. But after all, God made the tree, so maybe the maker thought that since God put the imperfections there, just as he put the beauty there, the maker shouldn't try to disguise how God had made the tree.

It seems to me that God works in a similar way to the furniture maker. He knows, better than I know, both the imperfections and the potential for beauty. He wants to work so that the latter will transcend the former.

Sometimes it seems it's easier to focus on the imperfections rather than the beauty - and even easier for me to do so in others. This thought has led me to meditate more about some lives in the Bible, to appreciate more where beauty was revealed beyond the imperfections. As I thought about lives in the Bible, it seemed to me that God didn't disguise the flaws in those lives in which he worked either. Rather, his work in their lives brought out the beauty, beauty that shines out beyond the imperfections.

Martha

For many years I mostly took a negative view of Martha - and of course a positive view of Mary. My views were based on just that one time recorded in Luke 10. Those views that were based on how I read that incident and the way I had often heard Mary's praiseworthy behaviour presented to us - and Martha's behaviour criticised, or if not criticised, compared unfavourably to Mary's actions.

We probably are familiar with how it goes: *"Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was*

distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her; "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." Luke 10:38-42 (ESV)

When I think now about what I previously thought of Martha, I feel it was probably with more than just a touch of self-righteousness. You know, thinking that in that situation I would have been doing what Mary was doing. I would probably have been wondering why Martha didn't 'get it', wondering how she could get her priorities so wrong. I found it easy to find fault with her self-pity - and that she let it lead her into criticising her sister and complaining to Jesus.

I don't think I was totally negative about Martha. I think I can honestly say that I took into account that it was her home and she had to provide for 13 men (and goodness knows how many more in the company). But it now seems that in finding positive things about Martha in the past, I was really making excuses for her, rather than seeing virtues.

More recently though, I've begun to think differently about Martha. Sure, Martha had her imperfections. God, through the scriptures, has left them on record for all to see. And yet, by the influence of the Master, there was beauty that blossomed there also.

It tells us that when Jesus went to that village, Martha welcomed him into her home. Isn't that a beautiful mark that

God would like to work into every human being - that they would welcome Jesus into their home? As we know, that's the time that Mary sat at Jesus' feet and Martha was so stressed about serving. It's not the only time, though, that we read of Martha and Mary connecting with Jesus.

We read again of Martha (and Mary) at the time Jesus went to Bethany because Lazarus had died: *"So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."* John 11:20-27 (ESV)

This time, Martha leaves behind her household responsibilities and makes the effort to put herself in Jesus' presence. It wasn't as though there wasn't anyone around and she could just sneak out, because it tells us, *"many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother."* John 11:19 (ESV) So once again Martha probably had a house full of people. And it's not that she wouldn't appreciate them coming to comfort her and Mary. But this time, Jesus' presence had the priority, and that's where she went and that's where she was.

Martha showed the beauty of dealing with loss and mourning by 'taking it to the Lord' - *"So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him"*. Then there is the beauty of Martha's simple faith, as she expressed to Jesus: *"But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."* And there is the beauty of Martha's revelation: *"She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*

Many of us have been oft times inspired by Peter's confession when Jesus asked the disciples firstly, "Who do men say that I am?" and then, "Who do you say that I am?". Peter gave what we can still sense is such a heartfelt response: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

Is Martha's response any less profound or any less beautiful? *"Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."* John 11:27 (ESV)

What about Mary on this occasion? Is she sharing in Jesus' comforting presence? Not, it seems, at the same time as Martha. However, immediately after Martha's confession (v.27) we read, *"When she (Martha) had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she (Mary) heard it, she rose quickly and went to him."* John 11:28-29 (ESV)

There's something lovely about Martha's attitude, isn't there? She had a message from Jesus for Mary and she passed it on quickly. There's no record of Jesus calling for Mary, other than what Martha heard. Maybe Martha could have stayed longer

with Jesus but she was sensitive and considerate of her sister - even as John so faithfully records that telling detail, speaking to Mary in private. It would have been easier to stay with Jesus, because returning home probably meant she had to take over the house-full of mourners. But Martha went home and unselfishly shared her privilege of Jesus' company with her sister.

There's beauty in those who have a message from the Master and pass it on. There's a beauty in those who will take up the tasks at hand to give us time with the Master. There's beauty in the sharing of privileges.

Jesus clearly loved going to Martha's house. We read of three occasions when Jesus went there and we know in some detail what occurred each time. A visit to Martha's house was one of the last things Jesus did before his crucifixion. John, though using not many words, captures a scene so full of meaning. It's a scene in which the beauty in Martha has transcended the imperfections that once were so prominent. And it's a scene in which the beauty of Mary's spirit of worship is blossoming even more wondrously than when she sat at Jesus' feet: *"Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair."* John 12:1-3 (ESV)

As things were the first recorded time Jesus went there, Martha is still serving - and Mary is still worshipping at Jesus' feet. But Martha isn't burdened by her serving any more. And Martha isn't complaining that Mary isn't helping her. Those things we saw in Martha in the first incident are still on record. But now we see beauty in Martha that goes beyond the imperfections that seemed so obvious back then.

At the time of the first incident, Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen a good part that would not be taken from her. The beauty of Martha's revelation of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God" and the beauty of her spirit during Jesus' last time in Bethany have been on record for 2000 years - and will be until the end of time. That part won't be taken away from Martha either.

Peter

When the furniture maker chose the log from which he cut the planks for the table and chairs, he could only speculate on what beauty or what flaws might be revealed by the saw and plane. But what about when Jesus chose the 'timber' that became the apostles? What about Peter for example? Would Jesus be aware of the 'good' and the 'flaws' in Peter before he chose him? Of course he would. But still Jesus chose Peter. The flaws in Peter, things that Jesus would know of before he chose him, have been on record for all to read about ever since. But more than that, much more than that, is the record of the beauty that Jesus brought out in Peter. To my mind,

Jesus brought out in Peter beauties that far surpassed the flaws.

I don't know about you, but I have come to value more and more all that's recorded about Peter in the gospels and the Acts. For one thing, I can easily identify with Peter's weaknesses and failures. That has been a help, but that's not what appeals most to me. What appeals most is seeing how the Master Craftsman worked in Peter's life to bring out the beauty that transcended the imperfections.

On the mount of transfiguration, Peter showed the beauty of a spirit of worship. Yes, we could say that Peter's idea about worship was a bit misguided. And I have said that. And I have to confess that for a lot of years I allowed myself to do that - to be quick to criticise Peter. I'm thankful that attitude has changed.

Now when I think about Peter on the mountain I see it was a spirit of worship, and it led to them hearing God himself speak. We could ask, "Would God have spoken if Peter had said nothing, if he had kept as quiet as James and John apparently were?" It seems unlikely. Peter put his idea of worship forward, slightly off beam though it was, and it seems it opened the way for God himself to provide the correction, like the plane smoothing the rough timber.

Peter also showed the beauty of conviction in his God-revealed belief. *When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the*

Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."
Matt 16:13-17 (KJV)

The Master Craftsman also worked into Peter the beauty of commitment. It doesn't mean that Peter's commitment was always without flaw. We know so well Peter's response when Jesus was telling them what they would all have to face. And we know so well what Jesus had to tell him about the strength of his commitment: *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."* Peter said to him, *"Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death."* Jesus said, *"I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me."* Luke 22:31-34 (ESV)

Perhaps we have all found it easy at times to see Peter as over confident as self-confident - and see that Jesus had to tell him it was misplaced. That's how I saw it for many years. Now, though, it makes me think of vows and promises I've made, many of them, to do better, to not fail in the same way again, only to stumble when the test came. It also makes me think of hymns I've sung for years. Hymns I've sung sincerely but without really considering all that they contained. And now I

wonder if some phrases seem, like over-confident words, a bit like words Peter used: For example², “I am going all the way”, and “I’ve vowed to be true I’ll followall the way” and “I will follow the Lamb wheresoever he goes”.

As Peter walked with Jesus, and the imperfections showed up, Jesus didn’t discard Peter. He didn’t go looking for a new piece of timber. The work that Jesus did in Peter’s life brought out the beauty of deep commitment. Peter’s level of commitment did fail him when Jesus was on trial. He thought he was willing to go to prison and to death with Jesus - but at that time he failed. Later, though, as we read in the early chapters of Acts, he had a level of commitment that did take him to prison and to death.

It wasn’t so long after Jesus’ resurrection that Peter was imprisoned, along with other apostles. *“But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.”* Acts 5:17-21 (ESV) We don’t read this time of Peter overstating how far he was prepared to go. He (and other apostles) just went and did what the angel said, knowing they may well end up back in prison.

Where once he may have seemed self-confident, Peter now showed a beauty of commitment that was not based on confidence but on resignation and obedience. When they were delivered from prison and again commanded by the rulers not to speak at all of Jesus, Peter and the other apostles fearlessly told the rulers, *“We ought to obey God rather than men”*. Isn’t this the same beauty of obedience and resignation that we see in Esther’s response when, to intercede for the Hebrews, she took the life-or-death risk to approach the king without being bidden, saying, *“If I perish, I perish”*. And it’s the same beauty we see in the Hebrew children telling the king of Babylon that their God was able to deliver them (if he willed) but even if he didn’t, they would not worship the idol the king had set up.

Then there’s the dramatic imperfection of Peter’s threefold denial at the time of Jesus’ trial. It’s recorded plainly for all to see for all time. As plain to see as it is, it’s not the finished work, is it? As we follow the work of the Master Craftsman we see the beauty being brought out.

We see the beauty of total involvement: *“Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”* John 13:8-9 (ESV)

We see the beauty of a tender conscience and the beauty of repentance: *“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter*

² “Hymns Old and New” numbers 290, 352 and 306 respectively

remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly." Luke 22:61-62 (ESV) When Judas realised he'd done the wrong thing - he went out and hanged himself. When Jesus just looked at Peter, he knew he'd done the wrong thing - and went out and wept bitterly. We could imagine they were tears of shame, of bitter defeat, of the grief of failing his Lord and Master. But they were also tears of restoration.

We see the beauty of unbounded faith when Peter ventured out of the boat to walk to Jesus on the water. Sure, his faith failed him when he looked at the stormy sea, but I want to remember that he alone of the apostles did step out in faith - and he did walk on the water.

We see the beauty of 'illogical' obedience: *"And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets."* Luke 5:4-5 (ESV)

Jesus revealed in Peter the beauty of an open heart. *"So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said*

unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep." John 21:15-17 (KJV)"

What would you or I have said to the question "lovest thou me?" I would probably have been more likely to say, "sure" or, "of course". And what would you or I have said to Jesus giving us a task, as he did to Peter? I think I would have probably have said something like, "Of course, if that's what you want me to do" or even, in the modern vernacular, "No worries". But Peter let Jesus' questions go right into the soul-piercing depths of his being. He knew he could not give a superficial answer. It had to be, *"Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee."* What can I say? The honest answer is that I have sometimes given superficial answers to the Lord - and followed up with superficial service.

The uneducated fisherman began, we could say, like a rough slab of timber with flaws and imperfections. What we see as the Master Craftsman worked are development of the beauties of commitment, repentance, an open heart and a tender conscience.

Sometimes we might feel that our flaws make us unsuitable material for the Master Craftsman to work on. I think Peter may have also felt that at times. Remember Peter's response when obedience to Jesus' command yielded that great catch of fish? *"And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."* Luke

5:7-8 (ESV) But did it convince the Master Craftsman to “depart” from him, to throw him on the workshop scrap pile?

The furniture maker didn’t discard the flawed slabs but worked with them to make something beautiful - even though the flaws remained. Jesus didn’t discard Peter either. In fact we could say Jesus made it clear after his resurrection that he wasn’t letting Peter out of his workshop. Remember how God gave a message to the women who came to the sepulchre, *“But go, tell his disciples **and Peter** that he is going before you to Galilee.”* Jesus seemed to be making sure Peter would still be in his hands as he worked to bring out beauty that transcends the imperfections.

It’s possible, of course, that I could become focused on the flaws in the furniture and let them blind me to the beauty. And I could focus on Peter’s shortcomings and let that blind me to the beauty that Jesus brought out. And in doing so, I could become self-righteous, thinking I’m less imperfect. Or, alternatively, feel hopeless, thinking my flaws are too great.

For all we could say about Peter, it seems fitting to let Peter himself have the final word. Writing to scattered believers, feeding the lambs and sheep as Jesus had told him to, Peter told them about the work of the Master Craftsman: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that*

is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Then Peter tells us how the work will proceed: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire....*

And finally, what the finished work will be like:—***may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.***³ 1 Peter 1:3-7 (ESV)

Moses

When God selected Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, Moses saw himself as poor raw material, a slab of timber with too many flaws, we might say. For example, he knew himself to be inarticulate, a serious flaw in a leader who was to be sent with God’s message to challenge the mighty Pharaoh.

But, in spite of Moses’ imperfections, God brought out wonderful beauty in Moses. One of the most beautiful marks is that Moses seemed to have a spirit that invited the presence of God to draw near and also invoked a spirit of worship in the people. *“Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until*

³ My emphasis

he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door.” Exodus 33:8-10 (ESV)

If there is one quality we see in Moses that to me seems more beautiful than others, it's this: *“Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” Exodus 33:11*

Even so, Moses wasn't perfect either. We can well imagine how the frustration of leading a stubborn, ungrateful, complaining multitude would wear on us, as it did on Moses over the years of wandering. It seemed to get the better of him one time, didn't it? God brought it up; as the children of Israel were nearing the end of their wanderings. God gave Moses a view of their future , along with a view of his own - and a reminder of his failure that day: *“Go up this mountain of the Abarim and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel And die on the mountain... because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel at the waters of Meribah-kadesh because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.” Deuteronomy 32:49-51 (ESV)*

What gets our attention as we think of Moses? Do we see the man whose attention God could attract - as he did with the burning bush? Do we see a man who rejected his royal privileges in Pharaoh's palace in Egypt to identify with God's children who were merely oppressed slaves? Do we see a man so meek God could treat him like a friend? Do we see the

man who could receive wise counsel - as he did from his father-in-law? Do we see an intercessor - a man who was willing to be blotted out of God's book if God could not accept his intercession for the sin of the people? Do we see a man to whom God could give the laws to govern every aspect of a nation's devotion to the one true God, including the day to day affairs of the nation and its citizens? And more than that, do we see a man to whom God could give a law that has influenced the legal systems and affairs of countless nations and peoples all over the world for thousands of years? Do we see a man to whom God could give the detailed pattern for the tabernacle and tabernacle worship - and know it would be done just as he instructed?

Or when we think of Moses do we see a man who protested that he was the wrong person for the job because he had a speech defect? Do we see a man who seemed one day to take some of the credit for one of God's miracles - or “didn't treat God as holy” as God recounted to him? Do we think of a man who killed another man in anger? Do we think of a man who married a woman who was not of the children of Israel? These are not small things, are they? But are these the things we focus on when we think of Moses?

That has been an interesting question for me to ponder. I think it has often been true of my thoughts about some, like a Peter or a Samson or a Martha, that I have tended to focus more on the flaws. With Moses it seems different. I don't claim any credit for the fact, but I realised in writing these things down that I rarely think of the 'flaws' when I think of Moses. The work

of God in bringing out the beauty of his handiwork in Moses seems to have pushed the flaws well into the background.

And so, it's truly the case with Moses also, that despite the reality that he wasn't perfect, the beauty of God's work has transcended the imperfections.

Samson

For me, Samson has been a contrasting life to Moses. As I mentioned, when I think of Moses it's usually in a very positive light. But over the years I've tended to take a less positive view of the life of Samson.

As I recorded this chapter, the life of Samson came to me in a new light and I realised I've been carelessly unkind and unfair, probably making rash judgments and, more importantly, missing the purpose God had for recording lives such as Samson.

When I read more carefully I realised that Samson judged Israel for twenty years. He had a number of victories and also, it seems, a number of failures and weak moments. As I've thought a little more about Samson though, there is one prevailing thought that is very sweet. It's this thought, that his greatest victory was his last.

We remember the scene. Samson betrayed by his wife, had his Nazarite vow stripped from him. That destroyed his God-

given strength and the Philistines did what they would like to do to all God's children - burned out his eyes and bound and enslaved him.

During a feast, the Philistines, drunk with wine and their own power, thought they would use Samson as a plaything:

“Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport. Then Samson called to the Lord and said, “O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.” And Samson grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. And Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines.” Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.” Judges 16:27-30 (ESV)

There was a beauty in Samson's life that finally transcended all the flaws. It was the beauty in this, that Samson was willing to lose his life to get the victory for God's people. It's a beauty that speaks to me of Jesus. Our Saviour was also set at nought, put to every extreme of ridicule, stripped (as men thought) of everything that could speak of dignity and power and was willing, as foreshadowed by Samson, to die to get the victory for us.

Job

When the book of Job begins we see a life where God has already been very effectively at work. We read of a man that seems as though God has ‘polished’ him to perfection. The very first verse tells us of Job that: *“that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”* The beauty of Job’s life was not only visible to others, but God pointed out his beauty to Satan: *“And the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?”* Job 1:8 (ESV)

Nevertheless, it seems God’s work in Job was not finished. Maybe God’s work in Job’s life was more like a furnace than a workshop but whichever analogy we use we know that God allowed Satan to afflict Job with one dreadful experience after another. The Sabeans killed his servants and took his 500 yoke of oxen and 500 female donkeys. The “fire of God from heaven” burned up more servants along with his 7,000 sheep. The Chaldeans raided and killed his servants and took his 3,000 camels. His seven sons and three daughters were together when a wind blew the house down and they were all killed. And what do we see from Job?

It tells us in 1:20, *“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground* That seems understandable doesn’t it - that after all he went through he would be crushed?

⁴ My emphasis

But that quote is not to the end of the verse. The complete verse goes like this: *“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground **and worshiped.**⁴ And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”* Job 1:20-21 (ESV)

Is that not a beautiful response? All those experiences of great and heart-breaking loss were accepted in a spirit of worship. There are times, perhaps, when we are so in awe of God’s hand in things in a positive way that we feel all we can do is bow our heads and worship. But wouldn’t we covet to have such a spirit of worship in a situation of affliction such as Job’s?

So we could ask, “why was God still working on Job?” After all, God portrayed Job as *“... there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?”* It seems we could think of Job as the perfect example of ‘furniture quality’ timber. Timber that has already been machined and polished and the beauty that God has put there is already evident.

But perhaps the timber is not yet prepared sufficiently for the next stage of the project. Perhaps the section is still too thick and the craftsman needs to slice into it again, cut it into thinner sections. And then, what may he find?

It seems that's what God did with Job. We could say he planed him down and planed him down. What a process God decreed for Job - every machine in the workshop put to work on him, we might say! Worked on firstly by the hand of Satan. Then by enemies. Then by natural disasters. Then by his friends. Then by Elihu. And finally by God himself.

It doesn't seem unkind to say that some imperfections were eventually revealed. Job saw this in himself after God had spoken to him directly: *"Then Job answered the Lord and said: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ... Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'"* Job :1-6 (ESV)

This seems to me such a moment of insight into the heart of God. When God drew Satan's attention to Job, God gave his view of Job *"there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"* But after God had spoken directly to Job, Job had this view of himself, *"but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."* Whose view was correct? Does it mean Job was aware of his imperfections but God wasn't?

Chapters 38 to 41 tell us otherwise. In these chapters, God gives a huge catalogue of Job's shortcomings compared to God himself. But nevertheless, when he spoke to Satan, God didn't dwell on Job's flaws but portrayed Job through the eyes of grace, *"a blameless and upright man"*. God well knew Job's

flaws, but through the eyes of grace, God saw and proclaimed the beauty that transcended the imperfections. Is that not our hope here and for eternity - that God will look at each of us through the eyes of grace? And as he does, then one day it will be as John puts it: *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."* 1 John 3:2 (ESV)

There were many facets to the beauty God brought out in Job in spite of the imperfections. There was the beauty of unshakeable integrity - *"And the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason.'"* Job 2:3 (ESV)

There was the beauty of indestructible trust: *"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: ..."* Job 13:15 (KJV)

There was the beauty of unwavering belief that God will work out everything for our good: *"But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."* Job 23:10 (KJV)

There was the beauty of acknowledging the Lord as Almighty God: *"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."* Job 42:2 (ESV)

There was the beauty of resignation to God's will, accepting whatever cup God gives him to drink, no matter how bitter:

Draw From The Well

“Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” Job 1:20-21 (ESV)

There was the beauty of a mediator: *“And his sons went and feasted in their houses, every one his day; and sent and called for their three sisters to eat and to drink with them. And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.” Job 1:4-5 (KJV)*

There was the beauty of power in prayer: *“And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly and the Lord accepted Job’s prayer.” Job 42:8-9 (ESV)*

God also revealed in Job the beauty of an amazing understanding of the majesty of God, describing it so profoundly: Job 26:6-13 (ESV) (can I exhort you to slowly read this out aloud to yourself?)

“He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the earth on nothing.

He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them.

He covers the face of the full moon and spreads over it his cloud.

He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness.

The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke.

By his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he shattered Rahab. (Egypt?)

By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.

I don’t know how you get on, but over the years I have found it difficult to have my thoughts embrace the majesty of God and found it even more difficult to explain his majesty. The way Job finishes this passage of scripture (v.14) has helped me understand why that is: *“Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! Now I understand that all I can comprehend and articulate of God’s majesty is at best just a “faint whisper” of what is truly God’s greatness.*

And I wonder if, like me, you sometimes feel that for all we understand and love about Jesus, about his life and work, about his atoning sacrifice, and about his glorious resurrection, we have as yet only heard a *“small whisper”* of him. And one day we will truly “see him as he is”.

As we think of these beautiful marks in Job are they not also some of the beautiful marks of our Saviour? And as we see these beautiful marks in Job wouldn’t we covet them for ourselves? I find it easy to quickly answer “Yes” - and then

realise I must ask myself, “But am I willing, as Job was, for what they cost?”

What’s in a Name?

To some of the apostles, Jesus gave new names⁵. To James and John, who by birth were the sons of Zebedee, Jesus gave the name of Boanerges. We’re told it means, “Sons of Thunder”. Perhaps the name relates to that time they asked should they call down fire from heaven on the village that wasn’t very hospitable to Jesus when he had his face set to go to Jerusalem. Or perhaps they were thunderous preachers.

To Simon, the brother to Andrew, he gave the name Peter, which means “Rock”. We also read that Simon the son of Alphaeus was called “The Zealot”. We’re not told that this name was given by Jesus or how it came about. He may have been so called because he had great zeal. Or possibly, he or his forbears had been associated with those who saw themselves as being full of zeal and it had become a family name. Or it may have been for some other reason.

In Acts 4:36 we read about a man called Joseph being given a ‘nickname’ by the apostles. They called him Barnabas. It has a lovely connotation: *“Thus Joseph, who was also called by the*

*apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), ...” Acts 4:36 (ESV) In our day, we might have called Barnabas ‘the encourager’.*⁶

Another of the apostles has acquired what is a not-so-kind nickname. It doesn’t come from the Bible as far as I can see. And it’s used widely in the community by those who know the Bible and those who don’t. It’s “Doubting Thomas” of course. And we can probably guess he got that nickname from what John records: *“Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”* John 20:24-25 (ESV)

Is “Doubting Thomas” a fair summation of Thomas? When I think a little more deeply about Thomas, I think the nickname is focusing on the flaws and not on the beauty beyond the flaws. And it’s become so pervasive, hasn’t it? It’s become part of the English language. It’s used as a derogatory term for anyone who is seen to have an unreasonable doubt about what they are being told. It’s used by people who know about the apostle Thomas (and perhaps should be a little more respectful). And it’s used by many people who would have no idea who the ‘Thomas’ is whose name they are using.

⁵ See Matthew 10, Mark 3 and Luke 6

⁶ Acts 11:22-26 gives some examples of how Barnabas lived up to his nickname

I can listen to Thomas at the passover with Jesus and the other apostles, and find it easy to put “doubting” in front of his name. (Jesus was speaking to them): *“And you know the way to where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”* John 14:4-5 (ESV)

But then I think of this: Is there any ten words more precious and with more depth of meaning than Jesus’ answer to Thomas? *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”* John 14:6 (ESV) Would we have ever heard that so, so special truth from Jesus’ lips if it wasn’t for Thomas voicing his ‘doubts’?

I wonder was the same question in the hearts of the other apostles? Maybe it was. But if it was they didn’t voice it, as far as we know. Should we call them ‘Silent Andrew’ and ‘Silent Bartholomew’ and ‘Silent James’ etc. We wouldn’t, would we? So I don’t want to focus on Thomas’s perplexity as a flaw. I’ve learned to see the beauty in Thomas voicing his uncertainty - and to value what it produced from the lips of our Master.

We know Thomas wasn’t there the first recorded time that Jesus appeared in the the room where the disciples met after the resurrection. And we know that when they told him the risen Christ had met with them, he said, *“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”* Is it fair, and is it kind to use this to justify the ‘Doubting Thomas’ label?

⁷ As Isaiah put it

After all, we also have this record: *“Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”* Luke 24:10-11 (ESV) But we don’t say ‘Doubting James’ or ‘Doubting John’ etc.

And once again, the ‘flaw’ of Thomas’s apparent skepticism brought out such beauty. It brought out a beautiful response in Jesus: *“Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.”* John 20:27 (KJV) And that brought out a beautiful response in Thomas: *“And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.”* John 20:28 (KJV)

Sure, if we are looking for it, there’s some justification (to the human mind) for Thomas’s nickname. Thomas did reveal he didn’t have perfect faith. But is there beauty in Thomas beyond the imperfections? Jesus made sure there was timeless beauty. I want to remember Thomas as the one who drew from Jesus the core of my faith, and the core of every Christian’s faith, *“I am the way, the truth and the life”*. And I want to remember Thomas as the one, who, in expressing his doubts, drew from Jesus the invitation, for himself, and for everyone, to reach out and touch the one who *“was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities:”*⁷ And when I look on my risen, crucified Saviour, I want to respond with the

same adoration and worship as Thomas - *“My Lord and my God”*.

A Catalogue of People with Flaws?

In a way, the Bible is a catalogue of people with flaws. To me, it's a miracle of grace that the God-inspired record of lives in which God worked does not attempt to hide their flaws, failures and imperfections. And it's a further miracle of grace that reveals, as the record goes on to tell us, how the Master Craftsman worked in those lives to bring out his beauty beyond the imperfections.

Consider the tree that provided the timber used in the furniture mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. If that tree had a voice, perhaps it would say that it would have preferred that only unflawed sections were used so that its flaws didn't show. And if you are like me, we would rather that our flaws weren't on show either and that just the 'Christian' aspect is seen.

But God's mind doesn't seem to work that way. Of course, God knew what was in the timber before the tree was felled. He knew what the furniture maker would find before ever he did any work on it. And that's true of all of his children also, isn't it? God well knew what was in us before ever we were aware of him working in our lives

We could ask, "How does God go about choosing?" Is he like the craftsman who takes pride in his product and only chooses

the most select timber and rejects any flawed material, trimming off any imperfect sections? And who, in the finishing fills any tiny cracks and flaws, making them invisible in the finished product? This is not how I see the God of the Bible working.

I see something different in God's record of David, of Peter, of Martha, of Sarah, of Paul, of John Boanerges, and of Solomon, Jonah and Job - to name just a few. Who of us would like our life, with all its flaws, put on the public record for thousands of years of perusal, kind or otherwise? That's the way God has recorded the picture of many of his best.

We'd prefer a different picture portrayed, would we not? Wouldn't we prefer ourselves to be seen as steady, reliable Christians without any of the 'big' sins such as those recorded of David and Peter, for example? And who of us would be brave enough to record, as it seems Jonah did, their own defiant, blatant disobedience? Or who of us would have the courage, like Moses, to record his murder of an Egyptian or his persistent objection to taking up the role God had for him?

What gave God's scribes the courage to so openly record their flaws and failures, or the flaws and failures of others as they were bidden by God to record? Their sins are not hidden from us in order that we see only their good side. Their failures and falls are not expunged from history as is the case with the record of many a 'great person' in the world.

Perhaps what gave them courage to write such frank records was that God took them as they were. And how do we deal

with these frank records? Who of us hasn't focused at some time on the recorded sins and failures of lives in the Bible? But what shines more brightly - their sins - or their Godly beauties?

Sometimes I've wondered: "How did God feel about David, for example, when he saw how David, the king he chose, sinned with Bathsheba?". And then it occurs to me that God knows the end from the beginning. So it seems we must assume that God knew how David's life, the flaws and the beauty, would turn out. There's evidence of this in the history of Peter. Before Peter denied his Lord and Master and Friend, Jesus knew that he would do it - and told Peter he would do it. He knew there was that flaw in Peter.

Job knew that when God had tried him, he would come forth as gold. That was Job's perspective. And God knew, that when he had tried Job far enough, he would bring the dross to the surface so that he could take it away and purify Job. That was God's perspective.

Paul knew, that despite all that God had wrought in his life, he was still the 'chief among sinners'. But Paul also knew that it wasn't that the flaws so apparent in his past had disappeared, but that they did not deter or hinder God from working.

Do I like to think of myself as any less susceptible to the weaknesses of the flesh than David was? Do I like to think of myself as any less likely to be impetuous and stumble like Peter seemed to? Do I think my belief is more unshakeable than that of Thomas? Do I think I am a better grade of 'timber' than Job and don't need to go through as much refining

process as he did?

What's my answer to those questions? The answer has sometimes been a self-righteous one - at least as shown by my attitude or the way I spoke about those men of God. But there is another question that brings me back to reality: "Would I be willing for my life and character, the best and the worst, to be put on the public record the way David and Thomas and Peter and others are chronicled in the Bible?"

God, in love and his faithfulness has told us in his word the best and the worst of many lives. Has he told us the worst to make us feel better? To give us the opportunity to find fault? To let us excuse ourselves and our failures? To let us deceive ourselves into thinking we wouldn't have stumbled the way they did?

I believe the answer is a resounding "No". I believe he has told us the worst and the best for two reasons. Firstly, to speak to us of his grace. We know so much about these lives because of the record in the Bible - written afterwards. God knew in advance - and still chose them for his handiwork.

Secondly, we have the record of their best and worst so that we can see how the beauty of his divine work transcends the imperfections of the human. And God has left us the record to inspire us to believe that he can take us, and wants to take us, 'just as I am', with all our flaws, and make us as he wants us to be, with the divine beauty of his Son, a beauty that is beyond all imperfections.

The Finishing Touch

To return briefly and finally to the furniture, there was a noticeable feature I didn't yet mention. On the chair-backs, the maker had done some carving. It was just a few very simple, wavy lines. I guess he thought they needed that little extra touch to take away the plainness - or just to draw the eye from the many small cracks in the timber. Or maybe he just wanted to add his personal touch. Whatever the motive, to me, it detracted from the work rather than enhancing it.

Isn't it true of so many people - maybe true of you and me also - that we'd like to 'improve' ourselves? We'd like to add our own personal touch to our lives. Maybe that's fine for this life and what is of value here and now. But will our 'enhancements' help us "come forth as gold"? That's the finishing touch that only God can add.