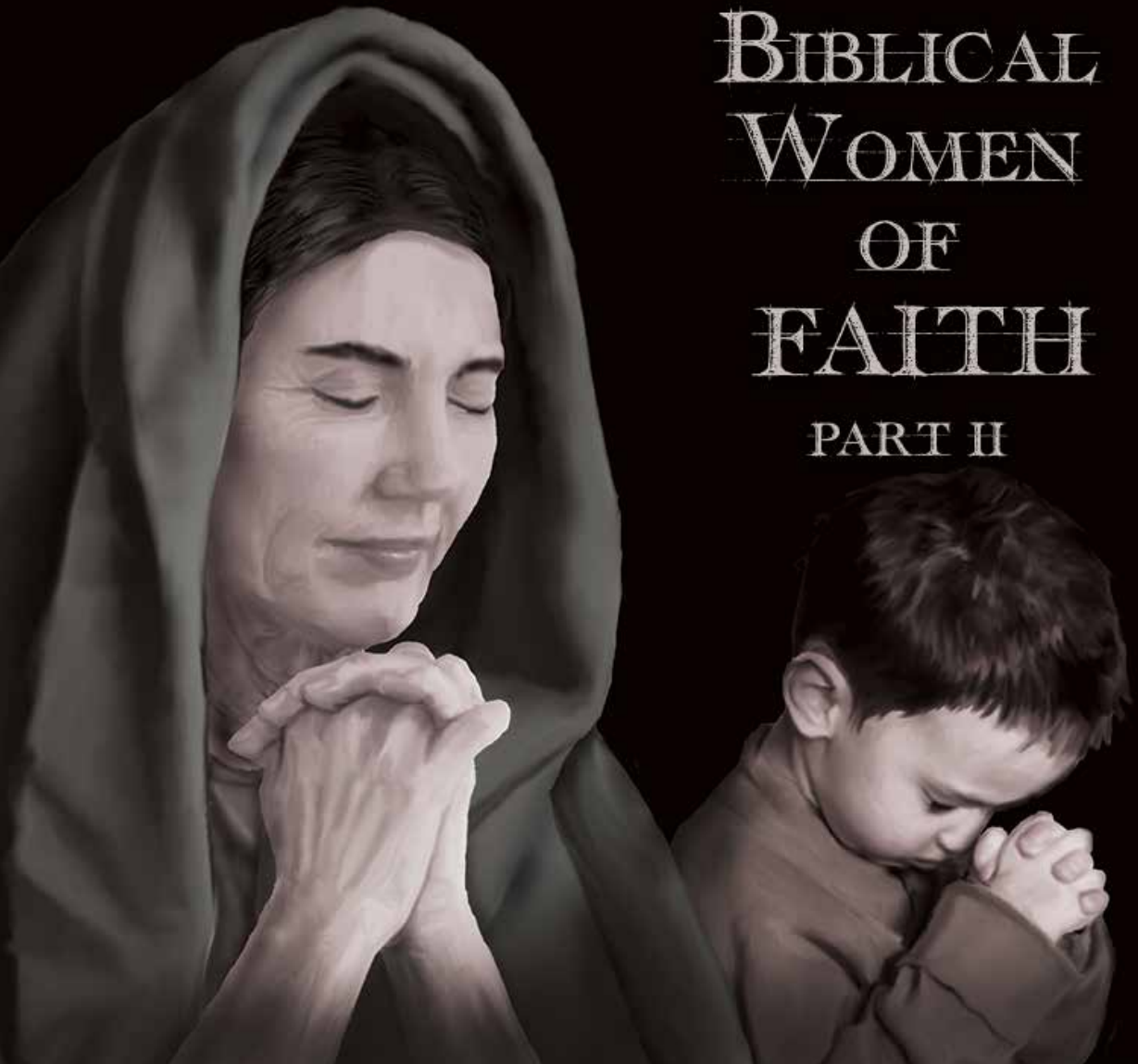
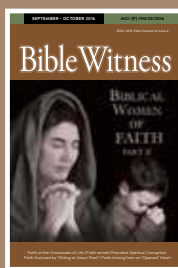


Bible Witness

BIBLICAL WOMEN OF FAITH PART II



Faith at the Crossroads of Life | Faith amidst Prevalent Spiritual Corruption
Faith Nurtured by "Sitting at Jesus' Feet" | Faith Arising from an "Opened" Heart



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CONTENTS

Biblical Women of Faith - Part II

3 Editorial

4 Faith at the Crossroads of Life

10 Faith amidst Prevalent Spiritual
Corruption

16 Faith Nurtured by "Sitting at Jesus' Feet"

22 Faith Arising from an "Opened" Heart

*All the articles in this issue
are contributed by Ho Kee How,
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Children's Page

27 Bible Trivia - Exodus 27

Sarah Yong

28 Martin Luther (1483 - 1546)
"The just shall live by faith" - Part 1

Jenny Lok

About the cover design

Hannah's faith, expressed in her prayer for a son and in her vow and commitment to bring him up for the LORD's service, presented a brave "knight" of God's truth and righteousness in Israel.

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Editorial

Dear readers,

Our Lord Jesus Christ commanded His disciples: “Have faith in God” (Mark 11:22). Faith is the gift of God’s grace to sinners (Ephesians 2:8-9), that they might come to Him through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1-2) and inherit all the blessings that He has prepared for them (1 Peter 1:4-5; cf. Hebrews 6:12). Faith in Christ marks the beginning of one’s Christian journey. That faith is enriched and strengthened through the knowledge of God’s Word, prayer and service. Such emboldened and empowered faith takes the Christian to great victories in spiritual battles, and accomplish great things for God’s glory.

The truth of that Scriptural maxim, “The just shall live by faith”, is so vital to every genuine Christian. This spiritual truth is mentioned in the Bible not once, but four times (cf. Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). The Reformers discovered this great truth of the Bible, and went on to declare and defend it with undaunted faith. They fought a good fight of faith, just like all other valiant heroes of faith who lived before them (1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7). True Christian faith is irrepressible; it overcomes doubt, fear, errors and ungodliness in affirming and advancing God’s glory.

Faith in God will gaze upon all that God has prepared for His saints, and will reach out for them without hesitation. It hears God’s voice and dashes forward for it, even though obstacles are laid ahead. Faith is not a “once-and-for-all” act done at the beginning of the Christian life, but a continuous “stretching out” for the glory of God. Faith will not stop until it be crowned with the glory that God has promised.

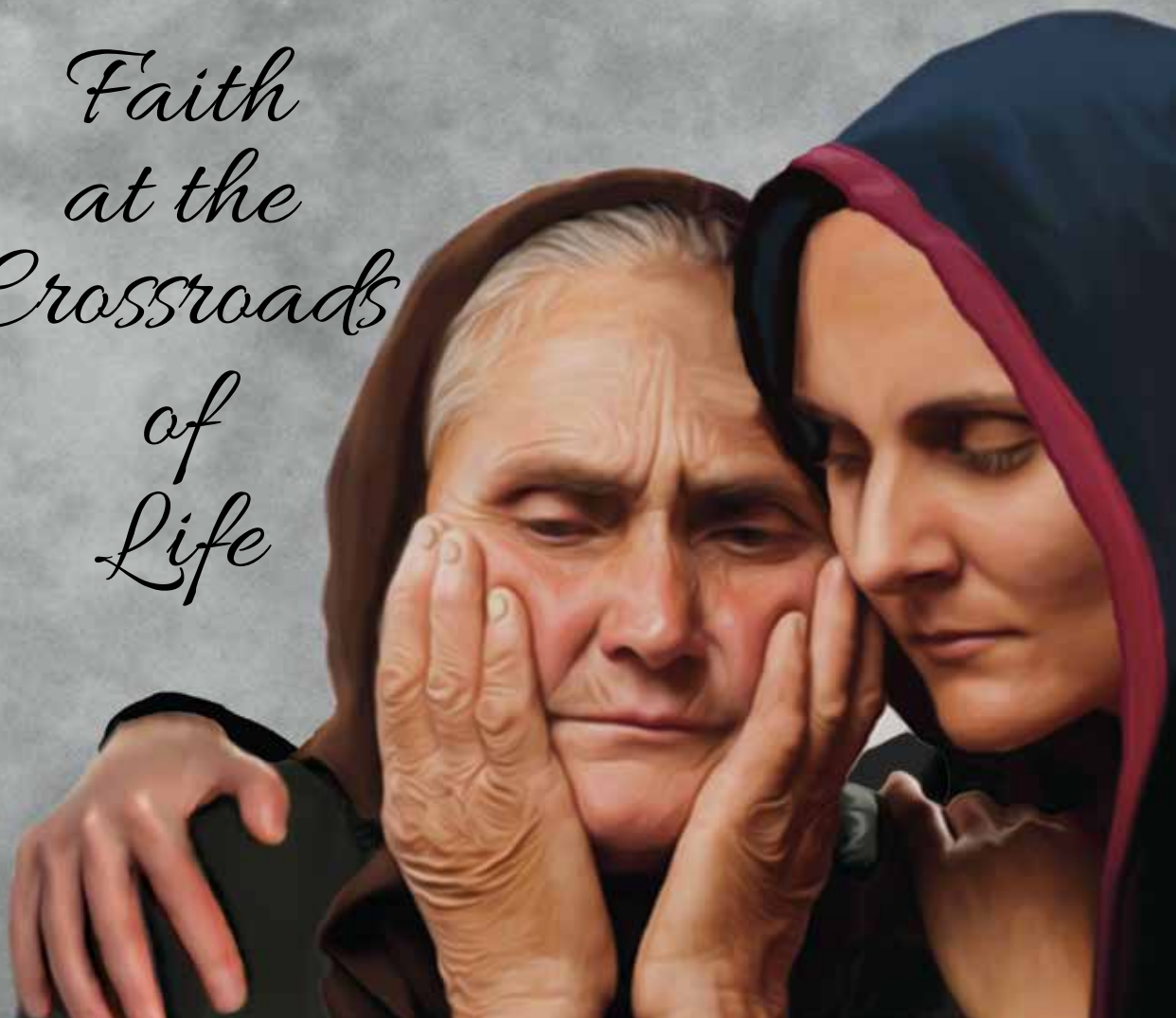
We present to you the second part of the series of articles on “Biblical Women of Faith” written by Ho Kee How (the Assistant Editor of Bible Witness), with thanksgiving to God for strengthening His servant to produce these articles for our spiritual nourishment. May our faith be fortified.

Finally, my co-labourers and I express our heartfelt thanks for your continual prayers and support. May the Lord bless and keep us all strong in faith.

Heartily in His service,

Prabhudas Koshy

Faith at the Crossroads of Life



The story of Ruth is a very heart-warming, touching one, complete with human drama and heartfelt emotions, as well as being interspersed with good sense, dignity and nobility of character. Hers was an enlivening, refreshing true-life account that will not fail to touch a responsive chord in the Bible-reader's soul.

The story was set “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1), i.e. during the Judges period of Israel, a most turbulent and troubled period in the nation's history. No established

government existed in those days, where “there was no king in Israel”, so “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). In other words, society had degenerated into a state of anarchy where every man is a law unto himself. The people would engage in idolatry and apostasy, and God would chasten them by allowing surrounding nations to oppress them. They would then repent and God would subsequently raise up a “judge” to deliver them. Upon the judge's death, they would shamelessly turn back to idolatry and apostasy again. This depressing cycle of “oppression

and deliverance” attested to the Judges period.

Ordinary People of Faith Matter to God!

Now, the book of Judges tells of war and battle (on a national scale). The book of Ruth, however, forms a contrast by passing from national strife to the quiet domestic life of a family. It talks about ordinary affairs of ordinary and seemingly unimportant people. It shows God’s interest in individual families who, though ordinary enough, were not unimportant to Him as long as faith was manifested. In fact, He works out His purposes through individual families. God, being a sovereign God who governs history, is able to weave those ordinary lives into the unfolding drama of the history of His chosen nation Israel, and ultimately to form an integral part of His grand overarching redemptive plan for mankind. Those who have read the entire book would know that Ruth went on to become the great-grandmother of Israel’s most well-loved king [David] (cf. Ruth 4:13, 17), and so became included in the lineage of the Messiah. But that’s getting ahead of our story ...

Beware of Miscalculation in Life’s Decisions

Interestingly, Ruth the Moabitess would not have come into the picture had it not been for a Jewish family who made a peculiar decision – a tragic one culminating in “bitter” outcomes, according to the wife of the head of that family (cf. Ruth 1:20-21) – and had it not been for that wife’s subsequent stirring to “reverse” that fateful

decision (cf. Ruth 1:6). Elimelech (together with his wife Naomi and two sons) had earlier decided “to sojourn in the country of Moab” (Ruth 1:1b) in the face of a famine in the land of Judah. The Hebrew word translated as “country” literally means “fields”. Elimelech, like all Israelites, knew that their blessings were closely tied to the Promised Land. His original intent was only a temporary short stay in the “fields” – not in any of the cities – of Moab, just to tide over this severest part of the famine. He must have remembered and deliberately avoided the folly of Lot (his ancestor Abraham’s nephew), who “pitched his tent toward Sodom” as he “dwelled in the cities of the plain” (Genesis 13:12). Apparently, his sincere intent was to move back to Judah once things got better and the economic picture became rosier back home.

In putting economic considerations above spiritual discretions, Elimelech erred in not looking to the LORD (the faithful God of Israel) for deliverance from their plight. He failed to realise (and even if he did, chose not to take seriously) God’s promise and warning: “If ye walk in my statutes, ... Then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase ... But if ye will not hearken unto me ... but that ye break my covenant: I also will do this unto you; I will even appoint over you terror ... and ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it” (Leviticus 26:3-4, 14-16). And this phenomenon would have been what was recurring during the chaotic “oppression and deliverance” cycle of the Judges period. Elimelech must have been living in one of Israel’s

“oppressed” times. The solution was national repentance, or (on a personal level) to abide and pray for God’s promised deliverance. But Elimelech had other ideas.

Elimelech thought he had it all figured out by taking temporary refuge in nearby peaceful Moab (unaffected by war and strife), but it was a miscalculation that would backfire. His earlier cautious intention to merely “sojourn” gave way to him “continuing” (i.e. remaining) in Moab (cf. Ruth 1:2b) for pragmatic reasons, and later to his family literally “dwelling” (i.e. permanently living) there for about 10 years (cf. Ruth 1:4b). In the process, his sons (after his death) ended up marrying pagan wives, for “they took them wives of the women of Moab” (Ruth 1:4a). Oh, what a mess Elimelech made of his family’s spiritual heritage! His premature death and both his sons’ subsequent deaths soon after their marriages in Moab could have been expressions of God’s chastisement upon his ill-advised decision. His family “went out full” but ended up “empty” (cf. Ruth 1:21), with only one “survivor” – a destitute widow and twice-bereaved mother! Bitter indeed are the outcomes of a wrong turn made at a crucial crossroads in life, due to lack of faith.

The Stirring to Turn Back

Nevertheless, the merciful God, whose “compassions fail not” (Lamentations 3:22), is faithful to the faithful. News had reached Naomi that the famine in the land of Judah was over, which caused a stirring (no doubt by the

Holy Spirit’s moving) in her heart to return to her homeland, which she should not have left in the first place. God had given her people the land of Canaan (which He had promised long before to Abraham) “for an everlasting possession” (Genesis 17:8), and would ensure the fruitfulness of the land if they keep and do His commandments (cf. Leviticus 26:3-4). She must have recognised the dealing of God’s Hand in her predicament, for she perceived that “the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me”, “seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me” (Ruth 1:20-21). She also understood that it was “the LORD (who) had visited his people in giving them bread” (Ruth 1:6b), which probably coincided with God raising up a “judge” to deliver the Israelites from their enemies (cf. Judges 2:16). The pious Naomi saw God’s Hand in all of human affairs and realised (at this crossroads of her life, with her irreparable past) that there was only one option left for her. Hence, “she arose ... that she might return” (Ruth 1:6a) unto the Promised Land – the land of her people’s spiritual heritage.

But Naomi had an added burden: she had two dependent, widowed Moabitish daughters-in-law to take into account. Her initial thought was for them to return to their Moabitish relatives as she was not able to look after their welfare. She knew full well the implications of such a “turning back”. While the physical reality was that they would be able to re-marry and thereby “may find rest” (Ruth 1:9a), the spiritual reality was that they would be going “back unto (their)

people, and unto (their) gods” (Ruth 1:15) and thus forfeit the inheritance of the LORD. Deep down in her spiritual heart, she would love for both to follow her to embrace the God of Israel. But she needed to be sure that they knew what they would be in for – three destitute widows facing an uncertain future in the land of Judah, with no hope of re-marriage (she being too old and they being Moabitish). Yet at the same time, she was fully aware of the far-reaching repercussions of any decision to follow her back to the Promised Land. It would be back to God’s people and their customs, back to God’s Law and His covenant, which come with responsibilities and ultimately, God’s blessings. But it would be a life of poverty and hardship ahead – no easy road at all! Hence, her apparent discouragement of her daughters-in-law to follow her (cf. Ruth 1:11-13).

Need for Stedfast-Mindedness at Turning Point

Here’s where Ruth’s nobility of character stood out. While Orpah’s true intent of her heart was revealed by her taking heed to Naomi’s “advice” and bidding an irreversible farewell, Ruth showed her resolute refusal to cut off her hitherto loving relationship with her mother-in-law. Evidently, a loving, kind atmosphere had prevailed in Naomi’s household, judging from Naomi’s intimation that the daughters-in-law had dealt “kindly” and been loyal to their husbands (while they were alive) and to her (cf. Ruth 1:8b). The Hebrew word (*chesed*) translated as “kindly” has the idea of “kindness shown in doing favours”. This would

reflect the loving kindness that had been displayed by Naomi’s family in the first place. Ruth would have realised that such “*chesed*” stemmed from their worship of the LORD and their keeping of the statutes of the LORD. She would have been further struck by God’s holiness as reflected by God’s perfect Law, which Naomi would have shared with her daughters-in-law from time to time. Doubtless, Naomi’s pious testimony and the attitude of “*chesed*” prevailing in the home, with “all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be(ing) put away ... with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31), would have impressed Ruth no end. An important thought-provoking question to note: Is such “*chesed*” displayed in our Christian home? If our home (supposedly a sanctuary away from the hostile world) be truly God-centred, then cutting criticism, retaliation (verbal and physical) and all forms of destructive conduct should be excluded!

God’s irresistible grace must have been working in Ruth’s heart over the years as she observed and experienced Naomi’s kind treatment of her daughters-in-law, though they hailed not from her own people. If the people of Judah were like Naomi, worshipping the living and true God and governed by His holy Law, she would be glad to belong to such a people – by virtue of her marriage into a Jewish family. Hence her amazing declaration of allegiance and faith: “thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16b). Her sealing of her declaration with a solemn oath was most telling: “the LORD do so to me, and more also”

(Ruth 1:17b). She invoked the name of “Yahweh”, and not Chemosh, “the abomination (i.e. detestable idol) of Moab” (1 Kings 11:7). By embracing the covenantal God of Israel, she disdained to call upon any other god – for she would have known the first commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). It was a momentous decision-time for Ruth; in actual fact, her solemn vow had the effect of strengthening her resolve, come what may.

Naomi noted it and “saw that she was stedfastly minded” (Ruth 1:18a). This indicates that Ruth was firmly settled in her heart and mentally full of fortitude to go with her through thick and thin, just so as to identify with “Yahweh”. Seeing that Ruth was fully persuaded of her godly choice, “she left speaking unto her” (Ruth 1:18b) and ceased from dissuading her. Ruth may not be able to see beyond the “bend” of that defining “turning point” in her life, but she had faith in the pre-existent, eternal God who can see the end from the beginning. Ruth’s determination to set her affection on spiritual over economic or marital considerations, coupled with her steadfast devotion to her godly mother-in-law, caused her to take the plunge. And that set in motion a chain of events which, under God’s providential care, would subsequently bring her into a blessed, privileged position (Ruth 4:9-10, 13, 17b).

Much May Hinge on Just One Step!

Dear believers, while we sojourn here on earth, living our Christian lives and running the Christian race that is set before us, life in the meantime will not

be a bed of roses. We will experience ups and downs. We will face external pressures due to unexpected events at every crossroads of life, where there will be decisions to make (some minor, some far-reaching or even life-changing). While we may plan and foresee somewhat ahead, we cannot see exactly what lies “around the corner”. All these can scare us, and squeeze and press us into making some hasty, regrettable “turn” without regard for God’s Word. Sometimes in life, one step or misstep is all it takes to change the whole course of one’s life! The repercussions of such a misstep cannot be underestimated.

Dear Christians, do you desire a life of God’s blessing and unerring guidance? Remember, God does not show favouritism. Regardless of one’s lineage, social status or station in life, the prerequisite (as was the case for Ruth) is: a steadfast heart of faith, demonstrated by some decisive step in faith. Indeed, the only safeguard against falling into the pitfall of missteps resulting in deep regrets is to be “stedfastly minded” (literally to be of good courage) in trusting God’s Word in every aspect of life, just as Moses had exhorted in Deuteronomy 31:6: “Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid ... for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”

**It was a momentous decision-
time for Ruth; in actual fact,
her solemn vow had the effect
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come what may.**

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Faith amidst Prevalent Spiritual Corruption

Hannah was a pious woman whose faith and sense of honour stood out as “a ray of light” in the midst of a dark and corrupt spiritual culture descending upon the land of Israel. Her prayerfulness, self-sacrifice and devotion were not typical of her times, which belonged to a spiritually degenerate and self-indulgent generation. But she would be quick to acknowledge that it was all by God’s grace; there was nothing good in and of herself. In fact, she kept referring

to herself as “thine handmaid”, when addressing God and the high priest (cf. 1 Samuel 1:11, 16, 18). She realised she was highly dependent on God’s favour. Well, her name in Hebrew reflects just that – “*Channah*”, which comes from the root word (*chen*) meaning “favour” or “grace”.

Hannah’s Deteriorating Times

Hannah’s story, like Ruth’s, was set in the time of Israel’s Judges period – to be specific, towards the tail end of the

Judges period. This we know because Samuel (Hannah's firstborn), who would shortly come onto the scene, would be the last major judge (cf. 1 Samuel 7:15-17) before ushering in (albeit reluctantly) Israel's monarchy. Now, the Judges period was a most turbulent and troubled period in the political and religious scene of the nation, where "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25b). Because the people repeatedly transgressed God's covenant in their open idolatry and apostasy, "the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies ... and they were greatly distressed" (Judges 2:14-15). Not only was it a time of political oppression from without, it was also pervaded with religious decay from within.

Scripture reveals that during Hannah's time, the tabernacle (which represented God's presence among His people in those pre-temple days) in Shiloh had fallen under the charge of corrupt and wicked hands, for "the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the LORD, were there" (1 Samuel 1:3b). And associated with these two "sons of Belial" were atrocious religious malpractices in the offering of sacrifices to the LORD [in direct contravention of the Mosaic Law concerning the Levitical system of animal sacrifices (cf. Leviticus 3:3-5, 16)], coupled with blatant display of gangsterism and bullying tactics (cf. 1 Samuel 2:13-16). So much so that "men

abhorred the offering of the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:17), and thus hated to come to Shiloh to worship God.

What was most appalling was the lack of decisive response from Eli, the high priest. Eli had "heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation" (1 Samuel 2:22). What he should have done was that after "it be told thee, and thou hast heard of it, and enquired diligently, and ... (ascertained) that such abomination is wrought in Israel: Then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing ... and shalt stone them with stones, till they die" (Deuteronomy 17:4-5). Instead, he merely issued a mild rebuke, which was impudently ignored by the two sons (cf. 1 Samuel 2:23-25)!

Though "there was no king in Israel" (Judges 21:25a), i.e. no central ruling body, in those days, the civil government appointed by God to hear difficult cases of controversy was supposed to be composed of priests and a specially appointed supreme judge (cf. Deuteronomy 17:8-9). Apparently, no such judicial structure was observed to function during those times; even if it existed, those sitting on the so-called "council of judgment", namely the priests, were either corrupt and abhorrent themselves or incompetent and unwilling to pass righteous judgment. With religious decay leading to judicial perversion, what hope was there for justice in the land? In such dark times for Israel, God was about to raise up His "man of the hour". Into this spiritually

tumultuous historical setting was to be born God's prophet to judge His disorganised, demoralised people, who had been utterly disappointed in inept judges and unfaithful priests. But first, behind a great man is often a woman of faith. Every godly man mightily used of God comes out of godly nurture and admonition of a godly family. And invariably, the early influence of a godly mother is involved (as in the case of Moses, John the Baptist, Timothy, etc.). Here's where Hannah came into the picture ...

Hannah's Divided Household

Apparently, it seems that Hannah was (true to her name) well-favoured early in life. She married a God-honouring, devout man (Elkanah), who faithfully kept up the regular observance of feasts of worship at the tabernacle and the offering of sacrifice unto the LORD (1 Samuel 1:3a; cf. 1:21). With Elkanah evidently doting on her (cf. 1 Samuel 1:5), she was looking forward to a happy family life. One could say the loving couple were eagerly awaiting their first "arrow in the quiver", to use the biblical analogy of Psalm 127:4-5. But alas, as the months turned into years, their eagerness turned into anxiety, and anxiety gave way to disappointment when the expected "fruit of the womb" was withheld, for Scripture says that "the LORD had shut up (Hannah's) womb" (1 Samuel 1:5b). Instead of engaging in heartfelt prayer before the LORD, like Isaac of old [who "intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren ... and Rebekah his wife conceived" (Genesis 25:21)], Elkanah too easily resigned

himself to his wife's barren condition. He took matters into his own hands and followed the corrupt custom of his decadent day by taking a second wife (Peninnah), that she might bear children unto his name, which she did (cf. 1 Samuel 1:2b). But that was the start of his domestic woes and Hannah's "bitterness of soul".

In having to vie for her husband's divided affections as Elkanah favoured Hannah more (cf. 1 Samuel 1:4-5), Peninnah's jealousy was aroused. She viewed Hannah as her rival and hence acted as "her adversary", who "provoked her sore" (i.e. vexed her exceedingly through taunting remarks), in order "to make her fret" (literally "cause to eat away at her innermost being") on account of her barren condition (1 Samuel 1:6). In other words, she would not hesitate to exploit every occasion to remind her of her barrenness. Such constant adversarial stance was tantamount to harassment and psychological bullying! So malicious was her attitude that she deliberately chose the most conspicuous moment to "provoke" her – the family feast at the yearly sacrifice in Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:7). Whether by her snide, sarcastic comments or by her loud chatter and exaggerated fussing over her children surrounding her, Peninnah would exact maximum misery upon Hannah in publicly highlighting Hannah's childlessness. Needless to say, Hannah would be reduced to tears and would lose all appetite to eat her portion.

What was most pathetic was Elkanah's futile and unhelpful attempts to comfort her: "Hannah,

why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8). Not only was his last comment insensitive, it was also a case of "too little, too late!" Truly, when God's ordained blueprint (of "one man-one woman") for marriage (Genesis 2:24) is flouted, domestic disaster will inevitably follow. Elkanah's sin of bigamy, which stemmed from his failure to exercise biblical leadership in family issues and crises in the first place, had brought needless pain and anguish to his now divided household.

Hannah's Dedicated Petition

Admittedly, it was not easy for Hannah to endure her adversary's relentless taunts. She exhibited faith by "pray(ing) unto the LORD" in the midst of her "bitterness of soul" (1 Samuel 1:10); she wept sore and abandoned herself totally to the LORD, who is her "secret (or hiding) place", where she could "abide under the shadow (or defence) of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1). Despite her adversary's aim "to make her fret", she was to "Fret not thyself because of evildoers", but rather "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Psalm 37:1, 4), including the desire to have children. Indeed, she would have remembered Moses' words unto the children of Israel that "if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, ... he (the LORD) will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land ... there shall not be male or female barren among you,

or among your cattle" (Deuteronomy 7:12-14). Hannah recognised that the cause (and removal) of infertility is in the LORD Himself! Hence her strong, passionate supplication: "O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid ..." (1 Samuel 1:11a).

This clearly reflects her intense yearning to be relieved of the stigma of barrenness, which she viewed as an "affliction" or misery seen as a sign of God's disfavour. Hers, however, was not a presumptuous whining like that of Rachel's complaint to Jacob: "Give me children, or else I die" (Genesis 30:1b). Hannah's specific request for a son was not for her selfish end. Her self-sacrifice was manifested by her preparedness to dedicate that son for lifelong service to God in the tabernacle, as reflected in her accompanying vow that if God "wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life" (1 Samuel 1:11b). In effect, her whole appeal centred around God's glory. Oh, what a noble, honourable petition, sealed with an earnest vow!

Hannah understood clearly that "children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward" (Psalm 127:3). In other words, God is the One who controls the conception of children – not modern medicine and science, or modern fertility treatments. Our day and age can neither appreciate nor grasp this divine aspect. Modern man has become so enamoured with modern science and technological advances

that he looks to these for answers to all ailments and physiological problems. Increasingly, many childless couples are turning to IVF or in vitro fertilisation (widely known as “test-tube baby” method) to circumvent their problem of infertility. To the biblically instructed, IVF crosses the line beyond which man has no mandate or authority. The conception of a child is a wonderful mystery and is one of those “secret things” which belong exclusively to the LORD (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29a). We are “fearfully and wonderfully (conceived and) made” (Psalm 139:14a) – the language here signifies that we are amazingly brought into existence not by a human agent, but by God our Creator! Granted, we do not know the motives of those gynaecological pioneers in IVF. Some might have genuinely wanted to help barren couples, but many would have hidden motives and agenda. One compelling biblical reason why this is not God-sanctioned is that God does not need our help – He is the One who “shuts up” the womb and causes the womb to “open”. Moreover, because of this so-called advanced technology, many unethical practices are spawned – surrogate mothers, donor eggs, having two fathers (one biological, the other legal), possibility of having children without a spouse, gay “couples” having children, ... and the list goes shamefully on! Christian couples should not be stained and associated with this questionable practice with all its related evil applications. Rather, be like Hannah who, in her ardent petition to the LORD, exhibited a far more superior grasp of theology than the majority of modern Christians!

Hannah's Determined Fulfilment of Her Vow

That Hannah did conceive shortly after her return from her yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh was proof that the LORD did “remember” (or take notice of) her and heard her heartfelt, dedicated petition (1 Samuel 1:19-20a). Hence the name “Samuel” for her son – made up of two words, “*shama*” (meaning “to hear”) and “*El*” (which is the Hebrew short form for “God”). Literally, the name means “heard of God”, which is corroborated by the reason Hannah gave: “Because I have asked him of the LORD” (1 Samuel 1:20b). Hannah felt vindicated that God had heard what she had asked of Him, and had not “forgotten” her. Neither would she forget her vow, for each time she called her son’s name, she would be reminded that God did “remember” her on account of her vow (cf. 1 Samuel 1:11).

Scripture further reveals her determination to fulfil her vow in her commitment to see to the weaning process of her son. “I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may ... there abide for ever” (1 Samuel 1:22). Day after day, month after month, she tenderly cared for her baby, and “gave her son suck until she weaned him” (1 Samuel 1:23b). She treasured the time she had with her lovely boy as she taught him God’s Word from the Mosaic Law. When Samuel was big and independent enough to feed himself and take care of his basic physiological functions, Hannah was ready to take him to the tabernacle, for we read that “when she had weaned him, she took him up ... unto the house of the

LORD in Shiloh" (1 Samuel 1:24). Truly, "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it, ... pay that which thou hast vowed" (Ecclesiastes 5:4).

Never for a moment did Hannah forget her precious promise to give (and that entails some form of training) her son for the LORD's use. Her words of dedication to Eli the high priest were most instructive. She almost waxed poetic when she engaged in a word play on the root word (*sha-al*) meaning "ask" or "enquire", which is translated as "lent" twice in 1 Samuel 1:28. The first occurrence is in the Hiphil (or causative) form – it literally means "caused to enquire". The second occurrence takes the form of a passive participle, which expresses a state caused by an external act, literally meaning "be made to enquire". The whole sentence can be literally translated thus: "Therefore also I have 'caused him to enquire' unto the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall 'be made to enquire' unto the LORD" (1 Samuel 1:28a) This indicates that Hannah had taken upon herself to teach and train

young Samuel to seek the LORD, and had determined that his life's purpose was to "enquire in his temple" all the days of his life (cf. Psalm 27:4b), which would include the receiving of God's revelations (cf. 1 Samuel 3:19-21). What a striking picture of Hannah's commitment to see to the fulfilment of her vow to the LORD!

Hannah's devotion and vow-honouring faith in the midst of prevalent spiritual corruption of her day show us what God can do through one woman's single-minded dedication to honour God and His Word. This should inspire us Christians living in no less degenerate times, "in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15b). Like Hannah, we are to stand on God's Word and swim against the tide of this godless world and the ungodly philosophies and lifestyles that it espouses. May God grant us more "Hannahs", and in turn raise up more "Samuels", to make an impact in this decadent, self-indulgent generation! Amen.

Hannah's specific request for a son was not for her selfish end. Her self-sacrifice was manifested by her preparedness to dedicate that son for lifelong service to God in the tabernacle, as reflected in her accompanying vow (1 Samuel 1:11b) ... In effect, her whole appeal centred around God's glory. Oh, what a noble, honourable petition, sealed with an earnest vow!

Faith Nurtured by “Sitting at Jesus’ Feet”



Despite the many miracles Jesus performed in the land of Israel and His authoritative teachings on the kingdom of heaven, Jesus’ public ministry was up against a backdrop of wide unbelief and rejection by the vast majority of Jewish society. Remember how Jesus upbraided “the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because

they repented not: Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matthew 11:20-21)! This unbelieving stance was also evident when, after Jesus’ “bread of life” discourse, many balked at His doctrine and “from that

time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (John 6:66). The problem was, the majority of the Jews were anticipating a mighty military deliverer, not realising that the first and utmost deliverance which they sorely needed was that from their sins! As such, they rejected Jesus as Israel’s promised Messiah.

However, that is not to say that there were no Jewish believers. In fact, some of the most devout followers were Jewish. Besides the eleven disciples, several holy women who were closely associated with Jesus, come readily to mind. Mary of Bethany was one such woman. Hers was a common Jewish name, so to differentiate her from the other “Marys” in the New Testament, the gospel-writers consistently associate her with Bethany, her town of residence, which “was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off (i.e. about two miles away, as one furlong is approximately one-eighth of a mile)” (John 11:18). Hence, Bible-readers have come to refer to her as “Mary of Bethany”.

Jesus’ Welcome Stopover at Bethany

In the Bible, Mary’s name is always mentioned alongside Martha, her sister. From the account in John 11, she also had a brother named Lazarus, and from the order in which their names are listed together (cf. John 11:5), we gather that Martha was Mary’s elder sister and Lazarus her younger brother. Together, they were a well-loved family of the Lord who, it is not unreasonable to infer, must have stopped over and received great

hospitality at their home in Bethany each time His ministry brought Him to Jerusalem in Judaea.

Actually, this was the case the first time the Bible (in Jesus’ ministry) mentions Mary of Bethany in Luke 10. In Luke 9:51, we read that “when the time was come that (Jesus) should be received up (i.e. referring to His ascension), he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem”. After the journey through Samaria (Luke 9:52-56) and the evangelistic mission of the seventy (Luke 10:1-24), “it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary” (Luke 10:38-39a). Now, the familiarity with which Jesus was hospitably welcomed would indicate that this was not the first time He came under their roof in Bethany.

Though Jesus spent the greater part of His early ministry in Galilee (for He only embarked on an intense, concentrated ministry in Judaea towards the end of His public ministry, nearing the time of His crucifixion), He nonetheless went to Jerusalem at least once a year for the Passover feast. Jesus’ short public ministry began when He was “about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23a) and lasted slightly more than three years, covering four Passovers. The first was soon after His first miracle at Cana (John 2:11-13), followed by the second (John 5:1) at 31 years of age, then the third (John 6:4) at 32 years old, and finally the fourth and last Passover (John 12:1) at the age of 33. Apparently, Mary’s family had heard and embraced Jesus’

teachings early in His ministry, and made it a point to extend their warm hospitality whenever He was in their vicinity. Jesus certainly was made to feel welcome in their home. No wonder Scripture tells us that “Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus” (John 11:5).

Mary’s Well-Chosen “Good Part”

In any case, the first time the Bible depicts Mary in the presence of Jesus at her home, she was found sitting at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39), which probably must have been the case each time. This indicates her desire to stay in Jesus’ presence to hear His words with rapt attention in order to learn of the great truths concerning the kingdom of heaven. She considered this privilege of settling herself peacefully at Jesus’ feet and becoming engrossed in His words as her most treasured moments and memories in life. She counted this to be more important than all her chores the moment Jesus came into her house on those infrequent occasions.

Such worshipful, learning moments did not come by readily and she would not know when Jesus would come visiting again in the midst of His busy public ministry. As such, she chose to put aside all else and give her undivided time to the “good part” of hearing Jesus speak, which to her was most excellent and indispensable. She refused to be preoccupied with much serving to the extent of becoming “cumbered” (i.e. distracted and bogged down), “careful” (i.e. anxious and worried), “troubled” (i.e. agitated

and disturbed in the mind) – which was exactly what happened to her harried, “stressed-out” sister (cf. Luke 10:40-41)!

In murmuring against Mary for listening to Jesus at the expense of helping her prepare a meal for the guests, Martha had apparently relegated the most “needful” thing to second place. For that, Jesus mildly rebuked her for her misguided priorities but commended Mary for making the right choice to her eternal benefit, “which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42b). Many of Mary’s possessions, acquaintances and earthly things that she enjoyed may be removed from her in the face of trials and tribulations, but nothing can take away her most holy faith, built up through the knowledge of God’s Word. That is her ultimate comfort and only protection (especially in the worst of times), hence Mary’s well-chosen “good part”!

Mary’s Keen Perception of Christ’s Impending Death

Mary having chosen the “good part” had enabled her to have a profound understanding of spiritual truths. This stood her in good stead when it comes to a keen discernment of divine truths. Evidently, her quiet and deep contemplation of Jesus’ teachings gave her the ability to understand the heart of Christ – apparently more than her sister, and perhaps even better than any of the twelve disciples! Mary’s spiritual enlightenment was astonishingly demonstrated by her keen perception of Jesus’ teachings and predictions of His death, and

thereby of His true intent / purpose of His first coming on earth.

In truth, Jesus had on several occasions shared unequivocally with His disciples regarding His impending death and subsequent resurrection (cf. Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:1-2). But His disciples “understood not this saying, and ... perceived it not” (Luke 9:45). No doubt they would have tried to clarify with Him when they were alone with Him during His many teaching sessions with them. It is not unreasonable to think that several of such sessions would have taken place in Mary’s home, where she would be found sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening intently to many thought-provoking doctrines, including Jesus’ impending death.

Furthermore, Scripture tells us that prior to His arrival at Bethany for the last time, while they were on the way towards Jerusalem, Jesus had specifically told His disciples that “all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished” (Luke 18:31). Needless to say, Mary would have heard (from Jesus at her home meetings) and pondered deeply over these “written things”, namely the Old Testament prophecies, including Isaiah 53:4, 5, 7, 10 – “Surely he hath borne our griefs, ... he was bruised for our iniquities: ... he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter ... Yet it pleased the LORD to ... make his soul an offering for sin”.

Mary seemed to perceive Jesus’ true intent better than most around her. This was not by accident. It had been properly and carefully cultivated through attentive listening

and meditation of Christ’s words. It was the result of her willingness to sit still and listen. A crucial point of note can be drawn here: While everybody is bustling about making preparations for and seeing to the logistics of the meeting (important though they are), only those who truly desire to listen intently to the Word of God preached will end up being spiritually enlightened, thereby growing “in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) – “which shall not be taken away”.

Mary’s Far-Reaching “Memorial”

Mary had taken seriously Jesus’ public declarations that He had come to lay down His life for His people. She realised how precious Jesus’ “fleshly” body was. It was a perfect body – soon to be sacrificed. The sinless “Sin-bearer” for her nation Israel (nay, for all mankind) was readying Himself for that ultimate “hour” (of His atoning death) for which He had come. In fact, while in Bethany, Jesus revealed that “after two days is the feast of the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified” (Matthew 26:2). While the disciples were “slow of heart to believe” (Luke 24:25), Mary purposed in her heart to express her grateful appreciation of Christ’s impending sacrifice.

Mary seemed to have grasped “the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh” (1 Timothy 3:16)! Christ’s taking on a human body had paved the way for Him to obey all the righteous demands of

the Law on man's behalf and then to suffer its death penalty as the ransom that would satisfy God's justice. She, perhaps more than others, understood and was utterly moved by this. How it would all come to pass was perhaps not totally clear to her – but the horror of it all would soon unfold before her sad eyes!

That is why Jesus' body was so precious to her that she gave of her best. She did what she could; she anointed Him with the very costly ointment of spikenard (cf. Mark 14:3). She wanted to "come aforehand to anoint (His) body to the burying" (Mark 14:8b). To her, this gesture was the highest form of appreciation she could express for her beloved Saviour ahead of His heart-wrenching ordeal [a "cup" which "if it be possible, (be) let ... (to) pass from me" (Matthew 26:39)]. It was "a good work" that she had wrought (Mark 14:6b) – a most outstanding, astounding work of faith! Jesus said "against the day of my burying hath she kept this (ointment)" (John 12:7b). Mary did not stint from giving of her most precious

possession [which could easily have cost more than 300 pence (cf. Mark 14:5), equivalent to a year's wages!]. As it turned out, that was what Christ needed most – an affirmation of His Father's will for Him that He should die for sinners (cf. Romans 5:8) – and He duly commended her publicly.

In honour of what Mary had done, the remembrance of her act of faith and devotion was preserved by Scripture (cf. Mark 14:9). Because she understood the real message of the Gospel, so wherever the Gospel is preached, she would also be remembered by Bible-readers throughout the church age. She did what she could within her means in the light of her deep spiritual understanding. In our limited capacity to serve the Lord, we should likewise do what we can – not what we wish we could but have no means to. And in so doing, may we leave behind a spiritual fragrance that lingers on in others' memory – much like Mary's far-reaching "memorial", which speaks of her perceptive faith, no doubt cultivated and nurtured through hours of "sitting at Jesus' feet"!

Evidently, her quiet and deep contemplation of Jesus' teachings gave her the ability to understand the heart of Christ – apparently more than her sister, and perhaps even better than any of the twelve disciples! Mary's spiritual enlightenment was astonishingly demonstrated by her keen perception of Jesus' teachings and predictions of His death, and thereby of His true intent / purpose of His first coming on earth.



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Faith Arising from an “Opened” Heart

The episode concerning Lydia in the city of Philippi (cf. Acts 16:12-15) highlights not just God’s wonder-working grace moving in a devout woman’s heart, but also God’s wonder-working grace moving in His servants’ lives. True, “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). Yet, “how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?” (Romans 10:14c-15a). Before the heart of God’s elect can be “opened” by the convicting power of God’s Word, God must first open a door for His servant to “preach the gospel of

peace, and bring glad tidings of good things” (Romans 10:15b). How the Gospel gained a foothold in “Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia” (Acts 16:12) presents a most telling example of God’s unerring Hand of providence at work.

An “Opened” Door

The backdrop is Paul’s second missionary journey. Paul’s first missionary journey (with Barnabas) had resulted in local Gentile churches being established within the provinces of Pamphylia, Phrygia and Galatia – in such cities as Perga (cf. Acts 13:13;



14:25), Antioch in Pisidia (cf. Acts 13:14), Iconium (cf. Acts 14:1), Lystra and Derbe (cf. Acts 14:6, 21). Such was the impact of their ministry that when they returned to the sending church at Antioch (of Syria), “from whence they had been recommended ... for the work which they fulfilled”, they (in the hearing of the entire assembled church) “rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” (Acts 14:26-27). Now, the purpose of Paul’s second journey was to strengthen the fledgling faith of the new believers in those churches and, in the process, “confirming the churches” (cf. Acts 15:36, 41). Going via an overland

route this time, Paul was accompanied by Silas, with Timothy joining along the way (at Lystra). “And as they went through the cities, ... so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily” (Acts 16:4-5).

Up to this point, things went according to plan. But after they had gone throughout Phrygia and Galatia, for some undisclosed reason, the team was “forbidden” (Acts 16:6) by the Holy Spirit to proceed westward into the province of Asia (i.e. the western coast of Asia Minor). Luke (writer of Acts) used a Greek word that means they were “hindered” from carrying out their plan of advance,

which hinted at inaccessibility to the region – possibly due to routes being closed or some political upheavals. Their only option was to continue northward to Mysia, after which they “assayed” to go northeastward into the province of Bithynia (Acts 16:7). The Greek word used here indicates that they had “made enquiry and diligently examined” the feasibility of a Gospel advance there. But again they were not permitted to – probably due to some language barrier or the forbidding terrain and sparse population in that region.

Be that as it may, “A man’s heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). In all these, God’s providential Hand was at work. When all doors were closed for further Gospel work in Asia Minor, the stage was set for Paul’s missionary foray into Europe. Upon receiving the “Macedonian call” in a night vision at Troas, Paul and his team “came with a straight (i.e. unhindered) course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis; and from thence to Philippi (which is in modern Greece)”, after “assuredly gathering that the Lord had called (them) for to preach the gospel unto them” there (Acts 16:9-12a). Assuredly, when God “set before thee an open door, ... no man can shut it” (Revelation 3:8a)!

Two compelling thoughts should strike us here concerning God’s unerring providential workings. With scriptural hindsight, we realise that Paul would later befriend Aquila and Priscilla at Corinth towards the tail end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-3), who would then join Paul on a brief stopover in Ephesus

(on the western coast of Asia Minor!) as he sailed back towards Syria (Acts 18:18-19). Their remaining behind at Ephesus would have helped pave the way for Paul's subsequent profitable ministry at Ephesus in his third missionary journey (cf. Acts 19:1, 10)!

Moreover, had Paul's missionary team gone into Bithynia (instead of being redirected westward into Macedonia), they might have ended up venturing into the Central Asian region (of modern states like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) and perhaps even towards China. But God in His foreknowledge has decreed that the initial crucial "battle for the Truth" be fought on the European front, where great doctrinal statements of faith would be crystallised, and where later the onset of Renaissance and invention of the printing press would usher in a renewed quest and effective dissemination of knowledge, culminating in the Protestant Reformation! God knew ahead of time that Europe was more receptive and would be a better "custodian" of His precious Word than its Asian counterparts in the early centuries of church history.

An "Opened" Heart

Come to think of it, the church in continental Europe had her humble beginnings in Philippi, where the first recorded convert by Paul on European soil was (interestingly enough) a woman and a Gentile – Lydia, a native "of the city of Thyatira" (Acts 16:14), which was situated in Asia Minor. She must have migrated to Philippi for business purposes (she being "a seller of purple") when Paul encountered

her there. Apparently, no synagogue existed at Philippi which would otherwise be Paul's first "preaching-stop". Instead, he and his team "were in that city abiding certain days" (Acts 16:12b), looking out for an opportune moment to act while awaiting their next move. Finally on the Sabbath, they went to the riverside, which was the customary place the Jewish women gathered to pray.

For Lydia to be found in that company would mean that she was a proselyte – a worshipper of Yahweh and a seeker of the living and true God. She had met regularly with these "women which resorted thither" (Acts 16:13b), meaning that they convened by pre-arrangement on a regular basis. Hitherto, she had enjoyed going to these meetings and must have found herself attracted to the God of Israel. No doubt she would have read the Scriptures and had a fairly good working knowledge of God's commands, promises and prophecies. But there was still an emptiness in her heart which all her head knowledge could not fill. There seemed to be something – or Someone – missing! Alas, the devout group of women (like most of the unguided Jews in those days), "knowing only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25b), needed to be "expounded ... the way of God more perfectly" (Acts 18:26b). But they had no one to expound to them the Scriptures concerning Christ ["and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14b)], since there was no man in their group to take that authoritative position ["and how shall they hear without a preacher?"

(Romans 10:14c)]. That was until Paul arrived on the scene – guided by God’s providential Hand – probably in answer to their fervent prayers!

Paul’s words by the riverbank that Sabbath must have immediately arrested Lydia’s attention, for Scripture says that she “heard” (Acts 16:14a), i.e. with rapt attention. Literally, she clung to the words of every sentence uttered by Paul and paid close attention to the meaning of those words. In the process, her heart was “opened” (Acts 16:14b), being caused to see what was not seen before and made willing to embrace the truth of the Gospel. So much so that “she attended unto (i.e. her mind was held and attracted by) the things which were spoken of Paul” (Acts 16:14c), much like a ship being held in its intended course. Lydia must have felt her heart “burn within” her, as Paul opened to them the Scriptures and presented the Gospel message of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Instructively, the same impact was not mentioned of the other women in the group. Only concerning Lydia was it said: “whose heart the Lord opened”. This evidently shows God’s unconditional election, regardless of how devout each woman might be – God elects some; God rejects others. In all this, He is sovereign, for “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jonah 2:9b). And therein is also manifested God’s irresistible grace in “opening” a sinner’s heart and drawing that soul to Christ!

An “Opened” House

Now, as soon as Lydia had believed and was baptized, attention was drawn to her “household” (cf. Acts 16:15a). That

would mean that she had children, perhaps a dependent extended family, and likely several servants living under her roof. She seemed to be the leader of her household, given her considerable and godly influence upon the entire family, for her household followed her example in being baptized. This implies that they believed and received the Gospel message also. However, nothing is mentioned of her husband; presumably, she could have been a widow, assuming the role of breadwinner for her house. Being “a seller of purple” (i.e. a trader in purple garments, which were robes worn by high-ranking personnel in those Roman Empire days), she would be a businesswoman of some standing and a woman of means. That being the case, she must have owned a big house, spacious enough not only to accommodate her household, but also to house the missionary team (of at least 4 men, namely Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke).

Lydia’s hospitality was plain to see. She unhesitatingly invited, nay “besought”, Paul’s missionary team to lodge in her house, which she viewed as more a favour upon her than a service to the missionaries. For she said, “If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide (i.e. remain as long as was needed) there” (Acts 16:15b). Besides, her “opened” heart had this ardent desire to hear more of God’s Word. Allowing Paul to stay and hold meetings at her home would surely enable her to learn further spiritual truths. Thus, she “constrained” (Acts 16:15c) them to stay. The language here suggests some initial reluctance on the missionaries’

part to come under her roof – for they knew (given the general population’s hostility towards the Gospel) that their presence could be a potential source of trouble to Lydia. Housing God’s servants could be fraught with risks and come with a great social cost. Bad publicity could be generated amongst the business community, resulting in a loss of business. As subsequent events highlighted (cf. Acts 16:19-23), there could also be the incurring of crowd displeasure and violence, as well as vulnerability to maltreatment by authorities and even imprisonment!

Certainly, Paul was under no illusion about the world’s hatred towards those who support the Gospel work, and was not sure if Lydia’s newfound faith could take all those pressures. Hospitality to God’s servants in times of peace and prosperity is one thing, hospitality in times of hostility and persecution is quite another. But Lydia would have none of it! She knew that it would be difficult for Paul and his team to go around preaching the glorious Gospel in that foreign city if they had to worry about food and lodging. By opening her house to them and taking care of their physical needs, she was in effect expediting their Gospel ministry. So, she “constrained” (literally “compelled by entreating”)

them to abide in her house. She would not take “no” for an answer! In other words, she insisted on accommodating the missionary team for the Gospel’s sake, against their discreet wish of not wanting to bring distress and trouble to their host.

At great risk to herself, her household and her business, Lydia opened her house for the Gospel work. Because of her hospitable faith arising from an “opened” heart, the Gospel gained a foothold in Philippi, where a strong church was flourishing right in her house. For when Paul and Silas were miraculously delivered from the Philippi jail, they “entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed” (Acts 16:40). Apparently, these “brethren” were saved while Paul had ministered there for “many days” (cf. Acts 16:18a).

Paul’s endeavours in Philippi would in turn serve as a “launching pad” for the Gospel’s forays into Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth (in Greece) and Rome (in Italy). And over the ensuing centuries, the Gospel would continue to spread further inland into the heart of continental Europe – Germany, France, Spain, England, Scotland – and the rest is (church) history!

(Lydia) clung to the words of every sentence uttered by Paul and paid close attention to the meaning of those words. In the process, her heart was “opened” (Acts 16:14b), being caused to see what was not seen before and made willing to embrace the truth of the Gospel.

Bible Trivia - Exodus 27

Sarah Yong

Read the above passage from your Bible. For each of the following statements, examine whether it is true or false. If true, then circle the letter in the "True" column; if false, then circle the letter in the "False" column.

Statement	True	False
1. The altar would have four equal sides, each five cubits long.	U	V
2. A golden horn was to be placed at each corner of the altar.	Q	R
3. The grate of network was to be hung above the altar.	M	N
4. There would be a brazen ring at each corner for staves to be inserted when carrying the altar.	T	U
5. The north side of the courtyard would measure 100 cubits.	F	G
6. The west side would be twice the length of the east side.	E	F
7. Fine twined linen of blue, pink and scarlet would adorn the gate of the court.	D	E
8. The pillars of the court would have hooks made of silver.	R	S
9. All the vessels of the tabernacle were to be made of brass.	I	J
10. The children of Israel were to bring pure olive oil for the lamp to remain lighted.	N	O
11. Aaron and his sons were to keep the tabernacle in order.	G	H

Write down the above circled letters (in that order) in the blanks below, to complete the given statement.

The brazen altar was also known as the
"Altar of B _ _ _ _ O _ _ _ _ _".

ANSWERS TO BIBLE TRIVIA - EXODUS 26 (VOLUME 16, ISSUE 3, P. 23)

- 1) ten, linen, purple, cherubims;
- 2) rams', red, badgers';
- 3) a) sanctuary, b) The Holiest of all,
c) golden pot of manna, Aaron's rod that budded, the tables of the covenant.

MARTIN LUTHER

(1483 – 1546) - PART I

"The just shall live by faith"

(Retold from "Martin Luther" written by Mike Fearon, published by Bethany House Publishers; "Martin Luther: The German Monk Who Changed the Church" written by Ben Alex, published by OM Literature; and "Trial and Triumph: Stories from Church History" written by Richard M. Hannula, published by Canon Press)

Retold by Jenny Lok

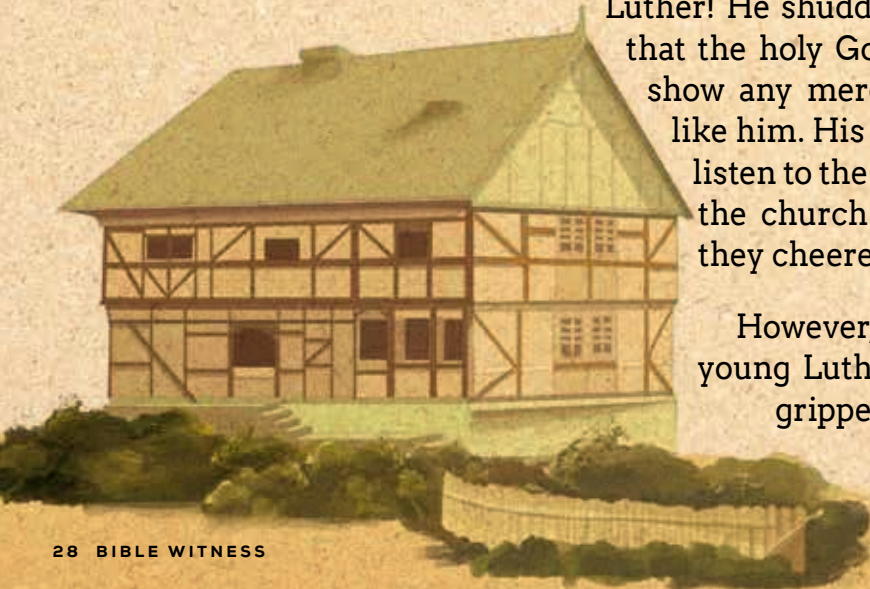
Illustrated by Andronicus Koshy

On 10 November 1483, a baby boy was born to Hans and Margaretha Luther. Being devout Catholics, they had their son baptised the following day in the Church of St Peter, in their German hometown of Eisleben. It happened to be St Martin's day, so they named him "Martin", in the hope that their son Martin Luther would receive great blessings in his life.

Shortly after, the Luther family moved to a little mining town called Mansfeld in search of a better life. Hans worked hard as a miner and gradually, his family began to enjoy a comfortable middle-class life. In the meantime, more children were also born to Hans and Margaretha. As much as they loved their children, they would not spare the rod whenever necessary. Often, Luther had to bear the stinging pain of a long, thick cane on his hand or back for any minor offence that he committed. Luther's parents were also very religious, hardly missing a day of worship in the local church. Sunday after Sunday, Luther would hear the priests speaking about hell and judgment, instead of God's love and forgiveness. Poor

Luther! He shuddered at the thought that the holy God would surely not show any mercy to a wicked boy like him. His only comfort was to listen to the melodious voices of the church choir and oh, how they cheered his soul!

However, come nightfall and young Luther's heart would be gripped by great terror.



All the superstitions he had picked up from his parents caused his imagination to run wild. His eyes would dart here and there, fearing some strange, wicked creatures would spring at him or carry him away to the dark woods! Feeling helpless and miserable, Luther would often cry himself to sleep. Daybreak, on the contrary, brought much relief to Luther's poor soul. He would look forward to his favourite pastime - roaming the countryside of Mansfeld, picking mushrooms and enjoying the beauty of the valleys, hills, and woods full of interesting wildlife. Such happy moments chased away all frightful thoughts of the night.

At the tender age of 5, Martin Luther began his education. To his dismay, he had to learn the rigorous rules of Latin grammar, which he found rather complex. Whenever he fumbled for words during his Latin class, severe beating would follow for sure. However, music lessons helped to bring some joy into his otherwise dreary school life. No doubt, he found much pleasure in singing than in his Latin!

In 1497, Luther turned 14, and his father sent him to a school in Magdeburg, a neighbouring town, where his friend Johann Reineck was his study companion. A group of men known as "Brothers of the Common Life" taught the students at Magdeburg. They were kind, compassionate and led an exemplary life. Luther learned advanced Latin from them and enjoyed singing in the cathedral choir. One afternoon after school, while walking along the streets of



Magdeburg, Luther and Johann chanced upon a frail-looking, skeleton-like figure (bent almost double beneath a huge sack of bread) staggering down the road ahead of them. When they were told that he was actually Prince William who had forsaken the world and been living a humble life fasting, praying and begging for food for his fellow monks, Luther thought to himself: Would God accept and love him if he were to fast and pray daily till he be all skin and bones, just like Prince William? Looking at the prince's miserable state, Martin concluded that it was too demanding to try to please God - he lost any hope of ever getting near to God!

Time flew. The one year spent in school, where he enjoyed his studies and the warm companionship of his fellow students, had helped him forget all his doubts and fears for the time being. Nonetheless, when he returned to visit his parents at Mansfeld, his father had other plans for him. He wanted Luther to continue his education at Eisenach, where his kinsfolk were; they would take good care of Luther and provide him with food and lodging. Luther, in obedience to his father's desire, entered the Latin school at St George's Church in Eisenach. The headmaster, John Trebonius, treated his students with much respect and even addressed them as "sirs" because he recognised the future scholars in them. By then, Luther had grown to be a "tall sturdy lad, not exactly handsome, but with a pleasant, honest face and lively, dark eyes".

Life at Eisenach was happy and Luther enjoyed the friendship of a close circle of friends. He also joined the church choir as he enjoyed singing very much. A wealthy Christian couple took care of his board and lodging, in exchange for his help in supervising their little son and his schoolwork. From this cultured family, Luther learned the finer things of life - "music, painting and tapestry work" - as well as met many godly Christians in their home. In school, Luther worked hard at his Latin grammar and mastered it so well that his headmaster asked him to give a welcome speech to a visiting professor of the University of Erfurt. The professor was greatly impressed by young Luther and suggested that he be sent to Erfurt for his degree course. To his happy father, that would mean bringing honour to the Luther family and, besides, he and his wife would then be sufficiently cared for in their twilight years. Deep in his heart, Hans Luther wanted his son to be a lawyer and marry a girl from a wealthy local family.

So after 3 years at Eisenach, Martin Luther proceeded to Erfurt, a much larger city than Eisenach. Erfurt was nicknamed "Little Rome" because of the great number of monks and priests in the city. At the University of Erfurt, all students were expected to be orderly and diligent. Any student who disobeyed the rules would be beaten in the presence of their fellow students. Luther, being an obedient and smart lad, did well to keep out of all troubles. Debating among students was encouraged, and Luther became such a good debater that everyone called him "the philosopher". Being also very enthusiastic and hardworking, he successfully obtained his first degree in 1502 and stayed on to study for his Master of Arts degree. Once, while in the university library, he found a copy of the Bible. It was the first time that he ever had an opportunity to read the Bible for himself (as the common people in his days were not encouraged to read the Bible, which was written in Latin). As he read on, his old fears about death and judgment returned. Though his heart was deeply troubled, Luther continued with his studies at Erfurt.

At the end of that term at Erfurt, Luther went back to Mansfeld to visit his parents as usual. It was a 3-day journey; like all students of his day, he carried a sword to protect himself in case of robbery. He walked on and was almost out of the city of Erfurt when he stumbled over the uneven ground and fell. The sword he was carrying cut his leg, resulting in a very deep wound! Though he survived this near-fatal accident, his spirit was badly shaken and the thought of death truly frightened him... How could he ever face death and judgment?

(to be continued)



Let's Go Yonder to Worship the LORD

Prabhudas Koshy

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The musical score is written for a four-part choir (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) in the key of E major (indicated by four sharps) and 3/4 time. The score is divided into four systems, each with a vocal staff and a piano accompaniment staff. Chord symbols are placed above the vocal staves. The lyrics are written below the vocal staves. The background of the page features a faint image of a church building with a tall steeple.

System 1: Chords: E, B, E, B/D#, E, A. Lyrics: Let's go yon-der where God's peo-ple meet, And wor-ship the LORD who is; Let's go yon-der where His faith-ful dwell, And sanc-ti-fy our hearts for; Let's go yon-der where bless-ings are found, And pray with thanks-giv-ing for the; Let's go yon-der where His Word is preached, And ren-der our ears to the

System 2: Chords: F#m, B7, E, B, A, F#m, A. Lyrics: wor-thy of praise; Let's join all who look to His mer-cy seat, And raise our ser-vice to Him; Let's raise our voice high that His praise may swell, And lift high His mer-cies we need; Let's find grace with all who His throne sur-round, And make known that Word of His pow'r; Let's yield when we are by His Word be-seech'd, And pres-ent our

System 3: Chords: B7, E, E, B, G#m, D. Lyrics: an-thems from hearts a-blaze. great name in glo-ri-ous hymn. Give glo-ry to the LORD our God; As-cribe God will bless all who plead. lives as His shin-ing tow'r.

System 4: Chords: D, A, B, B7. Lyrics: great-ness to our God; Praise Him, thank Him, seek

System 5: Chords: E, A, B7, E. Lyrics: Him, serve Him; Give glo-ry to the LORD our God.