

Chapter 5

Choose the Best !

After many years experience in buying trainers for adolescent children I can safely say that the most enduring brands are those which cost the most ! My kids also want the inner satisfaction of wearing recognised quality rather than cheap junk. This principle is the same for prayer. A cheap prayer life will quickly wear out whilst the quality of the " listening ear " will endure. When it comes to asking, choose the best !

Jesus himself confirmed this principle, (he, of course was more into sandals than trainers !), when he said to Martha in *Luke 10 :42* :

" Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her "

As we saw in the previous chapter she had simply chosen to sit at Jesus' feet and listen. **Listening requires preparation.**

The Old Testament often illustrates in material reality some of the more spiritual truths of New Testament principles. For example the battles and strategies of Israel can give us insight into spiritual warfare and the construction of tabernacle gives an albeit shadowy glimpse of ways into God's presence. The " Mary principle " of being at the redeemer's feet is also wonderfully illustrated by an Old Covenant heroine at the feet of her beloved " kinsman-redeemer ".

Our praying lady is Ruth and the book dedicated to her is a wonderful story of redemption. Redemption has two major thrusts. Salvation and Inheritance. The " avenger of blood " (*Deut 19 :6*), and the " kinsman redeemer " (*Ruth 2 :20*), illustrate these two thrusts which gloriously culminate in Christ's passion which is the ultimate " vengeance " or rather " propitiation " for salvation, and the definitive buying back of our lost inheritance. Ruth's story majors on the " inheritance factor " and a lifestyle of prayer will always lead us to a buying back of lands, places and people for the glory and advance of Christ's Kingdom in the world.

Ruth's loyalty and service transform a situation of death and bitterness and the key moment appears in *Chapter 3* with Ruth preparing a night vigil on the threshing floor. We will look closely at this passage as it gives us some key ***principles for prayer preparation*** as we seek to be at the feet of our own beloved redeemer.

*" My daughter, should I not try to **find a home** for you, where you will be well provided for ? " v.1*

People sometimes speak about " a house of prayer ", but bricks and stones don't pray, people do ! Our true home is in the presence of Christ, and it is always a place of rest, happiness and provision. How did Ruth prepare to meet her master ?

" Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. " v.3

Wash !

The blood of Christ is our ultimate cleansing agent. We must be fully paid up in the repentance stakes before coming to God. The Israelites were so conscious of hygiene and purity and it is no surprise that the writer to the Hebrews should illustrate this " cleanliness culture " spiritually.

*" He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves ; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. **How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God ! "***

Hebrews 9 :12-14

It is important that we are cleansed from all spiritual pollution and the shroud of death in preparation for meaningful prayer. King David's cry from *Psalms 139 :23-24*, is a useful prayer to open us up to God's cleansing gaze.

*" Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. "*

Most mornings I get up and make my way to the shower. I expose my tired and sweaty flesh to the clean renewing water. Then taking the soap, or whatever super shower gel is available, I proceed to wash and freshen up. As I do this I ask the Lord to cleanse me through and through in preparation for a new day with Him.

" May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. "

1 Thessalonians 5 :23-24

I'm aware that the example is very simplistic, but as we take the trouble to wash each morning, why not also take the opportunity to allow the Lord to sanctify us for His presence and purpose.

Perfume Yourself !.....Or the Henry Cooper factor !

A famous boxer, in advertising a certain brand of aftershave, used to say:

" You splash it on all over ! "

Anointing oil and perfume were very important to worship and consecration in the Old Testament and they are material symbols of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit puts the beautiful fragrance of Christ upon us....He longs to be " *splashed on all over !* "

A wonderful passage from *Hosea 14 :5-6*, gives us a glimpse of the principles of spiritual life.

*" I will be like the dew to Israel;
He will blossom like a lily.
Like a cedar of Lebanon
he will send down his roots;
his young shoots will grow.
His splendour will be like an olive tree,
his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon. "*

All natural life is sustained by the fresh falling of dew each morning. How much more do we need the fresh revelation of Christ each day. Our outward lives seem so fragile, like vulnerable petals, as we strive for purity in an aggressively hedonistic environment. However, beyond the visible is the hidden " root life " of a relationship with God. Have you ever seen a cedar's roots ? They are massive and deep. Our invisible life with God is a strength that belies our outward fragility. Regular, quality reading and meditation on God's word enables our roots to develop and grow.

A recent " Father's day " gift to me from my family was some after shave. I had specifically asked for the " Biblical fragrance ". They had to go around the shops asking for God's favourite fragrance..... " Cedar wood ! " **God loves the fragrance of those who are soaked in His word, possessing the dew-like freshness and vulnerability of innocence.**

A woman once came to Jesus and did something so outrageous that it made a world impact.

" I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her. "

Marc 14 :9

So what did she do ?

*" (she) came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard.
She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. "*

Marc 14 :3

The ultimate perfume is released from sacrifice.

As we are willing to break open our little " clay jar " lives for God in acts of extravagant love an inner fragrance is liberated from within.

" And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume "

John 12 :3

Someone once said that,

" Mission begins and ends in worship... "

And this woman's sacrificial gesture embodies the extravagant love that must motivate the missionary thrust. Prayer, which rises like incense, and the smell of a living sacrifice are other fragrant elements of the missionary spirit.

Two diabolically subtle questions await those who are set on pouring forth their lives for Christ.

" Why this waste ? "

Worship, prayer and personal sacrifice are not valued by the world or the materialistic mindset. They are seen as a dreadful waste of time and resources.

" It could have been "

Never get caught in the *" could have beens ! "* I could have been a star ! I could have been rich ! Learn to accept the ever present reality of your life and make it into a glorious sacrifice of worship, service and prayer for the Lord. Refuse the devil's trap of trying to get you into an ultimately depressing world of escapist fantasies ! **Live for the moment in Christ.**

Imagine a Pharisee coming upon the three crosses upon that hill outside Jerusalem. He looks carefully upon the scene and is suddenly saddened.

" Well I never ", he muses.

" Is that really Jesus hanging naked and abused upon such a cruel cross ? I remember all those years back when, as a young man, he confounded us all with his wonderful knowledge of the Scriptures. He was so bright, so full of life with the evident hand of Yahweh upon him. But look at him now. Why this waste of a life ? Why, he could even have been the chosen one we were hoping for. "

And, lost in his thoughts and quietly disappointed, he continues his way.

But was Christ's fragrant sacrifice just a futile waste ? When we ourselves suffer and sacrifice to the frustrating realities of life. Is it all in vain ? Never ! **We change the world by breaking ourselves open in sacrificial love.** However limited our space-Christ was limited to a narrow wooden cross, the perfume around us will cross space and time to fulfil God's deeper purpose. Through weakness Christ fulfilled his mission as Messiah,

and through our own broken clay pots, we too are called to be ministers of grace and love to the world around us.

Over twenty years ago I sat in field overlooking Poitiers in France, watching the sun rise and reading my Bible. I was seeking God's will for my life. As I found my way into Christ's presence certain words that I was reading became strangely heavy with significance carrying the authority of God's " now " word to my heart.

" But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task ? "

2 Corinthians 2 :14-16

Who indeed is equal to such a task ? It is grace alone that equips, and Christ's anointing that enables. I felt called to a life of missionary service at that time and I've been splashing on doses of " Cedar wood " ever since.

Francis of Assisi encouraged his followers to evangelistic zeal.

" Share the gospel on every occasion " he said.

" And, if necessary use words ! "

He was surely another who knew about the possibilities of being perfumed in Christ. Call on the Holy Spirit to fill you afresh as you diligently splash on the word of the Lord, while maintaining a sacrificial life of purity, worship, prayer and service to others.

Put on your best clothes !

Before I got married I wasn't that fashion conscious and would happily walk down the street with trousers two sizes too small and a scruffy jumper. However, when I met someone who loved me she carefully and tactfully elevated me to a greater level of sartorial elegance. God does the same for us in clothing us in the beautiful life of His Son. As the gold of a ring is inset with the beauty of the precious stone, so this divine clothing is necessary to build into us the kind of Christ like character which is able to hold prayer.

Colossians 3 :12-14 is a well stocked Biblical wardrobe which offers us a variety of attire to wear in the presence of the King. It is always well stocked with the seven attributes of Christian character. Let's take a look together.

*" Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with **compassion** "*

The *King James Version* translates "*compassion*" as "*bowels of mercies*". Apart from being a potential appeal for a dose of spiritual "*All Bran*" for the Church, the older words convey the sense of something being felt deep within. A "*gut feeling*", a deep travailing and groaning of soul. Jesus felt this compassion when he saw the people as sheep without a shepherd or when he wept at Lazarus' tomb. Compassion is an essential catalyst to set our prayers afire and our lives ablaze for Christ. It is the painful identification with the suffering of others which sets the stage for a potential miracle.

" *kindness* "

Just be nice and agreeable ! Before demanding a powerful wonder working anointing to save souls, ask the Lord to make you a kind person ! Simple acts of kindness win more souls than a years worth of triumphalistic anointing. The Greek word used here is *chrêstotês* which is derived from *chreia*, meaning "*need*". The literal sense is, "***The desire to make oneself useful, to minister to the needs of others.***" Friendly, practical helpers, are a key ingredient to the success of any Christian work. The cooks and cleaners, the builders and gardeners, the carers and givers, open heaven by their practical generosity. Their service is a living prayer. The absence of this quality is keenly felt and bodes the onset of spiritual poverty.

" *humility* "

God opposes the proud, and yet gives grace to the humble. Humility, rather than making us a " doormat ", gives us the quiet dignity of those who can give space to others, knowing that they do not have to force their own way. They trust God to lift them up in the due time. (*1 Peter 5 :6*). The original Greek, *tapeinophrosynê*, is composed of two separate words: *tapeinnos* (humble or low), and *phrên*, (intellect or mentality). This humble mentality is supremely displayed in *Philippians 2 :1-11*, where Christ personifies powerful humility and where Paul encourages us to:

" Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit , but in humility consider others better than yourselves. "

" *gentleness* " - " *tamed power* ! "

The idea of naive weakness which our English word for gentleness sometimes conveys is light years away from the original Greek meaning *praotês*. This word corresponds to the Latin *mitis*, which is used to describe a tamed animal. The image of a powerful stallion which allows a rider would be the idea conveyed in the word. An idea of an immense strength, which could even be dangerous, were it not tamed and mastered. Classical Greek added to this idea of gentleness the notion of it being "*like a caress*", and Aristotle defined it as being a half way house between anger and weakness. God has unleashed tremendous power into the heart of every believer. Such energy needs to be tempered by obedience and quiet submission to the Holy Spirit. The Patriarch Jacob learnt to walk with a limp and bless a nation (*Hebrews 11 :21*). True worshippers have also come to know the power of gentleness.

*" The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise. "*

Psalm 51 :17

" patience "

My patience, like my trousers of old , is far too short ! However the notion of patience here goes way beyond just the ability to wait. I trust that I won't bore you in bringing in another Greek reference to help us come to grips with the true beauty of this concept.

For the ancient Greeks one of their most prize worthy cultural aspects was the notion of *megalopsychia*, quite literally the "*power of soul*". Aristotle defined this as the proud refusal to forgive or tolerate a wrong. In short it was the spirit of vengeance which demanded that a man's wronged honour be satisfied in the eyes of the world.

Jesus and his disciples confronted this cultural norm with the exactly opposite Christian virtue of *makrothumia*, or patience. Along with its verb *makrothumein*, two ideas are conveyed by this radical new concept of longsuffering.

The first idea is that of tenacity, of not giving up, of persistent commitment which perseveres to the very end. We find it in Abraham, hanging on to the promises of God in the face of overwhelming odds, and in every faithful Christian who holds on to the hope of his calling through life's long pilgrimage. In a nutshell it means resistance, endurance. A famous French Huguenot, Marie Durand, was locked up in a tower in Aigues Mortes for many years because of her faith. She faced daily trials and temptations, but after her release they found the following words etched into the walls of the prison. "*Résister*".

The second idea is even more demanding. It signifies a love which continues to forgive and do good even in the most adverse of circumstances. This notion was an outrageous scandal to the worldview of the day and even in our modern times this longsuffering love cuts across all ideas of division and vengeance which are still only too common factors of life.

Indeed, *makrothumia*, is a truly divine initiative. God Himself is described as "*slow to anger*", (*Exodus 34 :6*) and only the outpouring of Christ's Spirit into our own hearts, and the crucifying of our selfish nature, can equip our humanity for such patience.

" Bear with each other "

Jean Paul Sartre's famous phrase, "*Hell is other people*", has an opportunity to be proved totally false by communities that choose to bear with one another's weaknesses. Early man fell by choosing to eat at the tree of judgement rather than at the tree of life. Instead of a mouth and a mind full of judgemental statements about all and sundry, let us cultivate a more positive mindset of looking for the good in the other.

" Who are you to judge someone else's servant ? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. "

" Therefore let us stop passing judgement on one another. Instead , make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. "

Romans 14 :4 et 13

And for those outside the Church ?

" What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church ? Are you not to judge those inside ? (there is indeed a place for not letting sin and anarchy destroy the Church). God will judge those outside. "

1 Corinthians 5 :12

A person, even in the wrong, represents an infinitely precious soul for whom Christ has shed his blood.

" forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. "

This gracious cloak of mutual pardon is surely one of the most essential elements needed to clothe us and prepare us for effective prayer.

The original Greek word for " forgive " can also help us here. Paul employs the verb *charizomai*, (from *charis*,) which literally means " grace in action ". **Being truly charismatic is being wholly forgiving of others.**

Another Greek word exists in the New testament for " forgive " : *aphiêmi*. The sense of this word is " leave behind, give up, abandon. " When used in the context of forgiveness it communicates the idea of God liberating us totally from guilt. Christ himself uses this term as, even with his dying breath on the cross, he sets us free from our sins, enabling us to leave behind the past with all its ugliness and condemnation.

" Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. " Luke 23 :34

However the word *charizomai*, which is always used by the apostle Paul to denote either God's forgiveness or mutual forgiveness between brothers, goes a step further than *aphiêm*. For Paul, forgiveness takes us into the realm of Christ likeness. We are owning our birthright as Christians when we persevere, and suffer, on the road to forgiveness. Forgiveness is a divine act. As Christ generously, freely and definitively forgives us, so we too, must forgive our brothers with the same extravagant generosity. In so doing we carry the mark of the divine.

" And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. "

Whenever a dirty or arduous job presents itself we usually put on the appropriate clothing to undertake the task. The ultimate Christian overalls are the " *over all* " of love. Love prevents us getting soiled by the trials of life. It " covers " a multitude of sins :

" It always protects... " (panta steguei.) 1 Corinthians 13 :7

The verb *seguein* originally means " to cover ".

Even if you forget to put on the other virtues, you can still " cover up " and keep warm by seeking to love. Love is the belt that holds all the others together. It is the fulfilment, the ultimate destiny of our being clothed in Christ.

Before we get back to Ruth at the feet of Boaz, I'll finish this section by citing the definition of love as given in the Amplified translation of *1 Corinthians 13 :4-8*.

" Love endures long and is patient and kind; love never is envious nor boils over with jealousy; is not boastful or vainglorious, does not display itself haughtily. It is not conceited - arrogant and inflated with pride; it is not rude (unmannerly), and does not act unbecomingly. Love (God's love in us) does not insist on its own rights or its own way, for it is not self-seeking; it is not touchy or fretful or resentful; it takes no account of the evil done to it - pays no attention to a suffered wrong. It does not rejoice at injustice and unrighteousness , but rejoices when right and truth prevail. Love bears up under anything and everything that comes, is ever ready to believe the best of every person, its hopes are fadeless under all circumstances and it endures everything without weakening. Love never fails - never fades out or becomes obsolete or comes to an end. "

Having carefully prepared, Ruth is sensitively watching for the place to set herself. Someone once said that in order to be successful we should find out what God is doing and they go ahead and join Him.

" When he lies down , note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do. " v.4

The key to success is not in us telling God what to do, or simply asking Him to bless our needs and projects, but in discerning His will and ways. Like Ruth, we need to learn sensitive submission and obedience.

" I will do whatever you say... " v.5

We are able to approach God with freedom and confidence because we have a redeemer who has covered our sin and shame. We can speak our name before Him because of the shed blood of Christ. **Revelation of our redemption gives strength to our prayer.**

" Who are you ? " he asked.

" I am your servant Ruth " she said, " Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer. " v.9

In his deep oriental wisdom, Watchman Nee once said:

*" The test of time is the hardest test of all. Yet only by learning to wait for God do we find ourselves involved in something really done by Him...It was to such a man (Abraham in his patient wait for Isaac), powerless now in himself to please God, that the marvellous gift of grace came in the person of Isaac. This was wholly God's doing and well worth waiting for. **To have God do His own work through us, even once, is better than a lifetime of human striving. "***

Ruth knew something of this " pregnant waiting ". She did not,

" run after the younger men , whether rich or poor. " v.10

She trusted not in her own ability to engineer things, but was willing to wait for her kinsman-redeemer. Her master was deeply touched by this renunciation of her own ways, and Christ, in the same way, is honoured by our waiting on him.

All this preparation won the marvellous prayer promise from the lips of Boaz. In the same way as Christ spoke lovingly to his disciples at the last supper when he too promised:

" You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. " John 14 :14

So Boaz prophetically proclaims:

*" And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. **I will do for you all you ask. "** v.11*

She had indeed, like Mary and many others whom she preceded, " *chosen what is better* ", at the feet of her master.

Let us be spurred on afresh to seek Christ in prayer. May our whole lives, as they seek to be conformed more and more to Christ, be prepared for heavenly dialogue. Christ's promise to his disciples, our blessed redeemer's fatherly encouragement to faithful communion, needs to resound afresh in our hearts, casting out fear and installing faith.

*" And now, my daughter , don't be afraid. **I will do for you all you ask. "***

Such a generous promise also finds an echo in God's words to King Solomon:

" Ask for whatever you want me to give you. " 2 Chronicles 1 :7

What would be the immediate reaction to such a straight forward, all-encompassing promise ? Most people would immediately think of a new car, or a bigger house. Second on the list might come fame and fortune. Good health, and a long life would no doubt follow. A few might even be tempted to pray for the arrest of all terrorists and evil men etc. But would the provision of such things bring ultimate good to me ? Could I handle the provision ?

This is the true crux of the prayer problem. Not God's inability to provide but our own incapacity to handle the outrageous dimension of his giving.

The more you think about such a vast, powerful promise, the more you realise that something is needed to hold it in check and protect it from presumptuous abuse. Something which will not compromise or dilute its power, something which will expand our human hearts to the level of God's generosity. That special " something " was exactly what Solomon asked for in his prayer.

*" Give me **wisdom** and knowledge... " v.10*

He puts it another way in *1 Kings 3 :9*

*" So give your servant **a discerning heart..** "*

The key to prayer is asking for and receiving the wisdom and discernment from heaven in order to ask aright and liberate total provision.

God delights in such a " wisdom focused " life.

" The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. " 1 Kings 3 :9

His initial reaction to the awesome prayer promise was not a selfish one.

*" Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth , riches or honour, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life **but for wisdom...** " 2 Chronicles 1 :11*

His first reaction was to serve God. His desire was to use the power of the promise for God's ends. This released God's generosity upon his life.

" Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for - both riches and honour...And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands (walking in wisdom), as David your father did, I will give you a long life. " 1 Kings 3 :13

This is the key to true prosperity.

So far we have looked at a simple praying lady and a glorious king. In *Mark 10:35-52*, we find the same powerful promise being given to poor blind Bartimaeus, and the disciples, James and John.

Bartimaeus represents all of those who are spectators of true prayer. Passively sitting by the roadside, they beg a pittance of spiritual provision to keep up a minimal Christian walk. They are blind to the true perspective of prayer. God's generous word to such as these:

" Cheer up ! On your feet ! He's calling you. " v.49

Allow God to call you afresh to a life of prayer. Throw off all that hinders and come again to Christ to hear the promise he gives.

" Throwing his cloak aside , he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

" What do you want me to do for you ? " Jesus asked him. "

How will you answer ?

" Rabbi, I want to see. " v.51

His eyes opened, and his faith renewed, he *" followed Jesus along the road "*. May our own eyes open to the possibilities of prayer, may our faith rise and may we find our own path alongside Christ.

James and John represent another category. Enthusiastic disciples of Christ wanting success....and yet boldly presumptuous in the way they take hold of God's promise to assure a name for themselves in heaven. They want the glory, but may have underestimated the true cost. They take up the promise of prayer:

" Teacher...we want you to do for us whatever we ask. "

Jesus' promise remains open to them:

" What do you want me to do for you ? " he asked.

In their request for a privileged place in heaven they may well have forgotten Solomon's lesson of wisdom.

" You don't know what you are asking. " v.38

Many, driven by ambition and immaturity, do not know what they are indeed asking. I, myself, am probably one of these " many ". Jesus doesn't shut the door on their prayer. He simply asks if they are willing to pay the price.

" Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with ? "

Are you truly willing to pay the price of a prayer ministry ? Or do you want a good place in God's work without "**praying the price?**" As James and John each of us will give his own answer. As John the Baptist said:

" A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. " John 3 :27

Ask the Lord to give you a fresh consecration to the costly life of prayer. Repent of all that is presumptuous and superficial.

Jesus concludes with a timely reminder of the true attitude that should govern the hearts of those who administer the great promises of prayer.

" ...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. "

Marc 10 :44-45

