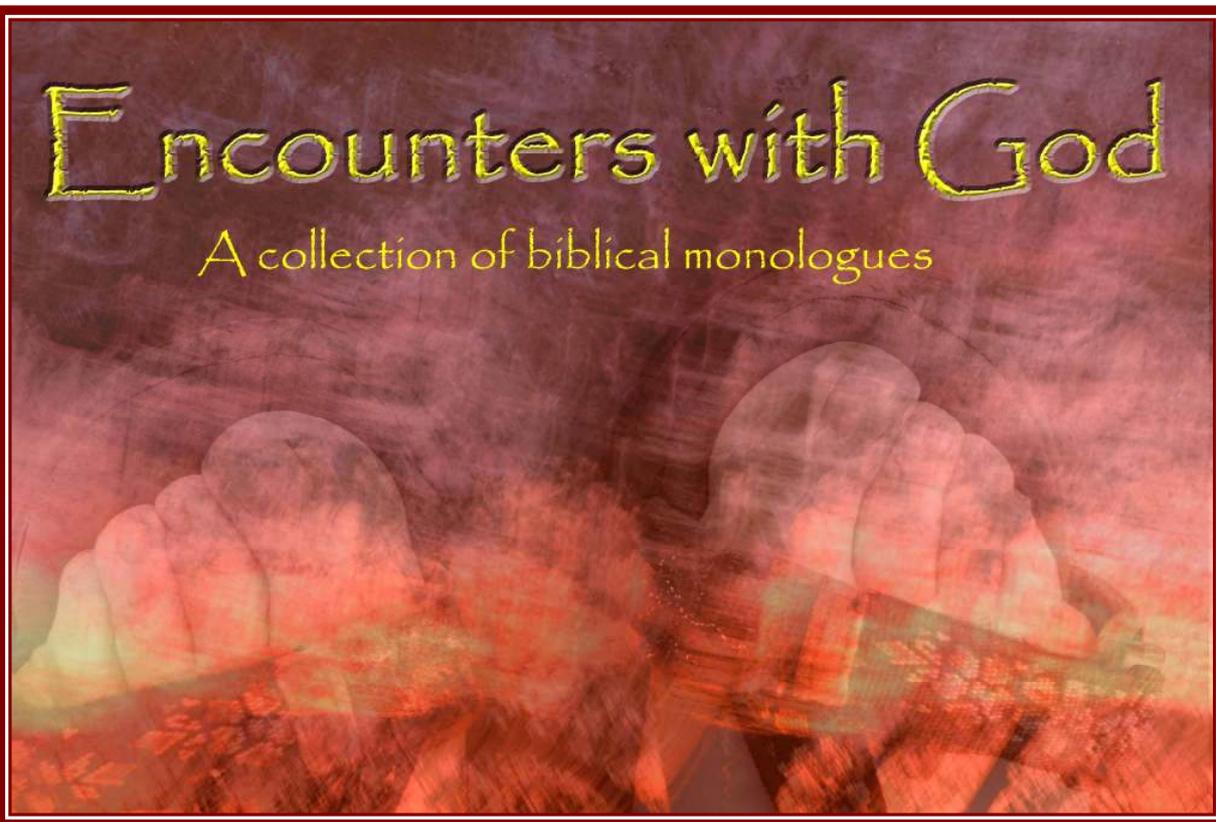


Encounters with God

A collection of biblical monologues



FORWARD

We hope you enjoy our collection of biblical monologues.

We have been meeting together monthly for well over a year and thought it was time to share the fruit of some of our labour.

The work included in this booklet has inspired us to see familiar biblical stories from fresh perspectives and to empathise with people with whom we thought we would have little in common.

Feel free to use our stories, as long as you acknowledge our copyright.

We envisaged someone acting out the monologues in a church service, during outreach or in small group settings.

We appreciate your feedback and any suggestions of how our writers' group can be of service to help the church and the community.

And new members are always welcome to join the group. We generally meet on the first Sunday evening of every month.

For further information please contact me at:-

Susanne Irving, 10 Bracken Road, Petersfield, GU31 4HQ

Email: dreamachiever2000@hotmail.com

Tel: 01730 269275

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THE OBVIOUS PRODIGAL

Let's face it. I don't deserve to be back here. I've messed up. Big time. "Honour your father and your mother", the law says and promises a double blessing for those who keep the command: Long life and a secure future.

Not much of an incentive for me back then. This honouring your parents business seemed tedious, boring and out-dated. I was young and wanted fun.

Like any young men in our position, my elder brother and I were expected to work in the family business. The old man kept harping on to us about how the land had been in our family since time immemorial. He always stressed that we had been blessed with a fertile land that would yield a harvest for generations to come if we continued to look after it with care and dedication.

He may have got his kick out of seeing the seeds that were sown grow and mature into a bumper crop year after year, but I was bored stiff by it all and increasingly frustrated. I mean, what was the point in earning all that money if it was never used for anything exciting? We could have spent time travelling. We could have organised some great parties. What a waste of our resources!

Whenever I made a suggestion, the old man reminded me that we were meant to be good stewards and were not just in the business for ourselves. My elder brother said that he agreed. He would never contradict the old man openly. He kept saying how one had to fulfil one's duty and earn one's keep in the father's house.

How I longed to express my creativity freely! My vision was so much bigger than farming. I was suffocating following the same routine year in and year out.

My elder brother reminded me that the old man would not live forever and that one day I would get my share of the inheritance. But the old man had always been in excellent health and might easily live another 20 or 30 years. By then I would be middle-aged and might no longer have the energy to pursue my dreams. I was only young once. If I did not break free now, I might be a prisoner for the rest of my life.

They say fortune favours the bold, so one day I simply asked the old man for my share of the inheritance and left as soon as I got the cash.

In the eyes of the traditionalists, I was an outcast now. I had done the unthinkable and shown utter contempt for my family and my father's honour. I mean hadn't I in effect been saying that I wished that my father was dead?

I did not quite see it in those terms. Most people were just old-fashioned and that made them short-sighted. Yes, my request was unconventional, but I was fed up with sticking to tradition for tradition's sake. I knew the old man could afford to give me the money. Our servants loved him because they often got more from him than was their due, so why should I as his son not get more than was officially due to me?

To be honest, I couldn't care less what people thought of me, as I had no intention of returning. In fact, I was quite proud of myself. I had been honest, bold and courageous - in contrast to my elder brother, who was too much of a wimp to express his views freely. He always repeated what the old man said in parrot-like fashion. He was welcome to be the old man's slave, but I was not prepared to be a slave to anyone or anything any longer.

I can see now how naïve and proud I was. I did not know that pleasure can enslave.

I went abroad and tried out whatever took my fancy. At first I had fun – lots of it. Women flocked to me, men sought my company, and we boozed and laughed all night. I did not worry about how much money I spent - budgeting seemed rather dull and saving for a rainy day was only for small-minded, over-anxious, uptight people.

I never noticed that I had to spend more and more just to feel the same excitement as I felt when I had my first taste of freedom. To be honest, how I spent my time is a bit of a blur to me now. I was on a constant high, until the morning I woke up and didn't have a single penny to my name.

That came as a bit of a blow to say the least. My plans had not included working for a living. I had done that back home. Living life to the full meant living for leisure and pleasure.

Now I had no choice than to look for a job to tide me over until my finances had recovered, but that was easier said than done. The economy had nosedived, and during the severe recession, people were looking out for their own. I quickly learned that foreigners are only welcome as long as they have the means to boost the local economy.

Suddenly the people I had drunk and laughed with and who had called me their best buddy crossed over to the other side when I approached. No-one cared that I had not eaten in days. The only job I got offered after a lot of begging and pleading was as a swine herd – if you want to call feeding pigs a job. I mean, I was still starving.

The pigs were better off than I, as they could stomach almost anything. No-one offered me even food scraps.

In my desperation, I once stole a few carob pods that I was meant to feed to the herd –but those pods were bone-dry and impossible to chew, let alone digest.

It finally hit me: No-one in my father's house would ever suffer like this. Humans always came first. Even the day labourers had food to spare at the end of their working day. If only I could be one of them!

I knew I did not deserve mercy. I had broken the law first in attitude and then in deed. What I deserved was what I was heading towards: a shortened life with no hope. If I stayed where I was, I would die. I had tried fixing things my way and failed.

To be honest, part of me was scared of hell if I did not turn back home. When I was healthy and wealthy, death seemed such a long way off, but now it was staring me in the face. I could not afford to waste another day. There was no more room for pride. Soon I would no longer have the energy to walk.

Deep down I knew that if I begged father for forgiveness, he would show mercy. He had never turned away anyone in need. And as a day labourer, I could repay some of the damage I had done.

I still had a lot to learn!

As I said, part of me naively believed I could earn father's forgiveness, but father showed me that forgiveness cannot be earned. Even if I could have somehow earned back the money I had squandered, how do you pay for breaking someone's heart? Tears cannot be unshed.

And a reputation once destroyed is almost impossible to rebuild. Folks have a good memory for scandal. I suspect that

years down the line, people will still be talking about the young fool who knew no shame and dared to ask for his inheritance ahead of time and about the old fool who gave in to the young fool's demands rather than punishing him as his impudence deserved.

But father has never cared about what people think. I will never forget the sight of him running - no sprinting! -, towards me, with his servants having difficulty in keeping up with him. At first I expected to see a huge stick in his hands to drive me out of the country for good. But when he came closer I saw that his arms were outstretched and ready to embrace me. He was both crying and laughing.

Before I could even voice my proposal to work as a day labourer, he had reinstated me as his son and heir. I never expected to wear shoes again. My feet had been sore and blistered for so long that I no longer even noticed it.

He also gave me his ring, effectively giving me free rein over his affairs and resources, even though I had already spent everything that was due to me.

To top it all, father treated me like royalty by throwing his best robe over me. I didn't even have time to wash and get rid of my stinking, filthy rags.

The robe is ruined now, but he says that the only thing he cares about is that I have not come to permanent ruin.

And father threw a huge party, the kind of party I had always longed for, to celebrate my homecoming. As if I had returned a hero from a war. I guess I have been in a war, a war for my soul. Father says I have effectively been resurrected from the dead. And I tell you one thing: It is great to be alive, truly alive!

© Susanne Irving

ANOTHER LOST SON

When he absconded, I continued to do my duty. After all, the ground still had to be ploughed. Seeds had to be sown, weeds pulled out and burned in the fire, and the harvest had to be brought in.

I often toiled from the first morning light until it was so dark that I could no longer distinguish between weed and crop. There was so much work to do that I often sacrificed lunch altogether. I could not afford to take a break because the workers tend to get lazy without proper supervision and guidance.

I hoped that father would acknowledge my hard work for him, but he never seemed to notice. I once even spent a couple of back-breaking hours weeding in the field with the workers, but my humility did not seem to impress father either. No point going beyond the call of duty then. Far better to just do as I had been told, trying my best to ignore father's moods.

He often stared absent-mindedly into the distance, sighing heavily. On more than one occasion, father's servants reported that they saw a tear trickle down his weathered cheek.

They say that time is a great healer, but according to the reports I received he never stopped grieving. Even years down the line, his heart was still broken.

Sometimes I wondered what would have happened if I had been the one who left. I am not sure that I as his eldest son would have received such a lenient treatment. To be honest, if he had caved in to my demands like he did for the younger one I would have been insulted. We had always been taught that insolence demands discipline. Any other response is neither right nor just.

Everyone agrees with me on that. The whole community is now whispering behind our backs. We have lost their respect. Well, father has, but I hope that they still respect me.

I am still doing what is expected of me. I am still doing my duty. I still show honour where honour is quite frankly no longer deserved.

It hurts that father continues to pine for a selfish, irreverent waster who has broken the laws of civility, decency and tradition and has brought shame on our family. After all, he still has ME, his most reliable and conscientious worker, me, who would never dare to ask for a reward beyond my daily food and shelter. For now, that is all that I should lay claim to.

Once father is dead, it is another matter of course. And I can tell you one thing: There will be justice on my estate.

But for now it is important to keep up appearances and obey father's orders. I have always known and accepted my place, whereas the one who left forgot his station. No sooner had father granted his demands that he strutted off without so much as a good-bye.

To be honest, I was glad when he went. Now I could finally get down to turning my future inheritance around.

The younger one had always been more of a hindrance than a help, preferring day-dreaming to working. Even before he made his move, it was clear to me that he had not the slightest interest in the family business. He kept telling everybody how exciting his life would be once he had the money due to him.

He laughed when I reminded him that an inheritance has to be earned through hard work. He said there was no need for that because father was rich.

When he told me about his plan to ask for an early division of our inheritance, I never tried to stop him. I expected father to teach him a long overdue lesson.

But what did father do? He REWARDED him for his outrageous behaviour by doing all he could to meet the demands. Father never even raised his voice when he paid out the money. He simply said: "I hope this will help you find the happiness you are craving."

Once I dared to ask father why he agreed to give this selfish, spoiled brat his share of the inheritance prematurely. Father said that true love lets go and sacrifices willingly.

In my eyes, this is sentimentality, not love. The rebel deserved to be beaten black and blue and then disinherited and thrown out of the house. Even that would have been merciful. He should have been killed or been told that he would be killed if he ever dared to set foot into our house again.

But of course there were no stipulations, and now I have been told by a servant boy that he has come back and that father is throwing a huge celebration to mark this occasion.

The old man must have completely lost his mind! Has he not heard what this waste of space was up to while he was away? He never once considered our reputation. All he was interested in was his own pleasure, squandering every last penny on booze and prostitutes.

There are talks that not only did the old man immediately restore him as a son, but went a step further. He put his best robe on him, treating him like royalty. If anyone should have had the robe it was I. Now it is ruined for good and so filthy that it is only fit to be burned.

And the spendthrift has also been given power of attorney, so that he can now squander my rightful inheritance as well.

The old man is not exactly setting an example of how to be a good steward of resources. After all these years of frugal living, he is throwing a party that will cost us a small fortune. Even the fattened calf is gone.

I feel like such a fool. Why have I bothered trying to be a good, law-abiding citizen, slaving away to win father's love and approval?

Because I shut up and kept my head down, there has never been a reward for my obedience other than more hard work. Where is the celebration in my honour?

Sadly, the old man does not seem to understand where I am coming from and is looking puzzled and sad when I point out the facts.

He talks sentimental rubbish about me having always been with him and that everything he owns I own too. He claims he would not have minded if I had slaughtered a goat from the flock to celebrate with my friends. That I did not have to wait for his permission.

The old man also insists that we **HAVE** to celebrate the return of the prodigal because he was as good as dead, but now that he has come back, he is alive again.

He seems to think that you can just wipe clean the slate and start afresh. It would be impossible for the waster to make up for all the damage he has done - even if he really wanted to, which is doubtful. Knowing him, he probably just came crawling back to fill his belly and will be off again soon. I have been told that he looks as if he has not eaten properly for months. Some say he was filthy beyond recognition and that you could smell him before you saw him. To have him in the house makes me shudder. If I enter, I will be contaminated too.

“Love covers a multitude of sins,” father has always said – but this time he has gone too far. I cannot condone immorality. I cannot collude with sin. Someone has to stand up for what is right. Someone has to uphold the law.

© Susanne Irving

A FATHER'S HEART OF LOVE

Once three men lived together in harmony: they shared the same house, worked together, probably did everything together.

Albert, Andrew and Alan, were the three men - their names are made up to protect their identity. Albert, the father, enjoyed his two sons nearby and took great enjoyment in the fact that when he was gone, the sons would still be together and benefiting from the wealth he had made, carrying on the work that he had started. But Albert's dreams were about to be shattered.

Alan, the youngest son, came to see him, said he wasn't happy and could he have his inheritance money to find happiness. Albert saw he was serious and because he loved him gave into him and allowed him to take his inheritance. He knew that the money would not last long and he might squander it. Still he had to find out which was the best life for him: nightclubbing, drinking, drugs even. He would have lots of friends while his money lasted, but would they be there when he had none. Albert knew his son.

Albert waved goodbye to his youngest son. Walking back home, he thought about his youngest son, and what the older brother would say. Naturally, the latter wasn't happy but hoped he would get more of his father's attention, and when his father died, everything would be his.

Now two men lived together doing the same things day after day, Andrew, the older son, was not happy being left to do his brothers share of the work. He didn't notice how sad Albert was that Alan wasn't there.

Albert loved both sons, but because he missed his younger son he was sad. He went daily to the place he had waved

goodbye, but time passed and Alan did not come. He wondered what he was doing. Was he being fed? It wasn't till later that he learned Alan was looking after the pigs and being so hungry that he ate their food.

Albert grieved for his son. He didn't forget the older one. How could he? He was faithful, always there for him. But the family wasn't complete without Alan. One day as he walked to the usual place, he saw someone in the distance, a figure barely recognisable, thin and dishevelled, yet he knew his son. He hugged him.

Alan expected to come back as a servant, but Albert wasn't having any of it. No, he gave a banquet for him. "He is my son", he said to others who also wondered like Andrew why his father was giving a banquet for his brother.

Albert had a quiet word with Andrew, telling him, that he loved him as much, and as he was always there with him, there was no need to have a banquet for him, but his brother had been lost to them. Now he had returned, the family was again complete.

© Chris Gibson

JOSEPH - GOD'S MAN OF THE MOMENT

I am now an old man living with my family in Egypt, but once I was very young and I would like to tell you about the beginning of all my adventures. When I was just seventeen I was naïve, insensitive to others' feelings and maybe a bit too trusting. I remember always feeling a bit of an outsider with my older brothers, who taunted and bullied me mercilessly. I realise now that this was partly father's fault; he tended to single me out for his rather smothering love as I was the firstborn of his dearly-loved wife Rachel. She died giving birth to baby Benjamin and she was sorely missed. Father once made me an extraordinary full-length coat, a real mark of distinction, and that, together with my prophetic dreams (which I should have kept to myself), pushed most of my brothers to the limit of their patience with me. Well, I suppose I was a bit of a telltale too, and had recently brought back a bad report about them to father.

Anyway, one day they had taken the flocks to the Shechem area and father asked me to go over and check that they were alright. He was worried because of the bad feeling that existed between the Shechemites and ourselves ever since they had done that awful thing to our sister Dinah, and Simeon and Levis's retaliation.

So I set off on my journey but when I arrived there was no sign of them. A local man found me wandering round in the fields, dreaming as usual, and told me he'd overheard them saying that they were going to move on to Dothan. That's where I eventually caught up with them, but not in the way I'd imagined!

They jumped on me, the whole crowd, ripped off my coat and dumped me in a cistern. Used to their bullying, I just tried to brazen it out, though it was actually very scary sitting down there with no possible way of getting out. I was sure they'd rescue me soon, as father was expecting me home. But they

just left me, all on my own. A long time later, I heard strange voices, a rope was thrown down and they hauled me out. A party of Midianite traders were staring at me. They had a large train of camels loaded down with spices, balm and myrrh and my brothers were haggling with them – demanding a good price – for me! They finally settled on 20 shekels of silver, and I was dragged off on the long journey to Egypt. My mind was buzzing; it was absolutely unbelievable. Where was Reuben? He would rescue me. But no, this wasn't another of their bullying jokes, this was for real. I had lost touch with my entire family for a long, long time.

As you know, years later we were reunited and my brothers were very repentant and apologetic about what they had done to me. But through the intervening years God had used me in very many ways, especially through my dreams which had got me into so much trouble as a youngster. Eventually he made me lord of all Egypt – what a mighty God is ours! As I told my brothers when we finally met again, it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of them to Egypt, to preserve for them a remnant on earth and to save their lives by a great deliverance. In the long run, it was not they who sent me away, it was God.

My brothers had intended to harm me but God intended it for good, to accomplish the saving of many lives. When our father was dying, he blessed us all and I will never forget his final words to me, which began 'Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed supple, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.'

© Patsy Robinson

A DOUBLE MIRACLE

By the time Elisha came into our lives I had worked things through. What was the point of pining for something I could not have? It only made me sad and miserable and clouded my perspective. After all, I had been richly blessed in so many other ways.

My husband was a good man. He was hard-working, loyal and kind and would never have dreamed of leaving me for a younger, healthier woman.

There was always more than enough food on the table, so offering hospitality was no real sacrifice for us.

We were well-regarded in our community.

Nobody ever commented about the fact that our family line would die out with my husband – at least not to my face. I imagine some people speculated what I'd done wrong.

I wondered about that in the early days. Back then, it sometimes appeared that my prayers had finally been answered. But after a few weeks, I would start bleeding and my hopes were dashed once again.

As I matured, I stopped speculating whether God had singled me out for punishment. Yes, I failed to be consistently holy and righteous, but so did our neighbours who had been blessed with children. I figured that the human race would have died out long ago if having children were a matter of merit.

In the end I concluded that outside Eden, a lot of things are not working the way they were designed to be, including wombs.

Whenever I was struggling to accept my fate, I reminded myself that God was God – and I was not. And who could understand the mind of the Almighty?

I decided to trust His purposes for me. After all, not having children of my own also had its advantages. It gave me a chance to be a mother to all who crossed my path.

I felt particularly drawn to Elisha. He clearly was a man after God's heart. He was both humble and holy. I enjoyed having him over for a meal. He soon became a regular guest in our home.

I felt we could do more than offer him a meal whenever he passed by. My husband agreed with my proposal to prepare a room for Elisha. Now he could stay with us whenever he was in the area.

“Consider my home your home,” I said to him, and I meant it. He was free to come and go as he pleased. While I enjoyed his company, I was always mindful of his privacy, as he needed space to go about God's business.

One day Elisha called me to his room and asked me what he could do for me in return for my hospitality. It had never crossed my mind to ask him for anything. I considered it my privilege to be able to serve one of God's prophets and so serve God in a small way.

As I said, I was well looked after. I did not need any favours from those in authority. I had a home among my own people and that was all I needed.

Elisha asked a second time what could be done for me. I had heard that he had performed some amazing miracles, but I had learned to be content with the life I led – and wasn't that a

miracle in itself? So I stayed silent and never mentioned the one thing I had wanted for most of my married life.

I was a bit embarrassed and uncomfortable when Elisha's servant Gehazi spoke up on my behalf. He must have put two and two together. I certainly never talked to him about the struggles I had endured because of my barrenness.

Elisha looked at me and smiled. "About a year from now you will hold a son in your arms", he said without a moment's hesitation.

I must confess I struggled to be joyful and grateful when Elisha told me that I would bear a son. How could this man be so confident? He had no idea what I had been through. I did not want to have my hopes raised, only for them to be dashed again. After all, I was no longer a young woman; if my body could not cope with the weight of a growing child when I was in my prime, how would it cope now?

I wished Elisha would not have said what he had said. His words stirred up a dream I had let go of after many tears. I did not want to lose my hard-fought peace.

When I fell pregnant, I remembered Sarah. She had born her son when she was long past the age of child-bearing, and if God could do it for her, he could also do it for me.

And God was gracious. This time I carried the child full-term. After all these years we finally had an heir!

He was a healthy boy, full of energy and enthusiasm. From an early age, he loved going out with his dad, first watching him do the work and than helping him with the harvest.

The year things took an unexpected turn, was a bumper year for crops. I had noticed that our son looked a little bit paler than

usual at breakfast, but I had put that down to tiredness. When his dad sent him home before midday because he had complained about a headache, I did not expect him to stop breathing a few hours later!

This did not make any sense. Could God really be so cruel? Had I not surrendered to His will? This was worse than never having a son in the first place. And how would my husband cope with the pain of losing his beloved heir? I might lose him as well.

No, I could not tell him that his son had just died in my arms – at least not right away. I needed some answers first. I had to find the man of God.

I carried my son to Elisha's room and laid him on his bed. I tucked a blanket around him, like I had always done whenever I put him to sleep. He looked so peaceful, but his forehead was already going cold when I stroked back his hair. There was no time to lose.

I forced myself to breathe deeply. In and out, in and out. I had to remain calm for my plan to succeed.

My husband was surprised when I asked for his permission to visit the man of God. After all, there seemed to be no special occasion for the trip. Luckily, he was so preoccupied with the harvest that he did not probe deeper and let me go.

I saddled a donkey and asked our servant to lead us to Mount Carmel without delay. I gave him strict instructions not to slow down for me unless I asked him to. He too looked a bit puzzled at my request, but simply obeyed.

I cannot remember a lot of the journey. All I could think was: "Elisha has got to fix this! Didn't I make it clear that I didn't want

to have my hopes raised in vain? It would have been better not to have a child than to lose a child.”

We had not yet reached Mount Carmel, when Elisha’s servant Gehazi came running towards us. My heart leaped. I would soon have my answer!

Gehazi enquired on Elisha’s behalf about my wellbeing and the wellbeing of my family. It dawned on me: Elisha was a man of God, but he was not God. Right now he did not even realise what had happened to my son!

I took a deep breath to try to steady my voice before I told Gehazi that everything was alright, but that I still needed to see Elisha without delay. I had come this far, I would not and could not give up now, even though my case seemed hopeless.

When I saw Elisha, I could no longer hold back the tears. I fell at his feet, sobbing and shaking. I told him of my distress, ignoring Gehazi’s attempts to push me away.

Elisha was full of compassion. He immediately sent Gehazi to my home and instructed him to lay his staff on my boy’s face.

Don’t ask me how, but I knew that this would not do. After all, last time God had used Elisha to announce the miracle of my pregnancy. So surely God would use Elisha again to give me back my son.

“Oh, Sovereign Lord, please have mercy. Sarah too almost lost her miracle child, but You intervened. Please do for me, what You did for her,” I kept praying. I could not abandon this hope, because if I did, all would truly be lost. I pleaded and begged until Elisha followed me home.

When we arrived, Elisha went straight into his room. I stared at the closed door, knowing that I had done what I could. All I

could do now was to wait. Would God have mercy and work another miracle in my life? Or would He simply grant me the strength to bear my grief?

I lost all sense of time. It may have been hours or only minutes, when I heard seven sneezes. The door flew open and my son rushed into my arms.

© Susanne Irving

BOAZ – KINDNESS REWARDED

How unexpected life can be! There I was, mature in years, rather set in my ways, perfectly resigned to entering middle age as a confirmed bachelor, and totally content. I had a few good, close friends, many acquaintances, and felt that I was respected in both town and synagogue. The farming was going well, with most of my men Godfearing and upright, conscientious and honest. A peaceful, if rather humdrum, existence.

Then, one April day, the town was buzzing with the news that Naomi had returned, accompanied by Ruth her daughter in law, who had given up everything to stay with her. Naomi and Elimelech left Bethlehem many years ago, during the famine, taking Mahlon and Kilion off to Moab, where the boys eventually found foreign wives. A lot of our friends disapproved and they may have been right, because Elimelech and both boys died within ten years of each other, leaving Naomi widowed and childless.

Now, supervising my workers, I saw a stunning young Moabite girl gleaning among our barley harvesters and immediately realised who she must be. On further investigation I found her to be a pious, shy, hard working young woman, devoted to Naomi and seeking refuge with her people and her God.

Ensuring that Ruth would be protected and looked after by our harvesters, I put the matter to the back of my mind and concentrated on getting in the barley.

Then, late one night, I was woken from a sound sleep to find Ruth curled at my feet. The dear girl had thrown herself on my mercy as a kinsman-redeemer, not running after the younger men but claiming protection from me. I explained that she had a

nearer relative than myself and promised to speak to him in the morning.

How I prayed when she had gone!

The next day, with some trepidation, I met him and ten elders at the town gate. We sat in the deep shade, refreshed by a cooling breeze, listening to the noise and bustle all around us, and quietly discussed the future of these two vulnerable women. When at first he agreed to buy Naomi's land, my foolish heart sank with heaviness. However, once he realised that the transaction would also involve taking on both Ruth and her mother in law, and that any future son would inherit, he could not accept such a commitment and the responsibility passed to me.

Now my heart sang! Dear, sweet, beautiful Ruth would be mine. Then, when baby Obed was born, I was the proudest man in Bethlehem, praising God and completely amazed that such an unexpected joy should now, at last, be mine.

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JUDAS ISCARIOT THE MAN WHO MISSED THE ULTIMATE MIRACLE

Passover is such a busy time, a time when it seemed the whole world was in Jerusalem. Jesus could have been seen by them as the Messiah, but he wasn't making any move to show himself. *Why? Judas wondered He confuses me; first he seems to be all out for war, then talks of peace, and loving your enemies. That his kingdom is not of this earth, says his father has told him - not Joseph, who has been dead for years, but His heavenly father. Says he is God's Son-What if this is true?*

"Move along", came the cry from behind. I wish I could, it's impossible to move.

Judas was a man on a mission, a secret mission. *Such a strange mission, to betray a friend, but it must be done.*

Jesus has friends in high places – but none that can help him now. Jesus did not reprimand the woman who broke an expensive Alabaster jar. The money that would have cost! I would have told her off. The money got from the sale of that would have helped our cause, or even given to the poor. Jesus took it as a gift. Said she was anointing his body for burial.

He is talking about dying for the world. I thought he would deliver us from the Romans - but now no earthly kingdom job for me if He dies. Why didn't he show himself to the people and the priests? Perhaps I can force his hand, by betraying him. Then he will fight and the Romans will be annihilated. The priests will acknowledge him and we as his disciples will be set up for life with high positions in his kingdom.

"Keep moving ", called the men with Judas, pushing him roughly into the crowds. Judas glared at them. I hate doing this, he thought, but I have a mission to do. Jesus told me to go and

do it. I have a feeling that he knows what I am about to do. When he looks at you, it's as if your soul is laid bare before him. It doesn't seem right to do this to a good man, but God will send his angels to lift him up and we will see him as he is.

Gethsemane at last! I will greet him with a kiss... There it's done! But nothing is happening. No angels. Peter has his sword out, the High Priest's servant has had his ear cut off... What is Jesus doing, healing it? Loving his enemies I suppose.

Jesus is taken prisoner, the rest of them run. This is a nightmare! I daren't join them, they will kill me. There's talk of crucifying Jesus before the Sabbath. Surely he will fight now and bring in His kingdom? He has the power to do it, I know he has, so why let them kill you Jesus? I wonder if I was wrong. Have I delivered the Son of God into the hands of His enemies? I don't know what to think any more. He saved others, surely he will save himself.

The Crowd is pushing Judas. Where to? Golgotha! I don't want to go there! No, they crucify criminals there! I can see three figures holding crosses. Poor souls, no release for them then. I will ask this man next to me who it is. "King of the Jews", he says. Can't be. Jesus is the king - but it is him. Let me get away from this. Let me through! I can't stay here! I can't see him die. It's my fault, but he is determined to die. He won't come of the cross. There is no release for Jerusalem. What will happen now? I can't go back and say sorry. I will be killed by the disciples or even the Romans as a follower of him. No way out.

They paid me 30 pieces of silver to betray the Son of God, I will take it back... There, thrown at the feet of Jesus killers... I am a traitor, all my dreams crashed, broken. No way out, no way out, I killed the Son of God, I must die. Those people over there, I am sure they are coming to get me, to crucify me. I won't let them. A good soldier never lets himself be captured by the

enemy. I'll preserve my honour – what's left of it, I hope this rope is strong...

Postscript:

He was found sometime later hanging. He was buried in an unknown grave. Jesus rose again not long after, Judas had missed the miracle he was looking for.

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MARY THE MIRACLE IN THE GARDEN

In vain she searched the garden, darting here and there, like a bird caught in a net. Blinded by tears that fell from sorrow-filled eyes, she strained to see the one she loved.

Where could he be? He wasn't where they left him. He couldn't have walked away, couldn't even have moved. He was dead. Her own eyes told her. He was dead.

Loving hands that touched the untouchable ...pierced by cruel nails. Arms that held young children, cruelly disabled, torn out of their sockets. His face... - she shuddered trying to shut out the horror of that dreadful sight. In life His face so welcoming, scarred beyond belief.

Loneliness and grief flooded her heart. The memories refused to go. The night they arrested him, brought fear into her heart, not for herself but for Him. He was a good man, said He was God's son. Why didn't God rescue Him? The crucifixion a nightmare, the cries of the two men around them contrasts to His silence - like a lamb to the slaughter He was. Strange though, when He died His voice sounded so strong and full of authority: 'It is finished.' What was finished? What was going on? He was triumphant at that moment, but he died. It seemed as if He was giving up his life, he chose to die.

Many hands touched him in life, some accidently but others for healing, looking for acceptance from him. In death where were these people now, in death only the few were there. They wrapped His body hurriedly, the Sabbath was nearly on them, and he was laid in the tomb, this tomb borrowed from Joseph of Aramithea. He was definitely dead.

Rumours said his followers would steal his body, but the High priest had a guard at the tomb so they couldn't get near it. She couldn't see them now though. Did they steal his body? Where could he be? It definitely was this tomb. She saw it with her own eyes.

Tears streaming down her face, she longed to hear his voice again, now silenced by death, to feel his gaze looking deep into her soul. Fresh sobs shook her body, tears falling freely now. She couldn't give him a decent burial or let him rest in peace.

Standing outside the tomb her mind in a whirl, where was his body? Through the mist, she saw a man. Turning to him, she pleaded: "Tell me where you have taken him - couldn't you have left him in peace?"

"Mary" Looking closer at Him, she couldn't believe her eyes: Her mind said no, her spirit said yes.

No longer grieving, she ran to tell His disciples: "Jesus is alive!"

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THE POWER OF ONE TOUCH

Some people rebuked me when they found out what I had done. After all, I had broken the law and put the health and well-being of the community at risk.

I am usually a law-abiding woman, but I have no regrets about what I did on this occasion.

I mean, what was I supposed to do? I'd run out of money and so had run out of options – not that my money had ever been able to purchase what I craved most: the chance to embrace my daughter again. She was only a toddler when I fell ill and that was the last time I was allowed to hold her. Now she was about to get married, and I would only be allowed to watch the celebrations from a distance.

I was told to stay out of touching distance until the flow stopped. Over the years there were times when I felt that it was finally ceasing, but as soon as I dared to put my hopes up, the trickle would turn into a stream and the cramps would return.

Some people advised me to simply resign myself to my fate and accept the Almighty's judgment for my sins or the sins of my forbearers. But I never could.

It may sound strange, but whenever I prayed, I didn't feel judged. I felt loved, despite my uncleanness.

So I never gave up and sought out the best doctors. Many were more interested in my money than in me – I was only a woman after all -, but there were one or two who genuinely seemed to care. Maybe they imagined their own mothers, wives or daughters afflicted like I was. Nonetheless, their compassion did not make any difference. No matter which potions I took or

how I adjusted my daily routine, the flow would not stop. It only grew worse over time.

And then the teacher came into town. I'd heard that he could heal people without using potions and without charging money. People said healing power was oozing out of him, so I figured that if I could just get close enough to touch his robe all would be well.

I don't know how I found the strength and courage to push through the crowds. The whole town seemed to be out and about to see him.

Yes, I admit I accidentally touched some people, but there was no way to avoid that, given the crowd. I did not want to harm anyone. I just wanted to be well again.

I prayed that I would get through to him without being recognized. Otherwise I would be in trouble.

And all went well at first. The flow stopped as soon as I touched the corner of his robe. My body was flooded with warmth. My energy returned. I had forgotten what it was like to feel truly alive.

As far as I was concerned, this was all I wanted. All I wanted now was to slip back home, but then the teacher turned around and asked who had touched him.

How could he know? No-one else had turned around when I brushed past them. No-one else seemed to have felt my uncleanness, but he was different. And I had only touched his robe. I was pretty sure of that.

There was a man who pleaded with him to hurry up to see his sick daughter. His disciples were also telling him that it was time to move on, as it was impossible to identify an individual's

touch with all the people pressing about, but he persisted. It felt as if he was on a divine mission and would not move until he had uncovered the truth.

I was holding everyone up and there were so many other people who needed him, so I fell at his feet and asked for his forgiveness. Trembling, I told him what I had done and why I had done it.

A gasp went through the crowd, and I expected a rebuke, but he just smiled and said: “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

More than my body was healed on that day. For the first time I felt complete in body, mind and soul.

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LYDIA THE ADVENTURE OF NEW LIFE

It feels very strange to return home as a completely different person. When I left Thyatira on a regular business trip to Philippi, little did I dream of the great adventure that awaited me. Now, back in the normal routine of life, I will follow the advice of Dr Luke, who suggested I write down all that has happened to me so that my children will have a record of the family's dramatic change of direction. But where to begin?

Sitting one day in the shady grove by the Gangites, listening to the movement of the river, feeling the gentle touch of the breeze, I was content. Even as a tiny child I had always felt drawn to God, wondering who he was and how I could please him, so it had become my habit, when in Philippi, to meet with some like-minded friends on their holy day, which they called the Sabbath. There were not enough Jewish men to constitute a synagogue so they and their families used to meet by the river, in a sort of amphitheatre. I used to love it: the readings from their holy book, the singing and the prayer, and this particular Sabbath as we were preparing to worship as usual, we were joined by a small party of travelling preachers. They looked quite tired and dusty, but their faces shone with an inner excitement and gradually we found out why.

I should explain that the Jews believe that one day a Saviour, a Messiah, will come to deliver his people. They look forward to this with expectation, so imagine their consternation when our visitors started to teach that he had already been! Their main speaker, called Paul, confided that he had even met the Messiah in a heavenly vision, that his name was Jesus and that if we believed in him our sins would be forgiven and we would be filled with God's goodness. Jesus had been crucified in Jerusalem and then come back to life after three days; there were hundreds of witnesses to this, and now many people were

being healed in his name and being what Dr Luke called 'born again'. Written down like that it looks completely crazy, but as Paul was speaking, my heart was warm and I knew deep down inside that this must be the truth. Even some of the psalms, the holy songs we used to sing, and also the writings of the Jewish prophets, foretold things that later happened to Jesus.

All this was an awful lot to take in; the men were hungry and tired and needed a place to stay, so I eventually managed to persuade them to come back to my house as I had plenty of room. As you can imagine, the discussion and prayer carried on far into the night, and was to continue during the week, but already I was convinced; I wanted to know this Jesus for myself. It was a big decision, but I have not regretted it for a moment. Together with all my household there in Philippi, I was baptised, and immediately the 'brothers' began to call me their sister, and that is how I feel. New life, a totally new kind of life, is now mine, and I want to pass it on.

Dr Luke, Paul, Silas and young Timothy used my house as their base as they spoke in the town to anyone who would listen. Philippi is a colony of Rome, more Roman than Rome itself I should think. There is a large number of army veterans and the ordinary people are very proud of their Roman citizenship; Latin is the language they speak, and the Roman law is followed. There is quite an anti-Jewish attitude in the general population, and that, I think, contributed to the upset which followed. I was unaware of it at the time as I was out conducting my business, but in the evening only Dr Luke and Timothy returned home, and related what had happened.

For some days apparently, a slave-girl had been following the group as they preached and prayed for people, but she was a Pytho, who is someone who can give oracles to guide men about the future. Paul realised she was being used by an unclean spirit and in the name of Jesus, he ordered the demon to leave her alone. Of course, when it had gone, her owners

had lost their livelihood. Furiously angry, they stirred up the anti-Jewish feelings of the market crowd and dragged Paul and Silas off to the Praetors, accusing them of teaching customs which are not lawful for them to receive or observe. They had them beaten with rods and put them in those agonising leg stocks the Romans use. No trial! Then our two brothers were locked in the innermost cell of the jail. We began to pray earnestly.

And our prayers were answered. During the night, (while Silas and Paul were singing praises to God would you believe) there was an earthquake which shook off the prisoners' fetters. Poor Drog, the jailor, was terrified because he knew that if prisoners escape, then the jailor has to suffer the punishment instead – and some of those criminals were under sentence of death. So he was about to run himself through with his own sword but just in time Paul called out that they were all still there. Drog was amazed and bathed their wounds while they told him all about Jesus. He and his family, too, were baptized, and they have all joined our new church.

When the Praetors heard about all this they tried to keep it quiet but Paul made sure that they were aware of his Roman citizenship, as scourging a Roman citizen is punishable by death. As a result, Jesus' followers, under the care of Dr Luke, are now given some respect in the town even though Paul and Silas have moved on to Thessalonica.

So here I am, back home until my next business trip. This new way of life cannot be contained and I am eager to share the good news with my family and friends here in Thyatira. God is so good!

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LOST SHEEP LOST AND FOUND

No, I am not lost. Who gave you that silly idea? I know what I am doing.

I really enjoy being on this barren rock miles away from the flock.

I don't need a shepherd to tell me where to go. I'm an adult now, so why would I want to follow anyone?

I enjoy finding my own way, even if it leads across rugged mountains.

Ok, I have not seen green pastures for a while, but I can cope. I'm made of tougher stuff than the big softies who huddle together somewhere out there being at their shepherd's back and call.

I'm ok out here in the open even when the storm clouds gather and the rain lashes down on me. Shelters are for wimps.

I would find my way back if I really wanted to, so stop telling me that I am lost!

Did you hear that?! It almost sounded like a roar - but that can't be.

What I heard was probably just thunder. Everything gets magnified in the dark.

We have always been told horror stories of what happens to a sheep that gets isolated from its flock - nothing but scaremongering, rumours spread to ensure that we toed the

line and stayed close to the shepherd. Only the very young or very naïve really believe that there is a lion out here.

And what about that big shadow over there? Probably just the wind, moving through the undergrowth. So nothing to worry about...

But why is it moving when I am moving and stopping when I am stopping? Almost as if it is stalking me. This is getting a bit creepy.

How do I get down from this rock again? I am too exposed up here.

O no, the shadow is closing in. I have never seen such menacing yellow eyes.

If I take one more step back, I will fall off the cliff and break my neck. If I stay, I will be devoured by the lion. I am doomed! I wish I had listened when there was still time.

I must be dreaming! Where did he suddenly come from? The shepherd has stepped between me and the lion.

O no, the lion has pounced on him and knocked him to the ground. It looks much stronger than him. There is blood everywhere.

I can't look! My poor shepherd is ending up as lion's dinner...

Someone is moving closer...

"Don't worry, you are safe now. I have come to take you home."

That sounds like my shepherd's voice, but this can't be. He is dead. I saw him getting knocked off his feet. And if he were still

alive, he surely would have rebuked me, and not spoken so tenderly and compassionately to me.

“It is ok. It is I. Don’t be afraid. The lion is dead. You can open your eyes now.”

He is standing over me, smiling while tears are trickling down his face. Still no word of rebuke.

Next thing I know, he has picked me up and carries me around his neck all the way home. He does not seem to care about his injuries. He only cares about me, even though I don’t deserve to be part of his flock.

Shepherd, I promise I will never run away again. From now on, I will always follow you.

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