

Lessons in
First Love

Name, Calling, Election
and Firstfruits

STUDY GUIDE

National Youth Convention 2018

Lessons in First Love

Name, Calling, Election and Firstfruits

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Study Guide for National Youth Convention 2018

December 2017

Scriptures are quoted from NASB, NKJV, KJV and LITV. Where italicised emphasis is used in Scripture references, this has been added and does not appear in the original translations.

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Preface

What is your testimony?

When we think of a testimony, we often think of its legal description. Someone may be testifying in court or recounting the events of an incident, and you can see that they are looking backwards in time. They are remembering something that happened, and perhaps analysing what was wrong or right about the incident. Perhaps they can even suggest what should be different from now on. Many Christians believe that 'testimony' is such an account. Perhaps, at times, it is more an assessment of their own performance, instead of a testimony of the forward-moving faith of a son of God. We might say that the testimony of a disciple is connected with the cry, 'Abba! Father!'

It is important to remember and be thankful for all that God has done for us. However, we can remember the instructions from the Scriptures that remind us to look forward. 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.'¹

1 Psa 30:5

Preface

as He helps us with a spirit of faith to press forward in our sonship and to take hold of the kingdom.¹⁰

When the gospel of sonship is proclaimed to an unbelieving person by a disciple-messenger, grace and supplication from God is coming to them. The grace of God is available to grant to them the capacity to hear the word in the moment that it is spoken to them. They also receive the capacity from God to respond to the word as it calls them to their sonship. If they do not resist the grace of God, they will realise that they are poor, or bankrupt, in spirit. Their identity is marred, and they have no capacity to correct the sin in their life, which results from their separation from God. Unless they receive help, they will lose all hope. They will need the gift of faith if they are to proceed in their sonship.

It is also possible for the hearer to resist the grace of God coming to them in the word. Have you ever considered what this might look like? Briefly, we can draw some profiles from the book of Acts that describe resistance to the gospel message.

1. *Prodigal sophistication.* Even though he believed, Agrippa rejected the call of the Father to be His son.¹¹ We could define this response as ‘clever superiority’. The hearer is the judge of the word as it comes, and they will not receive the word if it does not suit their own motivation. Agrippa was like this when Paul preached to him. Essentially, his confession was, ‘I’m convicted that you might be right, but I don’t want to do anything about it right now. I have my own agenda.’
2. *Fear and personal gain.* When the Roman governor, Felix, heard the gospel preached by Paul, he became afraid when the Spirit convicted him concerning righteousness, self-control, and the judgement to come. His response was to withdraw and to control their interaction until a more convenient time, secretly hoping to profit from Paul’s imprisonment.¹²
3. *Mocking accusation.* Felix’s successor, Festus, was present when Paul was with Agrippa. Festus mocked Paul, the messenger, accusing him of being a madman, and would not receive any conviction from the word.¹³

10 Mat 11:12. The Pulpit Commentary remarks that Jesus is describing ‘the energy with which some souls are pressing in, and urging the need of such energy if salvation is to be obtained.’

11 A ‘prodigal’ son is someone rejects the word of the Father concerning their obedient sonship. Act 26:27-28

12 Act 24:25

13 Act 26:24

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4. *Murderous fury.* The book of Acts recorded the response of the Jews to the gospel proclaimed to them by Stephen. Even though they were cut to the heart with conviction, they chose to resist the grace of God. They stopped their ears in refusal of the word, and gave themselves to a murderous fury. They sought the most immediate means to destroy the messenger and to stop the message and its conviction.¹⁴

It is sobering to think that we are all capable of such responses if we do not continue in a spirit of adoption to cry 'Abba! Father!' If the hearer chooses not to resist the grace of God, they will begin to understand that they are poor, or bankrupt, in spirit. As we said earlier, their identity is marred and, like Abraham, they realise that they have no capacity to achieve the promise of their sonship through the power of their own flesh. They will begin to mourn for their sin and to cry out in supplication for forgiveness. They also cry out for help to believe for the sonship that the gospel is offering to them.¹⁵

Hearing the travail of their supplication, the Father will forgive them. He gives to them the faith of God. This is the same faith that Abraham received when the Word of Yahweh came to him and said, 'Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield [of faith] to you; [I am] your very great reward.'¹⁶ This means that the hearer has received the shield of the faith of God, and has been delivered from fear of failure or death, to believe what God believes about them.¹⁷ They have been born as a son of God and can believe to receive their full inheritance as a son of God.

The Son of God Himself testified that He was made a disciple, saying, 'The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. The Lord GOD has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back.'¹⁸

The same elements of discipleship culture can now be active in the hearer's testimony. That is:

1. They have been born as a son of God and can believe to receive their full inheritance as a son of God. They have received the ear of a disciple, so that they can hear the word and receive the faith of God that comes by hearing.¹⁹ This is the *spirit of faith* about which Paul speaks.²⁰

14 Act 7:54-60

20 Rom 10:17

15 Mat 5:3-4

16 Gen 15:1. Eph 6:16

17 Eph 6:16

18 Isa 50:4-5

19 Isa 50:4. Eph 6:16

Preface

2. In this spirit of faith, they are enabled to believe and confess with the mouth of a disciple that they are a son of God, being born from above with God's own life.²¹ Their testimony is now expressing the faith of a son of God to receive the full inheritance of their sonship in Christ. They are continuing forward in the spirit of adoption.

Of course, the journey of being born of the Spirit has only just begun. By receiving Abraham's faith, they become his child, and an heir of the promise of sonship.²² The Father has credited righteousness to them and sees them as a son in His house, but they have not yet matured to the full sonship that God predestined for them. Nevertheless, they have received the faith of God to believe for, and lay hold of, their full inheritance. This is the adoption. Those who receive the adoption on account of believing God are blessed with Abraham the believer.²³

Throughout the whole of our Christian journey, we need to continue to take heed when the Holy Spirit energises the spirit of faith which we have received, and which causes us to cry 'Abba! Father!' At the same time, the Spirit of Christ within us continues to cry out 'Abba! Father!', bearing witness with our own spirit that we are sons of God. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul said that we have the firstfruits of the Spirit, but still groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.²⁴ This means that there is more yet for us to lay hold of in relation to our sonship.

We continue to cry out by a spirit of adoption, because we have not reached the fullness of our maturity as sons of God. We have received the Spirit of the Son who bears witness within us that we are sons. However, the divine nature has not yet become our nature. We continue to cry out so that Christ will be formed in us through a process of travail.²⁵ Through baptism, we are joined to the fellowship of Christ's sufferings and have an ongoing participation in His travail.

The Holy Spirit joins us to this travail.²⁶ He helps us in our supplication when we do not know how to pray. In all of our circumstances, He leads us into the truth of our sonship and helps us as we pray to build ourselves up in our most holy faith.²⁷ Together with our faith for sonship and the witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit that we are sons of God, we are assured that we are inheriting our sonship. We know that our calling as sons is secure and that our inheritance is sure as we

21 Isa 50:5. Eph 6:16 27 Rom 8:22,26,28.

22 Gal 3:7. Rom 4:11 Jud 1:20

23 Gal 3:6-9

24 Rom 8:22

25 Gal 4:19

26 Rom 8:22,26

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continue in the adoption to make our election sure. In this travailing fellowship, our sin and iniquity are taken from us and are transferred to Christ. At the same time, His life is transferred to us so that it can be formed in us. This is the process we refer to as ‘offering transfer’.

As we continue to receive the word of God spoken to us through His messengers, we will also continue to receive the faith of God and to grow from faith to faith.²⁸ Let’s consider for a moment how this works. With every word spoken to us by God through His messengers, faith is also coming to us with that word. We note that faith is not just an ambition or a hoping for something to happen somewhere in the future. Faith is continually coming by hearing. And hearing is a capacity given to us by God when He gives us the ear of a disciple.

As we grow from faith to faith, we receive increasing access to the grace of God, in which we stand.²⁹ This is the grace of life that is revealed as being the nature of His sonship. It is revealed through offering. We see that faith gives us the capacity to join this offering, so that the life that is multiplied through offering becomes ours. He was revealed as the Word in flesh, full of grace and truth. As we respond to the word from faith to faith, we are being changed from glory to glory, into the image of Christ’s sonship.

It is important that we embrace these understandings and apply them to our culture, daily. This is because we cannot live by any other means than by the word of God.³⁰ Furthermore, this is the ongoing culture of the sons of God pressing forward into the new heavens and new earth.

28 Rom 10:17.
Rom 5:1-2

29 Joh 1:14. 2Co 3:18

30 Mat 4:4

OVERVIEW
Lessons in first love
David Hall

Meeting in sanctification

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by the early church was to continue in first love. 'First love' is a term that Jesus used to address the Ephesian church. He also admonished every Christian to hear the same message.¹ The sobering thought for every disciple in every church today is that Jesus said, 'I have this *against you*, that *you have left your first love*'.² He was strongly indicating that every person needs to recover and grow to maturity in first love.

Jesus continued to speak to the churches, saying, 'Remember therefore *from where* [all of] you have fallen; repent and *do the first works*'.³ He was indicating that we have fallen, or departed, from a place, or a context. Jesus called this context 'first love'.⁴

When Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians, he called this context of first love '*heavenly places*'.⁵ He further explained that, when sons of God abide together in

1 Rev 2:7

2 Rev 2:4

3 Rev 2:5

4 Rev 2:4

5 Eph 2:5-6

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Christ, they are able to do the good works of sonship that God named for them.⁶ Heavenly places is the context where we have *fellowship* with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and with other sons of God.

We are able to observe the highpoint of our fellowship when we gather together to the communion table. There we are able to eat Christ's flesh and drink His blood, receive eternal life, and rejoice in the promise of the resurrection. Jesus said, 'He who eats my flesh and drinks My blood *abides in Me and I in him*'.⁷ This is the context of first love in which we are to live.

To understand how this works, we will need to examine what it means to gather together in first love. We will need to look at how we participate together as a congregation of believers at the communion table. It is also important to look at how we present ourselves for fellowship in our families, and how we minister the life of God as members of the body of Christ.

The elements of first love are the essential foundations for Christian living. If these capacities are active in a spiritual person, they are able to judge all things, yet they are judged by no-one.⁸

Sanctification

When we perceive another person's identity, we are appreciating their spirit, as well as the natural abilities they were born with. Every person is born with identity and ability; this is their *natural man*. When a person responds to the word proclaimed to them, their identity begins to be regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit.⁹ They are beginning to become *spiritual*. Their spirit is reborn by the word of the Father as they receive their name as a son of God, and the Spirit of the Son as their life. Then, through baptism, they are joined to the fellowship of Christ's offering. Having been born from above, a person receives the authority to express their name as a son of God. Jesus referred to this authority as a 'mina'.¹⁰ Spiritual capacities are also added to them so that they can accomplish the works that God has prepared for them. Jesus referred to these as 'talents'.¹¹

6 Eph 2:10. 11 Mat 25:14-30
Psa 139:16

7 Joh 6:54-56

8 1Co 2:15

9 Tit 3:5

10 Luk 19:11-27

Calling and election

It is important we understand that a person's name, mina and talents are given to them by God according to their calling. The word 'predestination' describes God's purpose for each of us – that we should be His son. When God reveals His purpose to us, we are able to see our calling.¹²

God's calling for each person is what He has sovereignly chosen, or elected, them to be and to do as His son. His call is revealing to them the nature of the spiritual person He intends them to be. The calling of God is not dependent upon the natural capacities associated with a person's identity. Paul emphasised that the elements of natural competence that man puts his trust in are not part of God's election, or choosing. God has chosen the foolish and weak things to put to shame the wise and mighty.¹³ He did this so that we would rejoice in His life alone, and not in the strength of our flesh.

When our name is called by the word of God, we understand the confidence of our name and the works of obedience God has chosen for us to perform. This is how we make our call and election sure and participate in the fulfilment of God's will.¹⁴ The apostle Paul explained that the will of God for us is our sanctification.¹⁵ This simply means being the son of God He created us to be. We could say that a person's sanctification is the expression of their calling. Each of us needs to continue to grow in the understanding of our sanctification in practical terms. We need to be thoughtfully presenting ourselves in the authority of our name, by faith, for fellowship in the body of Christ, multiplying the life of God through offering.

12 1Co 1:27

13 1Co 1:27

14 2Pe 1:10

15 1Th 4:3

Understanding your mina

We observe a person's sanctification when they express their name as a son of God. Each of us was born as a son of man, and given a name by our parents. However, this is not our name as a son of God. Before the creation of the heavens and earth, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit discussed and named every person. This name defined who they should be and the works they should do. This was all recorded in the book of life. God thought so carefully about each name that the psalmist recorded that His thoughts for each person were 'more in number than the sand'.¹

A person receives their name by the grace of the Father. This takes place when they are born from above of an incorruptible seed, becoming sons of the Father. All of this happens through faith in the living and enduring word of God.² When their name is given to them, it becomes their personal possession. This means they now own their own identity and, importantly, have the authority, or mandate, to express their sonship. This authority is not their name, but it is the mandate to

1 Psa 139:17-18

2 1Pe 1:23

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do the works of their sonship. Jesus made a distinction between this authority, or 'mina', and our names written in heaven. He said to His disciples, 'Behold, I give you the *authority* to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your *names are written in heaven*.'³

We understand from the parables that the authority, that is the mina, is given to us to multiply. Jesus taught that 'a certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, "Do business till I come".'⁴ Note that each of the servants received an equal amount of authority as a single mina, through which to express their sonship. In this, we can see that God loves and honours each son of God equally. The reward for multiplying the mina was described in the parable as authority over cities.⁵

It is also sobering to think that the authority to express your identity can be taken away from you in judgement.⁶ Because we are eternal beings, it would be a great sadness to pass into eternity possessing our identity, but having no capacity to express our name. We must remember that we begin to exercise the authority of our name when we continually present ourselves for fellowship. In fellowship, we can prove the will of God by offering and grow in the understanding of our sanctification and works.⁷

Multiplying your mina

Faith is the capacity to exercise the authority of one's name and thus multiply the mina. As Paul explained, 'Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.'⁸ A person pleases God by being the person who He named them to be. As we have already noted, they have their reward in the new heavens and earth.

When a person receives their name from the Father, they also receive a 'measure of faith' which enables them to exercise the authority of their name.⁹ We see someone's faith when they present themselves to do the works associated with their name. Each time they receive the word and obey it, faith continues to come

3 Luk 10:19-20 9 Rom 12:3

4 Luk 19:12-13

5 Luk 19:17

6 Luk 19:24-27

7 Rom 12:1

8 Heb 11:6

to them from 'faith to faith'.¹⁰ As the apostle James testified, 'I will show you my faith by my works.'¹¹ These works are called 'the obedience of faith'.¹²

When we do the works of our sonship in the obedience of faith, we are showing forth 'the righteousness of faith'.¹³ This begins with a confession of faith. Indeed, the first work of the righteousness of faith is to *speak*. Looking for fellowship, a person will speak in the authority of their name, and not look for an alternative word to empower their work or to give them a sense of worth or validity.¹⁴ They can speak in the righteousness of faith because the word preached to them is now in them; it is in their mouth and in their heart.¹⁵ With this faith, a son of God presents himself, in the authority of their name, for fellowship with their brethren.

A person receives faith by hearing the word of God.¹⁶ Faith is given to them so they can stand in the authority of their name to meet and speak in fellowship with their brethren in Christ. This is the context in which they speak in a spirit of faith.¹⁷ They will not be relating with others in order to gain affirmation of the image they have of themselves. Rather, they will entrust themselves to the Father, and be able to trust and openly converse with their brothers and sisters in Christ. Others can bear witness to their faith because they have presented themselves for fellowship according to their sanctification. This is a fellowship of offering from which they are able to minister the grace of God to others. The ability to minister this grace is through the giftedness of the talents.

10 Rom 1:17.
Rom 10:17

11 Jas 2:18

12 Rom 1:5.
Rom 16:26

13 Rom 10:6

14 Rom 10:6

15 Rom 10:8

16 Rom 10:8

17 2Co 4:13.
Psa 116:13-19

Understanding talents

Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven ‘is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey.’¹

Talents are gifts of grace that come from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and are given by Christ. The talents refer to the four dimensions of God’s grace that come from Christ’s hand. These four dimensions of grace are the word, life, Spirit and love of God. Every son of God receives this grace through the ministry of messengers who are in Christ’s hand as He walks among His lampstand churches.²

Christ distributes talents to a person according to their abilities.³ These abilities are a feature of a person’s identity, which continues to be regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit. As children grow up, these abilities begin to be seen, and will

1 Mat 25:14-15

2 Rev 1:12-18

3 Eph 4:7-12

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develop through training, and application to discipline. However, abilities are not talents. It is true that Christ gives us talents according to abilities. But not everyone who has abilities receives multiple talents. Talents belong to a person's calling; and calling and name meet in offering. Failure to recognise the difference between abilities and talents has been a source of confusion in the church. This confusion has given rise to presumption and corruption within Christian congregations.

A person receives the gift of talents from Christ after they have been born of God, and have come into the house of the Son through baptism. That is, talents are given to slaves of righteousness. Their slavehood to Christ results in their sanctification as a son of God.⁴ As a believer participates in the offering of Christ as a member of His body, they are also multiplying the grace of life as a son of God. Just like the servants in the parable, everyone is expected to invest their talent and to multiply a return through offering.⁵ Their eternal reward, or glory, in the new heavens and earth, depends upon the extent to which the talents they received in this age are multiplied.

Mina and talent

A person exercises their talent as a son of God according to the authority of the mina. In this regard, we note the teaching of Paul, who explained that faith grants a person access into the grace of God in which a believer stands and exults in the hope of the glory of God.⁶ This is the hope of receiving their full inheritance as a son of God.

We learn from Paul that the gifts and the calling of God are given without repentance.⁷ However, this does not mean that, once a person has received a gift from Christ, their salvation or sonship is assured. Jesus was making this point when He said to His disciples, 'Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness!"'⁸

Evidently, the gift of Christ, or talent, can be misused or misdirected in order for a person to gain validation for a profile that they have of themselves. For example, they may seek a position of authority or ministry power over others, and use their gift to justify their self-proclaimed image. This is in conflict with their calling,

4 Rom 6:19

5 Mat 25:29

6 Rom 5:1-2

7 Rom 11:29

8 Mat 7:22-23

and means that their ministry endeavours are not an expression of their sanctified sonship. Christ did not know these ones, because the exercise of their talent was not according to the sanctification of their name, by faith. Through sanctification, a person and their gift should be the same thing. The person should be the gift.

Finally, sober judgement, motivated by the realities of faith, integrates abilities with the talent or grace that God gives. The principle of sober judgement is contained in the words of Paul. 'I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound [or sober] judgement, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.'⁹

A person who has received a measure of faith demonstrates that they are living by faith when they present themselves for fellowship, according to their sanctification. This is a person who views themselves and others with sober judgement. They do not think more or less highly of themselves than they ought. Rather, by the Spirit, they have cast down the imaginations and high thoughts that they have of themselves.

Instead of pursuing an alternative image of themselves or their ministry, they bring every thought regarding who they are and how they function into captivity to the obedience of Christ.¹⁰ 'Captivity to the obedience of Christ' describes our slavehood in the house of the Son. This slavehood results in our sanctification as sons of God.

We can consider sober judgement as 'rightly discerning the body of Christ' and our participation within His body.¹¹ When we do not discern the body of Christ from the basis of sanctification, we become weak and sick, and may even die before our time.¹²

It is wonderful to consider that the Lord has given to each of us everything that pertains to life and godliness.¹³ This means that He has birthed us as a son of God and gives to us faith and grace, which are necessary for fulfilling the works of sonship that He predestined for us. This is cause for thanksgiving and great confidence. Our testimony can be the expression of a son of God who is exulting in the attainment of their sonship through every season of life. This is because we are making our calling and election sure, and because first love is our context for life.

9 Rom 12:3

10 2Co 10:4-5

11 Rom 12:4-8

12 1Co 11:27-32

13 2Pe 1:3

Overview - Study Questions

- God's calling for each person is what He has sovereignly chosen, or elected, them to be and do as His son. The will of God is our sanctification; and a person's sanctification is the expression of their calling. We make our call and election sure when we thoughtfully present ourselves in the authority of our name, by faith, for fellowship in the body of Christ, to multiply the life of God through offering. Explain how you have practically experienced this process in action.
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- A person receives their name by the grace of the Father when they are born from above of incorruptible seed through the living and enduring word of God. When their name is given to them, it becomes theirs. They now have possession, or ownership, of their identity and, importantly, the authority, or mandate, to express their sonship. The authority is not their name, but it is the mandate to do the works of their sonship. Jesus referred to this authority in the parable as a 'mina'. We begin to exercise the authority of our name (mina) when we present ourselves for fellowship, continually. In this context, we make offering, can prove the will of God concerning our work, and can learn our sanctification. Can you explain in your own words and testimony how this mode of fellowship works to perform the will of God, our sanctification?
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- A talent is a spiritual capacity given to us so that we can accomplish the works that God has prepared for us. It can be misused or misdirected in order for a person to gain validation or approval for an image, or profile, that they have of themselves. The result means that their actions are in conflict with or in contradiction to their calling. Christ did not know these ones, because the exercise of their talent was not according to the sanctification of their name, by faith. Can you describe a scenario in a church setting where this kind of confusion can arise?
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NAME

The lesson of Cain

Lachlan Perrin

You have a name

God has named every person

King David marvelled when he considered Yahweh's thoughts towards him. They were greater in number than the sands of the earth.¹ In fact, before the world was created, God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit recorded Their innumerable thoughts about every person as a 'name' in the book of life.² Of course, this name is not the title given to a baby by his or her earthly parents. Rather, Yahweh's name for each person defines His complete will for their life. The Lord calls every person by their unique name, and invites them to embrace His purpose for their life by becoming a son of God.³ He does this through the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The beginning point for fulfilling God's will is to understand and accept the predestined name that He has for us.

1 Psa 139:17-18

2 Rev 13:8.
Psa 139:16

3 Isa 40:26. Isa 45:4.
Joh 1:12

4 1Pe 1:12

LESSONS IN FIRST LOVE

The Bible uses the term ‘sanctification’ to describe a Christian who fulfils God’s will for their life, according to their name.⁵ A Christian expresses their sanctification by the obedience of their faith, their offering and their love for the body of Christ. The outcome for those who live in sanctification is eternal life.⁶

The scriptural story of Cain and Abel highlights two contrasting responses to the call of the Lord. One brother, Abel, accepted his name and sanctified his life through obedience to the word of God. Cain, on the other hand, rejected his name, departed from fellowship with God, and lived according to the desires of his flesh. The lessons we learn from the story of Cain and Abel apply to every person. We can think of Cain and Abel as two young adults negotiating their family traditions and culture, deciding whether they will honour God’s fatherhood toward them, and choosing whether or not to accept the name that He has for them.

The ‘other’ law

While Adam and Eve fellowshiped with God in the garden of Eden, His word gave light to their eyes, enabling them to know and walk in the good works that He had prepared for them.⁷ The apostle John wrote that God is light and in [fellowship with] Him there is no darkness at all.⁸ When a person walks in the light of fellowship, they can know all things in God, and God in all things. This is what it means to be ‘in the Spirit’.

When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were seeking an alternative source of life to the word of God. They wanted to be like God, judging good and evil, and defining their own destiny. But the stolen knowledge became a contrary law within them, only convincing them that the selfish desires of their flesh were ‘good’. This fleshly motivation disconnected them from God, who is Spirit, and corrupted their capacity to see themselves, one another and the world around them according to the light of God’s word. We read in the book of Genesis that, after Adam and Eve were sent out from the garden of Eden, ‘Eve conceived and gave birth to Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord”.’⁹ Soon after, she gave birth to his brother Abel.¹⁰ As a result of the Fall, Cain and Abel were born with the ‘other’ law at work in their hearts, motivating them to pursue the desires of their flesh. This is true for every person born since the Fall.

5 1Th 4:3

6 Rom 6:22

7 Eph 2:10

8 1Jn 1:5

9 Gen 4:1

10 Gen 4:2

Meeting the Lord

We read in the book of Genesis that Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain, like his father Adam, was a tiller of the ground.¹¹ It came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord.¹² Abel, on his part, also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions.¹³ Offering is the means by which a person meets God, proves His will, and receives instruction concerning their predestined name.¹⁴ The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that each man's work is revealed by offering.¹⁵ When we make offering, we invite the Lord to speak to us. His word 'disciples' us so that we can live according to His will.

The Lord accepted Abel's offering because it demonstrated his faith in the name that God had given him.¹⁶ When the Lord showed no regard for Cain's offering, he became angry and his countenance fell.¹⁷ Cain's offering was the fruit of the works that he had chosen for himself. Being a tiller of the ground was a projection for Cain, because this was Adam's mandate, not his. A projection is a self-righteous image that we hold of ourselves. It is not who the Lord has created us to be.

As the firstborn, Cain's work should have been priesthood.¹⁸ Cain defaulted to family tradition by pursuing his father's mandate to rule over creation.¹⁹ He became angry because he wanted to serve his self-definition, not serve God. He was demanding that God accept an offering from the basis of his other law, and accept the image that he was projecting. When Cain's countenance, or 'face', fell, it highlighted that his capacity to meet and be met by others was impeded because of the false image he held of himself.

Nevertheless, the Lord continued to seek relationship with Cain by speaking His word to him. Yahweh said, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, shall you not be accepted?'²⁰ This should have brought great relief to Cain. The Lord was reassuring him that if he received His word and brought offering according to his name, then he would be accepted by God. The Lord further helped Cain by drawing attention to the presence of another law at work in his body. God said, 'If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.'²¹ The other law operating within Cain's heart would become a doorway for sin if he failed in relation to sanctification.

11 Gen 4:2	17 Gen 4:5
12 Gen 4:3	18 Num 3:12
13 Gen 4:4	19 Gen 1:28-30. Gen 2:15
14 Rom 12:1. Mal 3:10	20 Gen 4:6-7
15 1Co 3:13	21 Gen 4:7
16 Heb 11:4	

Offering, fellowship and first love

After God admonished Cain to make acceptable offering, Cain sought fellowship with his brother. Abel had a prophetic gift and could have helped Cain to understand God's word, but Cain could not receive his younger brother. Cain viewed Abel as a resource that could help him to make God accept his carnality. In other words, he had no genuine regard for Abel's prophetic counsel. He was only prepared to receive Abel, if Abel supported his projection. 'When they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.'²² Cain refused to let go of his self-definition, and his other law caused him to 'kill the messenger'.²³

Following Abel's murder, the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' And Cain said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?'²⁴ Of course, God knew about Abel's death. Even after Cain committed the first murder in history, the Lord was granting him an opportunity to make a penitent and God-fearing response. Sadly, Cain's reply revealed his complete lack of first love. He could not comprehend that caring for Abel, let alone regarding Abel's life, could be more important than the false name that he desired to project.

The Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground. Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth.'²⁵ It was only then that Cain cried out to the Lord, 'My punishment is too great to bear!'²⁶ Astonishingly, Cain's outcry was not because of his disconnect from godly predestination, nor for the loss of Abel's life. Rather, Cain was dismayed because God's judgement would hinder his capacity to fulfil the false projection that he had idolised.

Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.²⁷ Ultimately, Cain's rejection of his name, and his departure from God's presence, impacted upon three contexts of relationship. First, he rebelled against God's fatherhood toward him. Second, he ceased to participate in the congregation of the Lord. And, third, he became estranged from his biological family.

22 Gen 4:8

23 Mat 22:2-6

24 Gen 4:9

25 Gen 4:10-12

26 Gen 4:13

27 Gen 4:14-16

The Father of spirits

The fatherhood of God

The epistle of Jude confirms that ‘the way of Cain’ leads to spiritual blindness and eternal destruction.¹ Cain’s plight began when he rejected the name and works that God had predestined for him. When Cain departed from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, he forsook the fatherhood of God, and transgressed the boundaries of his predestination. The Bible instructs believers not to ‘move the ancient boundary or go into the fields of the fatherless’.²

In the world today, cultural values, including the shape of the family unit, marriage and parenting, are rapidly shifting. Today’s generation of young people is progressively being pressured by the spirit of the world to move away from the commonly accepted ‘boundaries’ of previous generations. It is sobering to read the words of Paul to Timothy, ‘Realise this, in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, *disobedient to parents*.’³ The word translated ‘parents’ in this verse simply means

1 Jud 1:10-11

2 Pro 23:10

3 2Ti 3:1-2

'cause for coming into being'. God is the origin of all life and the source of every person's destiny. We learn from Cain's example just how imperative it is for young believers to understand and accept the fatherhood of God.

The Father of spirits

The story of Cain and Abel reveals God's heart to meet every person, irrespective of family. He wants to relate to every person as a Father does a son. Unlike Adam, who had one Father, Cain had both an earthly father and a heavenly Father. Cain needed to establish a personal relationship with God by offering. This is true for children from covenant households, carnal households and unbelieving households. We recall the words in Hebrews, 'We had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?'⁴ Regardless of upbringing, a believer can know the Lord and verify their predestined name by the process of offering.

Cain's offering was an action of religious ritual. It represented his default to family tradition. He was not offering to prove God's will; he was offering so that God would accept and bless his fleshly efforts. In this way, Cain was like many religious people today. He liked the idea of being accepted by God, but was unwilling to surrender his right to be self-defining. We read in the book of Hebrews, 'By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous'.⁵ Abel's sacrifice revealed his sincere desire to know the Lord and to fulfil His will, whereas Cain's sacrifice was carnal and without faith. He thought that he could take hold of God's law concerning offering while, at the same time, live by his own self-centered motivations. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he said, 'When the commandment came, sin revived and I died.'⁶

Carnal offering

Cain would have considered himself very successful when he offered the fruit of the ground. He had overcome the ground, which was cursed because of Adam, by bringing forth an abundant harvest.⁷ We can imagine his reaction when God showed no regard for his offering. The Hebrew word that is translated 'regard' means 'gaze at'. God did not so much as look at Cain's offering. Consequently, Cain took offence and became angry because God's refusal to accept his offering belittled the toil that it took to produce it, and the projection that it represented.

4 Heb 12:9 7 Gen 3:17

5 Heb 11:4

6 Rom 7:9-10.
Gen 4:3

The Lord showed no interest in Cain's offering because it was not an expression of his name and predestination. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus highlighted that this scenario will be common for carnal Christians. He warned that many people will presume to call Him Lord, but refuse to do the will of the Father.⁸ They will speak about all the things they have done in the name of Jesus, but the Lord will have no regard for their offering and, ultimately, will say to them, 'I never knew you.'⁹

Deeds of the devil

When Cain rejected God's fatherhood, he rejected his own name. The word of God had the capacity to deal with Cain's 'other' law and to regenerate his fallen identity. God the Father disciplines every son whom He receives for the purpose of maturing godly identity.¹⁰ Yahweh admonished Cain, saying, 'If you do not do well, sin crouches at the door; and its desire is for you, and you [must] rule over it.'¹¹ When Cain refused to be disciplined by this word, his other law led him into captivity to sin. The apostle John wrote about believers who receive and obey the word of God, saying, 'We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.'¹² John was saying that if we are not living by faith in the word, we are worldly and under the power of the evil one.

With this in mind, John specifically nominated Cain as a man who was 'of the evil one'.¹³ He identified Cain's carnal actions and deeds as being of the devil. John wrote to young adults, commending them for 'overcoming the evil one'. He said, 'I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one'.¹⁴ Cain chose to disobey the word of God and, in turn, he was overcome by the evil one. In his letter, James emphasised the imperative for believers to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. A disciple must 'receive the word implanted because it is able to save their soul'.¹⁵

The fatherhood of Satan

If a person disobeys the voice of the Lord and, instead, chooses to continue in their sin, the Scripture calls this 'wickedness'. Cain's sin became 'exceedingly sinful', or wicked, because he rejected God's command to accept his name and to 'do well'.¹⁶ As a result, he became caught in a trespass and needed his brother's help to rescue him from wickedness.¹⁷

8	Mat 7:21	12	1Jn 5:19	16	Rom 7:9,13
9	Mat 7:23	13	1Jn 3:12	17	Gal 6:1
10	Heb 12:6	14	1Jn 2:13-14		
11	Gen 4:7	15	Jas 1:21		

LESSONS IN FIRST LOVE

Cain's anger resulted in Abel's murder. And, 'just as [Cain] did not see fit to acknowledge God [as His Father] any longer', his mind became filled with 'all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, *murder*, strife, deceit, malice'.¹⁸ Jesus described these characteristics as 'the desires of the devil', who was 'a murderer from the beginning'.¹⁹ Cain chose the fatherhood of the devil when he rejected the fatherhood of God. Initially, Cain went to only speak to his brother. This should have been a fellowship through which the word of God concerning Cain was illuminated by Abel's prophetic gift. If Cain had received his brother's counsel, he could have been recovered to the sanctification of his God-given name.

Cain and Abel

Cain's interaction with Abel demonstrates how implicit fellowship is to the process of offering. Our brethren in Christ inspect and order our offering when we come to the altar. Cain had watched Abel present offering that was acceptable to the Lord. Perhaps he wondered how Abel knew to prepare his offering by separating out the 'fat portions'.²⁰ During His earthly ministry, Jesus confirmed that Abel was a prophet.²¹ Abel had the capacity to illuminate and apply the word of God so that Cain could prepare an acceptable offering.

Cain's response to Abel revealed that his carnal projection was more important to him than first love. Cain resented Abel, because the light of fellowship extended by his prophetic counsel exposed Cain's sin. Cain may have been shocked when his angry outburst led to Abel's murder. His determination to pursue a projection damaged his capacity to relate with his brother. We note the potential for extreme harm and violence to relationship when we exercise the motivations and agendas of our other law.

After Abel's death, the Lord asked Cain, 'What have you done?' Cain felt justified to say, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' because his wickedness had distorted his capacity to fellowship in first love. The apostle John wrote, 'The one who practises sin is of the devil ... by this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practise righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother'.²² The Lord said to Cain 'What have you done?', because Cain had given himself over to the devil. Cain had chosen wickedness.

18 Rom 1:28-29

19 Joh 8:44

20 Gen 4:4. Lev 8.
Lev 9

21 Mat 23:34-35

22 1Jn 3:8,10

Acceptable offering

Offering breaks familiar ways

Cain was a young adult when the Lord sought to establish a personal relationship with him, apart from his parents. We recall that Jesus described the impact of the gospel upon a household as a sword that cuts each family member to their individual sanctification.¹ He also spoke about the cost of discipleship, saying, 'He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.'² This was a major crisis for Cain because he wanted to continue in his father's work as a farmer, not receive God's word concerning his own name and works.

Cain's failure in relation to his sanctification occurred because he rejected his name and God's fatherhood and, instead, defaulted to family tradition. We observe that the unavoidable commitment of a Christian disciple is to answer and prove, by offering, the calling of God upon their life, instead of perpetuating their family

1 Mat 10:34-36

2 Mat 10:37

LESSONS IN FIRST LOVE

tradition. A Christian must 'much rather be subject to the Father of spirits' while nevertheless respecting their earthly parents.³

When a person makes offering, by faith, they are demonstrating their desire to be subject to the heavenly Father. Ongoing obedience to the word of God causes faith to reside in a believer's heart. Faith motivates a son of God to continue presenting themselves to do the works of sonship that God has prepared for them. A Christian who has faith to participate in the process of offering will possess the joyful confession, 'Abba! Father!'⁴ Their spirit will bear witness in the Holy Spirit that they are a son of God, progressively obtaining the blessing of sonship.

The outcome for a Christian who is verifying their name by offering is the ongoing renewal of their mind.⁵ Confidence in who they are as a son in the house of God replaces, or renews, aspects and mechanisms of their life that are conformed to fallen cultures. In this way, the process of offering delivers a Christian from the bonds of familiar ways and family traditions that would otherwise war against their individual sanctification.

Acceptable offering

Cain genuinely thought that his offering was 'good'. But the basis of his opinion was a projected image of himself that he had created using the knowledge of good and evil. His perception of 'good' was distorted by the other law at work in his heart. The Bible confirms that 'all have turned aside and there is none who does good'.⁶ There is a big difference between a person's 'good' ideas about offering, and offering that is *acceptable*. True 'good' does not exist outside of God's will.⁷ Despite Cain believing that his offering, and the hard work that it took to produce it, were 'good', it was unacceptable because it was not the fruit of his predestined name and works.

Practically, there are many ways in which this point can apply to our lives. For example, a young adult might aspire to write songs and choruses that will bless the Lord and their local congregation. They may even spend hours grappling over lyrics, melodies and chords. However, if composing music is not an authentic expression of that person's name or if those songs have not been inspired by the Lord, they will be dead works. Or, perhaps a young adult may like the idea of becoming a Sonseeker teacher. If, according to name and God-given abilities, they

3 Heb 12:9

4 2Co 4:13.
Rom 8:15

5 Rom 12:1

6 Rom 3:12

7 Mar 10:18. Jas 1:17

Acceptable offering

cannot connect with, inspire or show patience with small children, then the fruit of their offering may prove that teaching is not a work that God has prepared for them.

Furthermore, offering has a locational reality as well. The areas of service and offering within a communion congregation of three hundred people will be different from the areas of offering required in a congregation of thirty people. These examples highlight that offering is not a religious ceremony or a mechanistic process. Acceptable offering must be motivated by sincere faith in the word of sonship, and be the outcome of a believer's genuine relationship with God. It must also reflect their faith and submission to the geographical and relational context in which God has planted them.

If the Lord does not receive our offering, we need to ask 'Why?', instead of becoming offended. This requires fellowship and spiritual illumination. If we are not led by the Holy Spirit and not humbly willing to receive wise counsel, our other law will deceive us. This is what the apostle Paul explained when he said, 'I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practise the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.'⁸ Every Christian needs the illumination of the word, shared by Christ's messengers, to equip them for their unique work of service in the household of faith.

Offering within administration

The Lord is speaking to His church today through an administration that ministers His word, grace and adjustment to every son of God. Offering and relating within church service areas connects a Christian to Christ's administration, and enables them to prove the good, acceptable and perfect will of God.⁹ A person's offering reflects the condition of their heart, their attitudes and their understanding of their identity. This is why the process of offering, and the implicit fellowship involved, can leave a person feeling exposed. Their ideas about who they are, their future goals, and their family cultures and traditions are revealed by the nature of their offering.

8 Rom 7:18-20

9 Rom 12:1

LESSONS IN FIRST LOVE

For this reason, the Bible encourages every believer to live by faith, and to resist drawing back in shame when the light of fellowship identifies fallen familiars and projections.¹⁰ The Lord ‘has no pleasure’ in the one who draws back from Him, because a person draws back when they cannot surrender control of their life or their projections. Any personal goal, familiar culture or relational obligation that causes shame, secrecy and withdrawal from fellowship, is not from God. For example, a young adult may have a particular career aspiration which becomes increasingly difficult to pursue because of their commitment to Christ. The word of sonship is progressively constraining them to the narrow way in which God has called them to walk. But, if the young person is convinced that their preferred career path is ‘good’, they will gradually drift astray from the path that God has prepared for them.

It is important to recognise that the outworking of Christ’s administration involves tangible relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. There are spiritual fathers in the faith who are committed to nurturing the divine nature of God in the heart of believers. And there are overseers, deacons and firstfruits brethren who receive and order our offering. We read in the book of Leviticus, ‘When any one brings an offering to the Lord ... he shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange [set in order] the parts ... on the altar’.¹¹ If Cain had regarded Abel’s prophetic grace and received his counsel, he would have understood how to offer acceptably.

Finally, it was the practical fellowship associated with offering that caused Cain’s offence to manifest. Carnal responses such as, ‘I want to make offering but no-one will tell me how to do it’ or ‘My offering is between me and God’ have caused many believers to go the way of Cain and to sever their connection with Christ’s administration. The evidence that a person genuinely has faith to make acceptable offering is their ease of participation in fellowship. If a believer rejects the word being proclaimed by the Lord’s messengers, they will reject their own name.

The word of God abides in you

It is critical that every young adult become a sincere student of the word of God. We recall the apostle John’s encouragement for young adults to be overcomers by their diligence in studying the word. Taking notes and meditating on the

¹⁰ Heb 10:38

¹¹ Lev 1:2-8

Acceptable offering

proceeding word of God declared at church, together with daily devotions and Bible studies, equip a believer with strength. It is the strength of wisdom and godly perspective to master over sin, and to overcome the evil one. If we are not disciplined by the word of sonship, we will be unable to fellowship in spirit and truth with the Lord and our brethren. We will also be at risk of our minds being deceived and led astray from our devotion to Christ, by the alternate agendas and cultures at work in the world.

When Cain disregarded God's word, he lost the capacity to appreciate Abel's name and grace. Cain would have been upset that his younger brother had been accepted by God, while he had not been. We can picture Cain asking Abel, 'How can I make God accept *my* offering?' When Abel sought to encourage Cain in a way that contradicted what Cain wanted to hear, his outburst of anger revealed a personal issue with his brother. As a result, Cain would never have been able to make acceptable offering while his attitude towards Abel was not *first love*.

Practically, if a young adult is offering, yet their mind is filled with comparative judgements between their offering and the offering of other young adults, they are not demonstrating sincere faith in their own name. We recall the words of Jesus, 'If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that you brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering'.¹²

If a person has a relational issue with a brother or sister in Christ and proceeds to make offering, their offering carries the defect, or 'spot', of their relational breach.¹³ Throughout the young adult years, it is common for young disciples to observe their brothers and sisters in Christ making offering, finding grace, and ministering according to their name. At times, it can appear as though others are doing 'better'. This type of comparative thinking, based in the other law, leads to dissatisfaction, competitiveness, jealousy, and even anger. These attitudes stop us from meeting in first love. They stop us from recognising and appreciating the life of God in our brethren.

Thankfully, the process of offering progressively helps us to become real about our name and calling in God. As we obey the word, we are being sanctified, restored to first love with our brethren, and able to enjoy the glorious liberty of our sonship.

¹² Mat 5:23-24

¹³ Lev 1:3

Name - Study Questions

- Describe, practically, how the Lord is calling you by name.

- Offering is the means by which a person establishes a relationship with God the Father and receives instruction concerning their predestination. What is your testimony of God the Father meeting you, as you have made offering, and renewing your mind so that you can apprehend your name?

- Part of Cain's unwillingness to accept his God-given name, occurred because of his confusion between family tradition and sanctification. With this in mind, how can a Christian 'much rather be subject to the Father of spirits', while nevertheless loving and honouring their biological parents? Why do you think this can become a crisis for young adult disciples?

- Why is fellowship with our brethren so implicit in the process of making acceptable offering? And why do you think God does not accept our offering if we cannot meet our brethren in first love?

CALLING
The lesson of Ishmael
Jonathon Wills

The story of Ishmael

‘Sarah saw that Ishmael was mocking Isaac, and said to Abraham, “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with my son”.’¹

This incident occurred at the feast celebrating Isaac’s weaning. It stands as one of the defining markers in the story of Ishmael. Flesh and Spirit were at war in Ishmael, and he had no peace. His flesh, enslaved to fear, and striking out in mockery, persecution and despising, had to be cast out. How had it come to this?

Before Ishmael was born, God had made a promise to Abram, saying, ‘I will bless you and you will be a blessing’.² Abram understood that this promise referred to the birth of a son, through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. As God blessed Abram, he and Sarai were strengthened to believe the word of the Lord.

1 Gal 4:30.
Gen 21:9-10

2 Gen 12:1-3

LESSONS IN FIRST LOVE

Some years later, Christ came to Abram who, by faith, had just become the king of the ancient world. Melchizedek had shared communion with Abram before blessing him, saying that he would become the possessor of heaven and earth as a co-heir with the Son.³ Later, Christ spoke with Abram and addressed his fear. He said, 'Do not fear Abram, I am a shield to you, your very great reward.'⁴ Abram's fear related to the promises of God and the weakness of his flesh; he and Sarai could not have children because Sarai was barren. Uncertain of the way ahead, Abram said to the Lord God, 'What will You give me, since I am childless?'⁵

As Abram received the word of the Lord that addressed his fear, and turned to the Lord, the veil of fear relating to his inability to comprehend how the promises of God would come to pass was removed from his heart. As he received faith, Abram was then able to look into heavenly places and to see by revelation the great multitude of sons promised to him. As Abram believed, God credited it to him as righteousness.⁶ The covenant was then made sure with Abram as the Lord met him in the fellowship of offering.⁷

Ten years after they had left Ur of the Chaldeans, Sarai remained barren, so she went to Abram and said, 'The Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go to my Egyptian maid, Hagar; perhaps I will obtain children through her.'⁸ Sarai proposed an alternative to God's way, whereby the promises of God could be realised through a worldly custom and her good intentions. Unable to believe that Sarai would give birth to the promised son, Abram listened to Sarai and conceived a child with Hagar. But, once she was pregnant, Hagar began to despise Sarai. In response, Sarai treated Hagar harshly, and Hagar fled.⁹

The angel of the Lord said to her, 'Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?' Hagar said, 'I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.' Then the angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority. You will bear a son and will call him Ishmael, which means God hears. He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him; and he will live in defiance of his brothers.'¹⁰ Hagar returned to Abram's house and gave birth to Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old.¹¹

3 Gen 14:17-20

9 Gen 16:4-6

4 Gen 15:1

10 Gen 16:8-12

5 Gen 15:2

11 Gen 16:15-16

6 Gen 15:5-6

7 Gen 15:9,18

8 Gen 16:1-2

The story of Ishmael

A spirit of fear led Sarai to propose ‘the way of the flesh’ in fulfilling God’s promises. As a result, a spirit of slavery entered the house as the Egyptian bondwoman brought forth a son according to the flesh.

Thirteen years later, God Almighty met Abram to confirm the covenant.¹² Both Abram and Sarai received new names – Abraham and Sarah.¹³ God Almighty said to Abraham, ‘You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. The sign of My covenant will be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.’¹⁴

Then God said to Abraham, ‘I will bless Sarah, and I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will be a mother of nations.’ Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, ‘Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’ And Abraham said to God, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before You!’ But God said, ‘No! Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with Isaac.’¹⁵

Abraham’s crisis was his inability to believe that the promised son would be born to Sarah, because of her age and barrenness. This prompted him to ask that Ishmael might live before the Lord. Abraham was asking the Lord to accommodate and bless the spirit of fear and the carnal way that had been introduced into their house. God, however, was promising that, as husband and wife, they would be co-heirs of the grace of life in their marriage and family.

Having believed and having turned to the Lord, Abraham took Ishmael and every male in his household, and circumcised them. Abraham was ninety-nine when he was circumcised and Ishmael was thirteen.¹⁶ Because the sign of the covenant was now in Abraham’s flesh, the grace of life was made available to Abraham and Sarah, bringing the capacity for resurrection life. Their physical bodies were quickened, even in their old age, so that the promised seed could be brought forth.¹⁷

Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham at the Lord’s appointed time. Abraham called him Isaac.¹⁸ Isaac was born in a covenant house as a son of God. This was in contrast to Ishmael, who was born in a carnal house as the son of a bondwoman.

12 Gen 17:1

18 Gen 21:1-3

13 Gen 17:4-5,15-16

14 Gen 17:9-14

15 Gen 17:15-19

16 Gen 17:23-27

17 Rom 4:16-21

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Abraham circumcised Isaac when he was eight days old. Isaac grew, and Abraham gave a great feast on the day that he was weaned. At the feast, Sarah saw Ishmael, now seventeen, mocking Isaac, and said to Abraham, 'Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with my son.'¹⁹

Hagar mothered a despising spirit in her son Ishmael. The spirit of fear that brought about Ishmael's birth was the same spirit by which Ishmael lived. He was jealous of Isaac, and followed after his own ungodly lusts, mocking the child of promise. Ishmael was devoid of the Spirit, worldly-minded, and sowed division within the house.²⁰ There was no reasoning with him, nor finding peace with him.²¹ The spirit that is enslaved to fear wars and kicks hard against the Spirit.²² His mocking spirit had to be cast out.

The matter distressed Abraham greatly. But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of Ishmael and Hagar; listen to whatever Sarah tells you, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named [called].' So Abraham sent Ishmael and his mother Hagar away.²³

God was with Ishmael. He became an archer and lived in the wilderness of Paran. Hagar took a wife for him from Egypt, and Ishmael had twelve sons and became a great nation.²⁴ But God's covenant was established through Isaac and not Ishmael.²⁵ This shows us that God's covenant is with the Spirit and not the flesh; with the freewoman and not the bondwoman.²⁶ While God blessed Ishmael and made him a great nation, Ishmael did not receive the blessing of the covenant and the adoption.

19 Gen 21:8-10

20 Jud 1:18-19

21 Gen 16:12

22 Gal 5:17

23 Gen 21:11-14

24 Gen 21:20-21.

Gen 17:20

25 Gen 17:21

26 Gal 4:21-31

Two ways of responding to calling

Introduction

There are two ways of responding to our calling - by the Spirit or by the flesh. When we respond to calling by the Spirit, we live as spiritual sons of God. When we respond to calling by the flesh, we live as carnal sons. The alternative to being who God has called us to be is to try to be whatever we want to be.

In the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul highlighted the difference between living by the Spirit and living by the flesh. To illustrate his point, Paul contrasted the nature of Ishmael's birth with that of Isaac. Ishmael represents the flesh and that which is born enslaved by the bondwoman, while Isaac represents the Spirit and that which is born of the freewoman.¹

¹ Gal 4:21-31

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To bring practical implication, we'll highlight five key principles to do with how we make our calling sure, and five lessons that we learn from the life of Ishmael. The five key principles for living according to the Spirit and making our calling as a son of God sure are:

1. Understanding calling and sanctification
2. Speaking from a spirit of faith (the spirit of adoption)
3. Walking in the faith and fellowship of our baptism (the circumcision of Christ)
4. Journeying to make offering (according to sanctification)
5. Meeting the Lord in the secret place (the foundation of prayer).

Ishmael did not understand calling and sanctification

It is evident that Ishmael did not understand calling and sanctification. At seventeen years of age, he mocked his three year-old brother at a feast to celebrate a season of growth in Isaac's life.² Because Ishmael was not living in his own sanctification, he could not honour Isaac's sanctification. Ishmael's mocking was a persecution of the covenant seed in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Ishmael's mocking showed that he had set himself against the Spirit.

Ishmael did not consider himself or others with sober judgement.³ Instead of Ishmael allowing the Holy Spirit to give him the capacity to love, to honour and to appreciate others, his self-centeredness led him to comparison, competition, jealousy, conflict and feelings of alienation. With no capacity to love, and no way to reconcile his 'feelings', Ishmael kicked out against the Spirit. When we live according to the flesh, bound by its self-centeredness, we hurt others. The outcome is that fellowship and offering become difficult. The godly alternative is to receive a love of the truth and be saved.⁴

Ishmael did not speak from a spirit of faith

It is evident, by Ishmael's mocking of Isaac, that he did not speak from a spirit of faith. His speech demonstrated that he had given himself over to the emotions of the flesh, and that he was hostile to the things of the Spirit.

2 Gen 21:9. Gal 4:29

3 Rom 12:3

4 2Th 2:10

Prior to Ishmael's birth, his mother, Hagar, had left Abraham's house because she was being mistreated by Sarah. However, the angel of the Lord found Hagar and instructed her to return to Abraham's house and to submit to Sarah's authority.⁵ The Lord gave her a promise, saying, 'God has heard you'.⁶ This promise was to be passed to Ishmael, whose name means 'God hears'. Hagar was to return to Abraham's house and to submit to Sarah's motherhood for the sake of Ishmael.

Instead of submission and sanctification, Hagar mothered the cultures of Egypt in Ishmael. These are cultures that despise the people of God. Instead of raising him as a young man whom 'God heard', she raised him as the wild donkey whose hand was against others.⁷ He despised the culture of godliness and mocked the covenant, the promises, and the one born of the Spirit.⁸ Ishmael's speech showed that he was in bondage to fear.

Ishmael did not walk in the faith of his circumcision (the fellowship of baptism)

Ishmael, who was circumcised at the age of thirteen, on the same day as Abraham, did not demonstrate faith toward his circumcision. Consequently, there was no 'putting off of the flesh' evidenced in his life. Paul likened Ishmael's birth and Hagar's motherhood to Mt Sinai, where the nation of Israel said, 'All You have said, we will do.'⁹ But they did not keep the law, and nor *could* they keep it. Their response was carnal. In fact, they were hostile to what God had said, because their minds were set on the things of the flesh.¹⁰

Circumcision speaks to us of our baptism. Wherever there is no faith to walk in our baptism, the other law rules our life. As a result, we are taken captive by another word.¹¹ This robs us of the simplicity that comes from pure devotion to Christ and, instead, we are plagued by complexities, fears and insecurities.

Ishmael did not journey to make offering

Ishmael did not deal with the propensities of his flesh, and therefore found no place for repentance, nor any faith for offering. Unlike his father, Abraham, Ishmael was unwilling to submit to the sufferings in the house of faith that typify a fellowship in offering. Abraham spoke faith to Isaac when he said, 'God will provide for Himself a lamb for the offering'.¹² As we join the fellowship of faith according to

5 Gen 16:8-9

6 Gen 16:11

7 Gen 16:12

8 Gal 4:29

9 Exo 19:7-8.

Exo 24:3.

Gal 4:24-25

10 Rom 8:7

11 Col 2:8

12 Gen 22:8

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our sanctification, we too receive the faith of Abraham and Isaac, knowing that God *has* provided *for us* a lamb – Jesus Christ. Our faith for fellowship joins us to the offering of Jesus Christ and to the fellowship of His sufferings.

Even though God had commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac was not a victim. Ishmael and Hagar, however, saw themselves as victims. A person who is not addressing the issue of the other law will perceive themselves as a victim when their chosen way of living is examined by the Lord. Adjustment will only reinforce their perception, leading them to justify their position, not as a son, but as a victim.

Having received the command from God, Abraham proceeded in faith obedience, calling Isaac to journey with him. Isaac was ‘of the same faith as Abraham’, enabling him to proceed in faith obedience. Faith obedience and simplicity was the nature of their fellowship as the two of them walked on and worshipped together.¹³ Our worship is to offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice according to our sanctification.¹⁴

Ishmael did not meet the Lord in the secret place

Ishmael’s name means ‘God hears’. This was a promise from God. Ishmael could have brought everything to God in prayer; however, it is clear that Ishmael was not a young man of prayer.¹⁵ Consequently, Ishmael could not love his brother because, among other things, he did not seek the Lord in the secret place.

13 Gen 22:5,8

14 Rom 12:1-2.
1Th 4:3

15 Php 4:6-7

Making your calling sure

In our last article, we highlighted five key principles for living according to the Spirit and making our calling as a son of God sure. We looked at the life of Ishmael in relation to these principles, and noted that he missed them all because he walked according to the flesh.

In this article, we will highlight the same five key principles, and this time look at how they apply to the life of a son of God.

Understanding calling and sanctification

There is no higher calling in life than the call to be a son of God. John highlighted this when he said, 'See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons of God; and *such* we are.'¹

¹ 1Jn 3:1

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While we are *all* called to be sons of God, *only you* can be the son that God predestined *you* to be. There is a word of truth that belongs to each one. That word is your sanctification. Without sanctification, we cannot be the son whom God predestined us to be. The only alternative is to make an ‘image’ for ourselves, and to project to others who we want to be or who we think we are. Any such projection is not according to God’s word of truth for us. As such, we live a lie that is fathered by the devil.²

Speaking from a spirit of faith – the spirit of adoption

The spirit of adoption is also described by Paul as ‘a spirit of faith’. It is by faith that sons of God present themselves for fellowship with their brethren.³ As the word of God comes to us, it grants us faith to stand as a son according to the will of God. When we live in this way, holding fast to the word of truth, we walk in a manner that is worthy of our calling.⁴ Full of faith and sure in our sanctification, we are able to recognise that all things are working together for our good.⁵ Unlike Ishmael, we do not have to react, lose heart or ‘kick’ when life becomes difficult or appears to be unfair.

The term ‘diligence’ is used in several places to describe how a believer makes their call and election sure.⁶ Diligence is better defined as ‘a speedy, eager, and keen response’ to the word, motivating us forward and demonstrating the spirit of adoption in a believer.

Jude warned us that in the last days many Christians will not speak from a spirit of faith but, rather, from a spirit of fear. Even though they profess to pursue God’s will, their minds are set on worldly things and ungodly lusts. With this carnal mindset, they cause divisions as they speak from a spirit of fear; even mocking the word of present truth that establishes sanctification. Those who speak this way have set themselves against the things of the Spirit.⁷ Their mocking spirit is always finding fault with others or calling into question the motivation of the brethren. They are antagonistic towards those ministering the word, and towards those who have embraced their calling and are living in the word of their sanctification.

2 Joh 8:44 6 2Pe 1:10
3 Rom 8:15. 7 Jud 1:18-21
2Co 4:13
4 Eph 4:1. Php 2:16.
3Jn 1:3-4
5 Rom 8:28

Walking in the faith and fellowship of baptism (the circumcision of Christ)

While Ishmael did not demonstrate faith toward his circumcision, Isaac did. Isaac was circumcised on the eighth day, as a demonstration of the faith of his parents.⁸ His journey of offering with Abraham up the mountain was where he demonstrated his faith towards that circumcision.⁹ We exercise ourselves in the faith of our baptism when we, by the Spirit, determine to put off the deeds of the flesh each day.¹⁰ This means keeping ourselves in daily connection to the truth through prayer and fellowship. As we turn to the Lord and set our mind on the Spirit, we find the freedom to live as the son whom God has called us to be. In this fellowship of faith, we find both a cutting away of our carnality, and the answer of a good conscience.¹¹ This means that we are able to bear witness to what is true; in both ourselves and our brethren. This is instead of being stuck in the bind of always either accusing or excusing ourselves and others.¹²

When we are not living by the Spirit, and putting to death the deeds of the flesh, our mindset becomes hostile toward God. We are unable to submit to the word of God, the Spirit frustrates the efforts of our flesh, and there is jealousy and strife among us.¹³

Our predicament is the misplaced desire for the flesh to live before God. The person living according to the flesh says, 'My intentions in serving God were good. That should be good enough.' This is the carnal dilemma. The carnal Christian is powerless to walk in obedience to the word of God.¹⁴ They believe that the blessing of God can be obtained without the need for an ongoing participation in the fellowship of Christ's offering as a sanctified member of His body. Their prayer sounds a lot like, 'Oh, that my flesh might live before You, Lord!'¹⁵

God's response is, 'No!' The flesh cannot live before God, and we should stop asking God to bless our best intentions. Instead, we must cry out in repentance and faith to receive the circumcising cut that our flesh needs, so that we can be free from the other law that works in us. Thanks be to God; we have victory in the fellowship of Christ's offering!¹⁶ Life is found when, by the Spirit, we put to death the deeds of the flesh. In this fellowship, we are delivered from the desire to live by any principle other than the Spirit of life that is in Christ Jesus.¹⁷

8 Gen 21:4

9 Gen 22

10 Col 2:11-12,20

11 1Pe 3:21

12 Rom 2:15

13 Rom 8:3-9.

1Co 3:3.

Gal 5:19-21.

Col 3:5-9

14 Rom 8:5-8

15 Gen 17:18

16 Rom 7:21-25

17 Rom 8:2

Making offering according to sanctification

The call to live as a son of God is made sure by offering. A person standing in their sanctification will, by faith, present themselves in the authority of their name for fellowship in the body of Christ. Through offering, they multiply the life of God. This is how we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to God. Offering according to our sanctification proves what the will of God is.¹⁸ It is not, firstly, what we do, but *who we are*, that is pleasing to God.

As we proceed to make offering, we will know a fellowship in which the Lord has His hand on our life. By faith, we carry the wood for the altar, knowing the necessary cut to our flesh as God deals with us as His son. We may recognise this *load* as being a constraint from God. We see that God uses very practical areas of life to demonstrate how He ‘works together’ for our good. For example, He may use one of the many pressures of life to act as a constraint that impacts on how we make offering and on the journey that we walk to make that offering. In these constraints, or disciplines, we find that God is helping us with our sanctification. The offering that proves the will of God is the one offered according to sanctification. Anything else, regardless of our best intentions or sincerity, is not pleasing to God.

Even though these constraints may be difficult and painful, we will know that we are a much-loved son of God who is formed by the hand of a loving Father. Joining the fellowship of Christ’s offering is the crisis for every person who has received the call to be a son of God. The covenant of sonship is confirmed in the fellowship of offering. We should all take care as to how we partake of the communion, because it is at communion that we find our participation in the offering of Jesus Christ. If we live like Ishmael, we will be unable to discern the body of Christ or the sanctification of our brethren. Our eating and drinking at communion becomes unworthy.¹⁹

Meeting the Lord in the secret place

The secret place of prayer is where we receive His power. When we draw near to God in prayer, we find our sanctification. It’s there, in the secret place, that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all meet us and provide us with the capacity to

18 Rom 12:1-2.
1Th 4:3

19 1Co 11:27-32

express our sonship. As we remain in this fellowship, we find the freedom and capacity to live according to the Spirit every day. Jude described praying in the Holy Spirit as the building blocks for our sanctification and faith.²⁰

The fruit of this discipline in prayer is the Holy Spirit enabling us to love and to appreciate our own sanctification and the sanctification of others. We are able to live as a sanctified vessel of honour that is useful to the Master and prepared for every good work that is according to our name.²¹ In contrast, whenever the lines of personal sanctification are blurred, we will find it increasingly difficult to love and honour our brethren and the Lord.

Summary

To embrace your calling as a son of God, you need to know what it is to live according to the Spirit.²² Every son of God who has been born of the Spirit has the capacity to set their mind on the things of the Spirit.²³ When we live according to the Spirit, by setting our minds on the things from above, we will know the will of God, which is our sanctification.²⁴

20 Jud 1:20

21 2Ti 2:20-26

22 2Th 2:13-14

23 Col 3:1-4. Rom 8.
Gal 5

24 1Th 4:3

Calling - Study Questions

- An understanding and an appreciation of your individual sanctification as sons of God is critical to accepting the call of God to live as His son. Only you can be the son that God has called you to be. Consider how the word of sanctification, by which you are called a son of God, impacts upon your relationships (fellowship) and your context for offering.

- The carnal dilemma is when we call our own way, God's way. What are some of the difficulties young people face with regard to being led by the Spirit or by the flesh? What does it look like when we call our way, God's way?

- Ishmael was circumcised when he was thirteen, however he did not express any faith towards his circumcision. This meant there was no 'putting to death of the deeds of the flesh' in his life. Circumcision speaks to us of our baptism. What does it look like for us to walk in the faith of our baptism?

- At seventeen years of age, Ishmael mocked his three year-old brother at a feast to celebrate a season of growth in Isaac's life. Ishmael's mocking speech showed what was in his heart. He despised the calling of God and represented our flesh, which wars against the Spirit. Consider the difference between speaking from a spirit of faith and speaking from a spirit of fear.

ELECTION
The lesson of Esau
Luke Pomery

The account of Esau's life

God's sovereign election and predestination

If we're honest, until now, many of us haven't thought there was much to learn from the life of Esau. We know that he made some significant errors, and eventually forfeited the blessing that God wanted to give to him. Yet, for us, the account of Esau's life highlights an important truth concerning the purpose of God – that is, God's *election* for each individual is unchangeable. In His sovereignty, before we were even born, God chose the unique predestination for each person. He decided this according to His good pleasure.¹ The scriptural account of Esau's life teaches us the lesson of accepting and honouring God's election for ourselves, and His election for those around us. And, as we do this, we become 'the elect of God'.²

God had chosen a specific predestination for Esau and a specific predestination for his brother, Jacob. The Lord spoke of this in His word to their mother,

1 Php 2:13. Eph 1:9

2 Col 3:12

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Rebekah, while the boys were still in her womb. The Lord declared, ‘The older shall serve the younger.’³ Esau was to serve his younger brother, Jacob. This was the predestination that God had sovereignly chosen for Esau. And blessing would have been found by Esau if he had accepted God’s sovereign choice for him. This predestination was confirmed by Isaac when he blessed Esau concerning the things to come.⁴ Isaac said to Esau, ‘Indeed I have made him [Jacob] your master ... and you shall serve your brother.’⁵

It is important to recognise that the predestination that God had chosen for Esau was not based on any of Esau’s actions or responses throughout his life. His predestination was *sovereignly* chosen by God, before the foundation of the world. And it was declared to his mother before he himself had done anything good or evil.⁶

However, as he grew up, Esau incorrectly assumed and expected that, because of his position in the family, the inheritance of the firstborn would be given to him.⁷ He was the first born son to Isaac. From Esau’s perspective, according to family lineage, the right to the inheritance and blessing was his. He did not acknowledge that God predestined the firstborn blessing to be given to his brother, through election.⁸

Esau’s rejection of God’s calling and election

When we look at the Scriptures in more detail, the contributing factors underlying Esau’s mistakes become clearer. When Esau was born, his appearance was ‘like a hairy garment all over’, and ‘so they called his name Esau’.⁹ Esau’s name literally meant ‘hairy’. It is probable that Esau’s condition was related to a genetic defect of some kind – a physiological syndrome of excessive hair growth that continued throughout his life. We can recall that when Jacob deceived Isaac, the skin of young goats was placed on his hands and neck in order to mimic the feel of Esau’s hairy skin.¹⁰

Imagine the chronic humiliation that Esau would have felt throughout his life, having this condition. He had been ‘labelled’ according to his genetic disorder and he would have been excessively self-conscious of how he looked. People’s

3	Gen 25:23	8	Gen 25:23
4	Heb 11:20	9	Gen 25:25
5	Gen 27:37,40	10	Gen 27:16
6	Rom 9:11		
7	Gen 25:25. Gen 27:32		

reactions to his unusually hairy appearance would have undoubtedly caused Esau to become even more insecure about his weakened state.

Esau's insecurity about his physical abnormality may have been the unspoken motivation for him to 'prove himself' through his exploits in life. The Scriptures record that he was 'a man of the field', and 'a skilful hunter'.¹¹ Perhaps these well-developed pursuits were nothing more than a means to find a sense of self-validation.

There was obvious relational contention and strife within their household. Jacob had clearly secured his mother's approval and attention. Esau gained his father's approval and attention – seemingly because of Isaac's particular love of game meat.¹² This may have been a momentary fulfilment of Esau's desire for affirmation, and a brief reprieve from his weak and disadvantaged state. This constant drive to prove himself and to gain approval caused Esau to become 'weary'.¹³

Esau had become weary in life. He was unresolved regarding his physical abnormality. His struggle to gain recognition through his own pursuits was tiresome and somewhat unfruitful. According to his perspective, life was not turning out the way that he had hoped. His hope of a successful life was not being realised, and his heart had become sick.¹⁴ He was evidently depressed.

As a result of his insecurity and depression, Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of red lentil stew.¹⁵ Although we read that Esau sought food from his brother because he was weary, it is unlikely that Esau was so physically famished that he was at risk of dying. Rather, he was depressed and weary in his soul, and this depression caused him to lose sight of the importance of his natural birthright. Thus, he sold it.

Jacob took advantage of Esau when he was in a disadvantaged position. He took the natural birthright from Esau through manipulation and trickery. Not only this, but Jacob later took the blessing from Esau as well, again through manipulation and deception. This happened when Jacob colluded with his mother to deceive Isaac and steal the spiritual birthright. When Esau realised that he had been taken advantage of by his brother, he cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry.¹⁶ Esau's tears were due to the sense of loss that he was experiencing, and the injustice of the situation.¹⁷

11 Gen 25:27

17 Gen 27:38

12 Gen 25:28

13 Gen 25:29

14 Pro 13:12

15 Gen 25:30-32

16 Gen 27:34

Ancient hatred

Esau then demanded a blessing from his father.¹⁸ This demand, and the bitterness in his heart, was based on his perspective and claim that he was ‘more righteous’ than the one who had sinned against him. Esau viewed himself as the victim of Jacob’s opportunistic and deceitful behaviour. Jacob had unfairly gained an advantage over him. Esau could not understand why Jacob had been rewarded with such blessing and advancement. As an angry victim of his circumstances, Esau allowed bitterness to take root in his heart. So, ‘Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him’.¹⁹

Amazingly, Isaac did bless Esau!²⁰ And Isaac confirmed Esau’s predestined work to serve his younger brother. In truth, Esau would have found blessing and rest if he had carried out his predestined work. These were the ‘good works’, sovereignly chosen and prepared beforehand by God for Esau to fulfil.²¹

However, Esau’s bitterness meant that he was unable to abide in the blessing which had been given to him. Instead, Esau’s hatred of Jacob only increased, and he sought to kill his brother. He would have viewed the murder of Jacob as the execution of justice.²² This same root of bitterness corrupted Esau’s family lineage for thousands of years. The Scriptures describe this as an ‘ancient hatred’ against God’s covenant people.²³

Esau did not accept God’s sovereign choice concerning his life. Nor did he appreciate the call of God upon his brother. Esau despised the election of God. It was for this reason that the Lord declared, concerning Esau, ‘Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.’²⁴ Does this mean Esau was predestined to failure? Certainly not.²⁵ Esau was given the dignity of choice. Yet he failed to simply choose what God had chosen for him.

18 Gen 27:34

24 Mal 1:2-3

19 Gen 27:41

25 Rom 9:14

20 Gen 27:39-40

21 Eph 2:10

22 Gen 27:41

23 Eze 35:5

The principle of election

God's sovereign choice

Election refers to everything that God has sovereignly chosen for each person. This includes their God-given *name* and the *works* which God has planned for them to do. In scriptural terms, a person's 'name' simply signifies the truth of who God intended for them to be as a son or daughter of God. All the elements of a person's name and works have been meticulously considered by God. This intricate plan is the unique predestination that God chose for them, from before the foundation of the world.¹ God has proclaimed the name and works of every individual, and inscribed that word in the Lamb's book of life.² His word concerning their predestination is forever settled in heaven.³ This is true for every person.

God's predestination for a person is unchangeable. This is the meaning of the verse, 'For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable'.⁴ God does not regret

1 Eph 1:4

2 Rev 3:5

3 Psa 119:89

4 Rom 11:29

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His choice, and He does not doubt that what He chose is the very best for each one!⁵ The Father, Son and Holy Spirit were all involved in fashioning each person's predestination. The apostle Peter explained that this predestination is according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.⁶ We are sanctified to this predestination by the Holy Spirit. And Jesus Christ makes us sufficient for this predestination by the sprinkling of His blood.⁷ As we fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are made adequate to make our calling and election sure.⁸

The principle of election is revealed in the account of Esau and Jacob. The Scriptures clearly explain that God's word concerning their predestination was proclaimed to their mother, Rebekah, before they were born.⁹ Why did God speak about what He had elected for each of them? He did so, in order that *His sovereign choice* for them would come to pass. The apostle Paul wrote in the book of Romans, 'For the children [Esau and Jacob] not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that *the purpose of God according to election* might stand, not of works but of Him who calls, it was said to her [Rebekah], "The older shall serve the younger".'¹⁰

Choosing what God has chosen

Throughout the account of their lives, we witness that God's election was a major issue and point of contention for Esau and Jacob. Esau did not accept the sovereign choice of God for his life and, instead, tried to obtain the blessing of God according to his own definition. Even though Jacob appreciated God's choice and plan for his life, he did not trust that God would bring it to pass. Instead, Jacob tried to obtain the blessing of God by his own endeavours. Esau and Jacob needed to meet the Lord personally in order to resolve the issue of election.

We honour God by choosing what He has sovereignly chosen for us. We are strengthened in faith to gladly accept His predestination for our lives, recognising the many precious thoughts that He has for each of us.¹¹ We present ourselves to do the works of righteousness that He has prepared for us in Christ Jesus.¹² This is what it means to 'make our call and election sure'. The apostle Peter emphatically encouraged every believer to structure their Christian life upon the sure foundation of God's call and election.¹³ And he made the point that, if we do this, we will never stumble.

5 Jas 1:17

6 1Pe 1:2

7 Heb 9:14

8 2Pe 1:10

9 Gen 25:23

10 Rom 9:11-12

11 Rom 4:20.

Psa 139:17-18

12 Eph 2:10

13 2Pe 1:10

Our election is not based upon our natural capacities, our family lineage or our achievements in life. Nor is it based on our expectations and ideas of how God could promote us; or how we could 'promote' Him. Election is God's sovereign plan for every individual. And this was finalised before we were even born.¹⁴ We could ask ourselves the question, 'Why did God choose *that* for me?' Well, He just did! The more important question is, 'Am I going to accept that?' We will be blessed by God as we accept His election upon our life.

Esau rejected God's sovereign plan for his life. At first, when we look at the account of Esau in the Scripture, we can think that he simply made a silly decision to sell his birthright, and that we are not susceptible to that kind of whimsical behaviour. He sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew! Surely we wouldn't do the same. However, the Scriptures teach us that many are defiled because they follow the way of Esau.¹⁵ Even if Esau had gained the whole world, what benefit would it be to him if he lost the blessing of God that is only received by choosing God's election?¹⁶

Accountable for our choice

If we do not honour God's call upon our life, we fall under the judgement of God. This is why the Scripture records, 'Many are called, but few are chosen, or elect.'¹⁷ Many people do not honour God's purpose for their life. These ones are not predestined to damnation.¹⁸ Rather, God gives them the liberty of choice, and their choice has eternal consequences. Every individual is accountable before God for how they respond to His election concerning their life.¹⁹

In the end, the choices Esau and Jacob made throughout their lives bore fruit. Jacob submitted to the chastening hand of God, and was recovered to God's plan for his life. Esau, however, despised his particular calling and never found recovery. It was for this reason that God declared, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.'²⁰

Jacob was recovered to God's plan for his life by accepting and submitting to the chastening hand of the Lord. Jacob loved the spiritual blessing of God and sold everything to possess it.²¹ However, the Lord sought to reform Jacob's motivation toward the blessing and election which He had chosen for Jacob. The Lord personally confronted him in order to change his nature. And when Jacob had

14 Eph 1:4

15 Heb 12:15-16

16 Mat 16:26

17 Mat 22:14

18 Rom 9:13-14

19 Rom 14:10,12

20 Rom 9:13

21 Gen 32:21-24.

Mat 13:44-46

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wrestled with the angel of the Lord, he then received the blessing.²² Thus, the principle of election was established by God with Jacob.²³

Each of us must measure ourselves to the unique calling of God for our life. Although we do not have the capacity within ourself to fulfil the Lord's calling, we have the dignity and freedom to choose how to respond to His command. We need to make a deliberate choice to live according to God's definition about who we are, and what we are to do. This is only possible as we meet the Lord and receive from Him the enabling capacity to fulfil our predestined name and works. We demonstrate that we have accepted the Lord's call as we embrace our predestination and fulfil the works that God has chosen for our life. We are blessed as we take hold of the Lord's sanctification for our life.²⁴

22 Gen 32:24-29

23 Isa 45:4. Isa 41:8

24 Rom 6:22

Making our election sure

Process of sanctification

When God's word illuminates our hearts, we are able to recognise that the predestination He has chosen for each person is precious. In His love, He chose the very best for each person. When we seek the Lord in prayer 'in secret', He promises to reveal the truth of our name and works.¹ As we read in the book of Isaiah, these are 'the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places'.² This is the treasure of knowing Him and receiving the unique predestination that He has chosen for us.³

God, from the beginning, *chose us* for salvation through *sanctification*.⁴ We are 'being sanctified' to become the unique person, and to fulfil the very works, that He predestined for us before the foundation of the world.⁵ This process of sanctification is the means by which we make our calling and election sure.⁶

1 Mat 6:6

2 Isa 45:3

3 Php 3:8

4 2Th 2:13

5 Heb 2:11. Eph 2:10

6 2Pe 1:10

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Hebrews chapter twelve highlights a framework, with five major components, which helps us to understand this process of sanctification and our recovery to it.⁷ This passage teaches us to:

1. pursue sanctification and peace with all people
2. look carefully lest we fall short of the grace of God
3. look carefully lest a root of bitterness springs up in our heart
4. look carefully lest we become immoral and godless, like Esau, who sold his own birthright
5. look carefully lest we find no place of repentance, like Esau, who was unable to inherit the blessing.

Pursuing sanctification and peace

We will give consideration to each of these points. First, we will look closely at what it means to ‘pursue *peace with all people* and the *sanctification* without which no-one will see the Lord’.⁸

How do we diligently seek after sanctification? We eagerly receive the word of God which defines our predestination. And then, with the measure of faith that we have received from God, we simply present ourselves in the context in which our sanctification will be proven.⁹ As we present ourselves to do the works which God has given for us to do, our sanctification is progressively obtained. This means that we grow in the knowledge and expression of our sonship, as we continually prove the will of God through offering.¹⁰ The will of God is our sanctification.¹¹

Peace is given to us in the word of God, and it is also an outcome of sanctification. Conversely, constant agitation is evidence that we are unresolved concerning the call of God. If this is the case, we will have undoubtedly begun to pursue an alternative image of who we think we are. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we are eccentrically pursuing fame and riches. An alternative image can be as simple as our own perspective of life. For example, we may view ourselves as being disadvantaged in some way. However, this is not God’s view on the matter. God desires to deliver us from our perspectives, which are not according to the predestination that He has chosen for us.

7 Heb 12:14-17

8 Heb 12:14

9 Rom 12:3.
Rom 6:19

10 Rom 12:2

11 1Th 4:3

How do we diligently seek after ‘peace with all people’? Inasmuch as it is necessary for us to appreciate our own predestination, it is essential that we also *appreciate the predestination of each one of our brethren*. This does not mean that we impose our perspective of another person’s predestination upon them. Neither do we impose our perspective of ourself on others. This only leads to argument and comparing ourselves among ourselves.¹² Sanctification is *proven* by offering; it is not imposed upon someone by comparison. Sober judgement, which means rightly thinking about yourself and others, results in works that multiply God’s life by the revealing of another person’s name.¹³

Practically, our focus becomes how we can support and encourage the sanctified expression of another person. For example, a father is focused on training his children, so that they grow and mature in the Lord; he is not focused on asserting his fatherhood. Neither is he focused on his fatherhood being validated by his children’s compliance.

In the Scriptures, Jonathon is a great example to us!¹⁴ Jonathon honoured the call of God upon David’s life. Not only that, Jonathon also saved David’s life because he appreciated his own predestination to stand alongside David as a close friend. This is an example of how we diligently seek after peace in the context of our relationships. Likewise, parents and siblings need to appreciate the distinct call of God upon each child within their family. And, as each child grows, parents are able to encourage them to present themselves for fellowship and offering, free from family comparison and historical assumptions.

Careful not to fall short of God’s grace

Now let’s consider the second point in our framework from Hebrews chapter twelve. We are to look carefully into the face of Jesus Christ lest we fall short of the grace of God.¹⁵ The grace of God enables us to grow in our sanctification as a firstfruits Christian – that is, in our slavehood, priesthood, discipleship and sonship. If we fall short of the grace of God, it means that we have stalled in one of these aspects of our life. We are not maturing as we should, and have begun to draw back from the context of offering.

12 Luk 9:46.
2Co 10:12

13 Rom 12:3

14 1Sa 18:3. 1Sa 20:42

15 Heb 12:15

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God only gives grace for us to fulfil the works that belong to our name. He does not give grace for us to pursue any other image of ourselves. If we are living according to a perspective of ourselves, other than the truth of our predestination, we will, by necessity, revert to our fleshly propensities in an attempt to obtain the blessing of God. We observe this principle in the account of the life of Esau. Like Esau, we can be highly motivated to be successful in our pursuits as a means of personal validation. Furthermore, we can seek the affirmation of others as verification of our good intentions. However, all of these efforts only result in further dystrophy. Instead of finding contentment, as we had hoped, our heart becomes disappointed and depressed.¹⁶

Careful that bitterness does not spring up

When we fall short of the grace of God, we are in danger of allowing ‘a root of bitterness’ to spring up in our hearts.¹⁷ This is the third point in our framework.

A root of bitterness is the fruit of longstanding offence and unforgiveness. This may be the result of injustice or perceived injustice that we have encountered in life. For example, we may feel mistreated when our particular initiative to serve God was not appreciated as we had expected. A root of bitterness will affect our emotional wellbeing, and will invariably impact on our relationships.

The Lord desires to deliver us from unforgiveness so that we can seek to restore relationship with the ones whom we think have mistreated us. Also, we must realise that, even if we have been subjected to injustice, that has not changed our election at all! Fundamentally, this is what Esau could not accept. He viewed his life as being ruined as a result of the injustice he had suffered at the hand of his brother. Esau was called by God to receive the blessing that always belonged to his name. However, Esau could not inherit the blessing, because he never forgave his brother. Motivated by a root of bitterness, Esau gathered a huge crowd to sympathise with the injustice of his situation.¹⁸

Careful that we don’t become immoral and godless

It is for these reasons that Esau sold his own birthright for a single meal, and became immoral and godless.¹⁹ This is the fourth point in our framework.

16 1Ti 6:6. Pro 13:12

17 Heb 12:15

18 Gen 33:1

19 Heb 12:16

Immorality and becoming godless are indicators that a person has fallen from the grace of God and has allowed a root of bitterness to corrupt their mind.²⁰ Instead of the hope of their sonship being an anchor for their soul, they have begun to trade their inheritance to pursue their own fleshly expectations in life. They sell the treasure of their sonship for worthless things.²¹ This indicates their deceived state. Immorality is an attempt to build up one's own identity by taking from others. Being 'godless' means to have a complete lack of regard for what God has spoken.

The Lord desires to deliver us from our fleshly expectations and pursuit of worthless things, and to restore us to the truth of the word that He has spoken concerning us.

Careful to find a place of repentance

The final point in our framework is to do with repentance. Esau was unable to find a place of repentance because he did not mourn with godly sorrow.²²

Godly sorrow leading to repentance is foundational to our recovery to the pathway of sanctification.²³ If we allow the word of God to expose our motivations, we realise that we are completely unable to fulfil the will of God by our natural capacities or fallen mechanisms. Rather, we need to meet the Lord and be delivered from our *perspectives, propensities, unforgiveness and expectations*.

God is faithful. He will enable His plan to come to pass in our life. And He will deliver us from our propensity to try to obtain the blessing of God by our own means. As we negotiate the issue of election, He is able to recover each of us to the pathway of sanctification.

Our election includes not only the destiny given to us by God, but also the *process* by which that destiny is given to us. And, for every person, this will include participation in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. Like Jacob, we must learn that God is making us sufficient for our calling as we participate in the fellowship of His offering and sufferings. We are the elect of God as we fulfil the works that He has chosen for us.

20 2Co 11:3

21 Gal 4:9

22 Heb 12:17

23 2Co 7:9

Election - Study Questions

- We know that Esau could have inherited a blessing if he accepted his predestination to serve his brother. Explain why Esau's predestination was not actually affected by his brother's deceitful behaviour.

- Importantly, we honour God by choosing what He has sovereignly chosen for us. How does this practically work? How do we practically make our call and election sure?

- Like Jacob, we realise that we must be delivered from our fallen propensities to try to obtain the blessing of God by our own means. How are you meeting the Lord in this season? How is the Lord delivering you from these kinds of propensities?

FIRSTFRUITS
The lesson of Joseph
Richie Kaa

The fruitful bough

The usual focus of Joseph's life is the 'rags to riches' story of triumph over much adversity. But the very important lesson in this current season is to understand how Joseph emerged as a *firstfruits* person.

The focus upon calling and election has been well explored in this publication. But, in Joseph, we see a man who demonstrated more than the assurance of his election. He revealed the effective work of the elect as the ministry of reconciliation. For Joseph, reconciliation was the capacity to see his brethren reconciled to the Father and recovered to His plan for them.

This meant that each brother, personally, could acknowledge and honour the unique call of God upon their own life. Further, it meant that each brother could acknowledge the unique call of God upon each other's lives. This kind of ministry enables brethren to dwell together in unity, and to acknowledge how good and pleasant it is to live together in this way.¹ But before Joseph and his brethren were established in this ministry, God needed to prepare them.

1 Psa 133:1

The favourite son

Joseph was the youngest of eleven sons, and demonstrated a competence and an initiative beyond his years. Not only this, but Jacob loved Joseph more than all his brothers, and demonstrated this special affection by making a colourful tunic for him. Surely such expressions of overt favouritism were wrong, even in ancient days, and such parental bias worthy of a sibling uprising!

And if things weren't already difficult enough for his brothers, they became even worse. One morning, after waking, Joseph shared a dream with his whole family; a dream in which his brothers (represented as sheaves) bowed down to him as a sheaf standing upright. In a second dream, he described the sun, moon and eleven stars all bowing again to him. This dream depicted his parents bowing down, along with his siblings, provoking even Jacob to rebuke his favourite son for his words.²

The call of God

Although his dreams were poorly received, Joseph knew that they were from the Lord and that they revealed God's purpose and plans for his life.³ Through them, Joseph was being personally invited to choose what God had chosen for him. What Joseph didn't know was how and when these plans would be fulfilled.

During the next phase of his life, Joseph would encounter three specific events that would serve to train and establish him in God's call for his life. Even though he'd heard the call of God, Joseph was about to be sown into a context where he would have to prove God's will through suffering. In other words, the word had to try him.

Sold as a slave

One day, his jealous brothers took matters into their own hands and overpowered Joseph. A last moment reprieve saw them commute their intention of murder to a life of servitude, by selling him as a slave into a foreign land.⁴ We could liken this action to a kind of death – being thrown into a pit, just like a seed going into the ground to die.⁵

2 Gen 37:10

3 Gen 37:6-7

4 Gen 37:26-28

5 Gen 37:23.
Joh 12:24

How distant Joseph must have felt from the call of God that showed him as a saviour to his family - even a call with authority, requiring them to bow down. How quickly things had changed.

Falsely accused

Before long, Joseph was serving as a slave in Potiphar's house. Rather than sulking and resisting the shackles of his circumstances, Joseph received them as from the hand of the Lord, and 'the Lord made all that he did [in Potiphar's house] prosper in his hand'.⁶ Soon after, he was appointed as overseer of the house.⁷ The Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake. Unfortunately, things turned sour, and Joseph was placed in prison by his master. Joseph had been falsely accused of trying to rape his master's wife. In truth, he had repeatedly refused her advances, provoking her to make a false claim in order to punish him for rejecting her.

Although his circumstances seemed to go from bad to worse, Joseph demonstrated that he was a man who feared the Lord. His rebuttal to the woman whom he refused was, 'How can I do this great evil and sin against God'.⁸ He proved that he feared the Lord more than he feared man and man's plans.

While in prison, Joseph again found favour in the sight of his master, the prison keeper, who committed all the prisoners into Joseph's care.⁹ While he was serving two of the king's servants, he had cause to interpret their respective dreams. Upon interpreting one dream, which would eventually see the butler restored, Joseph made a request, 'Remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. *For I was stolen ... and I am innocent.*'¹⁰

Forgotten

It soon became apparent that Joseph had been forgotten by the butler, and that his opportunity for justice had been lost. In fact, two years would pass before the butler remembered Joseph to Pharaoh. Finally, Joseph was summoned to Pharaoh's court to interpret his troubling dreams.

Upon meeting with Pharaoh, Joseph demonstrated the fruit of wisdom and discernment by interpreting Pharaoh's dream and then proposing a plan to

6 Gen 39:3

7 Gen 39:4

8 Gen 39:9

9 Gen 39:22

10 Gen 40:14-15

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preserve the nation of Egypt during the season of leanness. The advice was deemed good in the eyes of Pharaoh and his servants, and he immediately set Joseph 'over all the land of Egypt'.¹¹ Here we see the dramatic elevation of Joseph to a place of oversight with authority. Here we see a glimpse of the *firstfruits* coming up out of the ground.

Fruitful

Joseph had chosen what God had chosen for Him and, at an appointed time, God placed him in authority over all of Egypt. It was during this time that Joseph bore two sons, and he named the second son Ephraim, which meant 'God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction'.¹² 'The peaceable fruit of righteousness' (Joseph's sanctification) was the product of being trained by the discipline of his circumstances. The call of God upon Joseph's life was now being made evident to all.

Joseph remained patient concerning his dream of saving his family and feeding them, knowing that the will of God would come to pass at the appointed time. So it was that, during Joseph's routine day in overseeing the distribution of food during the famine, his ten brothers appeared, seeking food at the request of their aging father, Jacob. It's likely that Jacob's sons had grown up hearing some of the sad stories about their forebears: Cain killing Abel, Ishmael mocking and despising Isaac, and Jacob deceiving Esau.

Would it be that the house of Jacob would continue the familiar pattern of sibling spite and hatred, and the refusal to acknowledge God's purpose? Or would the matters concerning calling and election be resolved in this generation?

Joseph forgives his brothers

We know that the call upon Joseph's life was according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.¹³ But Joseph proved that he was the elect of God by the choices that he made in the circumstances of his life, despite the personal cost. This was clearly demonstrated when, after several interactions, he revealed himself to his brothers and forgave them. But, much more than this, he ministered to his brothers so that they would be recovered to the name and destiny that God had for each of them. God had called and chosen them to be the firstfruits of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel.

11 Gen 41:41

12 Gen 41:52

13 1Pe 1:2

Joseph had bread

Joseph held no resentment for the evil actions of his brothers because he understood that he had been sent before them to preserve life and ‘to save their lives by a great deliverance’.¹⁴ Even though his brothers meant to cause him harm, Joseph understood that God had chosen a specific pathway for him to walk, for their good. God appointed Joseph to be fruitful in Egypt, flourishing in a foreign culture. He was sent before his family so that, at an appointed time, he would be in a place of authority to make room for them, and for all of their flocks to be preserved within the choicest land of all of Egypt. He was appointed to feed them and to save them.

¹⁴ Gen 45:7

To those who have been trained

The principle of firstfruits is revealed through the life of Joseph. Joseph, a fruitful son in his father's house, was figuratively sown as a slave into the ground when his brothers threw him in a well and then sold him as a slave. 'Buried' in captivity, he endured a series of unjust circumstances; yet, through them, he continued to prosper.

At an appointed time, Joseph surfaced from the hidden place of his captivity, bearing the fruit of God's chastening with new life, a new office and a new authority.¹ As a sanctified son revealing the will of God, Joseph was anointed for his priestly service, which was to minister reconciliation. This was more than simply forgiving his brothers and then offering them safety and food during the famine. Joseph gave them the bread of life, enabling them to be restored to the will of God.

¹ Gen 41:42-44.
Heb 12:11

A seed sown

Like Joseph, we who are born of God are to be joined to a process that results in our sanctification.² This process is like being sown into the ground in the same manner as a seed. As we join Christ's death, crucifying those things that prevent us from attaining our sanctification, He gives us His life. This transfer of His life to us, as He takes our sin upon Himself, proceeds as we continue to offer ourselves in the circumstances of our life. As we endure tribulation because of His word, we are transformed.³ Through this process, we bear the fruit of our sanctification, resulting in eternal life.⁴

Through His word, God gives us faith to participate in offering.⁵ As we continue to receive God's word, we will be motivated by a spirit of faith to present ourselves as a living sacrifice, according to our sanctification. We are then activated as ministers of the New Covenant, reconciling others to the will of God in the same way as we have been established in the will of God. As we endure the travail of this season, with those whom the Lord has sown us among, the resurrection life that we are experiencing is able to be ministered to them as well.

Every son sown into the world

The story of fruitfulness begins with a seed. Every son of the kingdom is likened to a seed.⁶ Filled with the potential to bear the fruit of God's life, according to the sanctified expression of their name, sons of the kingdom are sown into the field of the world, just as Joseph was. For fruit to develop, a process, which requires certain conditions, must take place. The life of Joseph illustrates these conditions, and includes a death, a burial, and then a resurrection. Jesus said, concerning this process, that 'unless a seed falls into the ground to die it abides alone, but if dies it bears much fruit'.⁷

Unless a seed falls into the ground to die

For fruit to come forth, death is essential. For a Christian, death means surrendering control of our own life and submitting our self to our Lord and master, Jesus Christ. Joseph's death came at the hands of his brothers, and resulted in him being sold as a slave into Egypt.

2 Rom 6:22 7 Joh 12:24

3 Mat 13:21.
Rom 8:17

4 Rom 6:22

5 Rom 10:17

6 Mat 13:38

Despite the great betrayal by his brothers, Joseph kept faith with the word of God's call, and accepted his unpleasant circumstances as being the will of God. This was demonstrated by his willing submission to his foreign masters. Joseph flourished in the context of his service, and his masters were blessed by his service. This is because he trusted God and gave himself steadfastly and faithfully in the contexts in which he found himself. Consequently, he was entrusted, in each context, with authority from his masters.

Slave to friend

Christ desires to do the same with us. He said to His disciples, 'No longer do I call you slaves, for a slave does not know what his master is doing.'⁸ Rather, a slave is preoccupied in doing the will of his master.⁹ We note that slavehood is the starting point for us. As we are proven in our sanctification as slaves, then Christ calls us His 'friends'.¹⁰ The transition from slave to friend is when Christ makes known to us what He hears the Father saying: 'For all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you'.¹¹ Christ reveals our name and our works to us. This is the secret of the Lord that He makes known to those who fear Him.¹²

God invites every son to walk this same path, so that a harvest of sanctified sons might emerge to His glory. To understand the pathway to firstfruits, we are helped by a curious passage in Leviticus which describes how a fruit tree matures to become a firstfruits.¹³

God's discipline trains us to bear fruit

Every gardener will tell you not to let fruit trees bear fruit in their earliest years. Instead, it is necessary to pluck off the blossoms or the fruit, so that the tree will thrive and bear more abundantly in the seasons to come. As noted in the book of Leviticus, the Lord said that if any tree did come to bear fruit in its first three years, the fruit was not to be used in the service of either God or man. They were to dispose of the fruit. However, what was borne in the fourth year was to be holy (a firstfruits) to the Lord. It was either given to the priests or eaten before the Lord with joy. After the fourth-year harvest, the fruit belonged to the owner of the tree to do with as they pleased.

8 Joh 15:15

9 Joh 15:15-16

10 Joh 15:16

11 Joh 15:15

12 Psa 25:14

13 Lev 19:23-25

By this definition, the fourth season of a fruit tree is the season of *firstfruits*. It's not that fruit wasn't evident in the three previous years but, in order to maximise the capacity of the tree, and to generate the best quality fruit (long-term), the tree was pruned to promote fruitfulness. Jesus described this principle, saying, 'Every branch that does bear fruit, He [the Father] prunes to make it even more fruitful.'¹⁴

Pruning

The 'pruning' of a person when they are bearing fruit can seem harsh, perhaps even unfair. But 'no discipline [or pruning] seems pleasant at the time, but to those who have been *trained* by it, it produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness'.¹⁵ 'Training' here speaks of a willingness to receive the cut of the cross that is purging, cleansing or pruning any element in a person that hinders the bearing of fruit. The Father (who is the Vinedresser) chastens those whom He loves in order that they might be trained according to their sanctification, which is His will.

As He did with Joseph, the Father will use the real-life circumstances of our lives to train us. As we submit ourselves as slaves to our various masters, we will be pruned and purged of any hindrances to our sanctification. The emerging fruit in our lives will begin to reveal the will of God; our sanctification.

In Joseph's life, there were three specific seasons, or contexts, in his captivity, which produced fruit in his life. However, the fruit of these three contexts were not 'eaten', or used, to benefit Joseph personally. Instead, he was pruned on each occasion. This included 1. being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers; 2. being falsely accused of trying to rape by his master's wife and, finally; 3. being overlooked and forgotten in prison by the butler's failure to honour his promise.

Bearing fruit that remains

God chose Joseph and 'appointed him [in the fourth season] that he should go and bear fruit and that his fruit would remain'.¹⁶ Joseph was no longer being pruned. His faithful submission to the discipline of God had trained him in the way of his sanctification.¹⁷ He was now able to offer the fruit of his life, which was holy and acceptable, and was his spiritual act of worship.¹⁸ The fruit was no longer stripped from his branches as it had been in previous seasons. It remained because it was acceptable. The fruit was able to feed and benefit others as a source of blessing.

14 Joh 15:3

15 Heb 12:11

16 Joh 15:16

17 Heb 12:11

18 Rom 12:1

Reconciling others to the Father's will

Central to Joseph's story was the significant relational breach that saw Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. Joseph could have felt he had a right to refuse his brethren when they came looking for food during the famine. That is, if Joseph had taken a natural view on his circumstances. However, Joseph understood the workings of God, including the role that his brothers played. This meant that, even though his brothers intended to cause him harm, Joseph understood that God used it for good. Joseph's circumstances had been for their good, because they would be blessed.

Joseph was raised to see his life from the perspective of heavenly places, and demonstrated the priestly demeanour of a firstfruits person. By this means, he was allowing God to make His appeal through him.¹⁹ He understood that God had used him so that his brothers could be recovered to God's will for them. This connected each brother to their own sanctification as a firstfruits person. They were to be the firstfruits of the tribes of Israel.

The activation of this ministry is common to every firstfruits son who continues to live according to their sanctification. This includes loving and appreciating their own name, and doing the works of their name. Essential to the name of every son is the priestly capacity to love, to appreciate and to guard the names of those among whom the Lord sows us. As we live as firstfruits Christians, we believe that we can also help others to be established as firstfruits Christians who are obtaining their sanctification and are fulfilling the will of God.

19 2Co 5:20

Ministers of reconciliation

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus announced that ‘many are called but few are chosen’.¹ Like Joseph, each son of God has been called, or invited, by God to take their place in His covenant purpose. The call of God is a personal invitation and, as we respond to His call, He will instruct us so that we are equipped and enabled to fulfil this call in our lifetime. This is what it means to be ‘discipled’.

Joseph acknowledged the call of God upon His life. He shared with his family what he had received. Unfortunately, this provoked a reaction among them all, even causing his father to rebuke him for what seemed an absurd dream. But, before long, Joseph was ‘sown’, or sent, to fulfil the plan that God had for him and for his family. This is because he was to be sent ahead of them.

¹ Mat 22:14

Few choose what He has chosen

For many Christian people, the idea of being trained to serve God seems appealing. But God's training comes through chastening. As Paul taught, 'Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines'.² Therefore, as we submit to His hand and to the circumstances that He leads us through, we can be trained according to our sanctification, so that we might fulfil the will of God.

Choosing what God has chosen, and accepting what He has chosen for another person, is key to how we must respond to His call. As we live according to this way, we are making our calling and election sure. Sometimes, the issue of election can become confused when we make comparisons with the unique call of God upon another's life. This can even surface in childhood among our siblings and close friends.

Accepting what God has chosen for another

An important implication to consider is the possibility that God has chosen a sibling or close friend to be a messenger of God to us in the coming years. The action of bowing down to Joseph was nearly too much for his older brothers to bear. But it's no different from the call for all Christians to submit to those in the household of God, who are sanctified to lead and give direction, regardless of their personal relationships. We must all be reconciled to this reality.

This can become complicated when we choose to remember all the foibles and failings of a sibling or close friend. The danger with this approach is that it can cause us to refuse what God has chosen for them. Joseph's brothers rejected him, unaware that God had predestined him to feed them, save them and reconcile them to the will of God. Likewise, if we refuse our brethren whom God has appointed to feed us, then we too will refuse the bread of life that proceeds from the mouth of God.

The apostle Paul picked up on this when reminding us that 'we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time, we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know Him now!'³ To know a man 'after the flesh' is to know him by the outward events and circumstances of his life: his wealth, social status, achievements, culture and knowledge. But we

2 Heb 12:6

3 2Co 5:16 NLT

who are in Christ no longer live this way. We now see one another as new creation sons, and affirm the truth of each person's name in the spirit as the evidence that we are true worshippers.⁴ This is because we've been recovered to the will of God, and raised to live in heavenly places.

Trouble and persecution because of the word

It's worth noting that Joseph didn't simply 'ride off into the sunset' after hearing the call of God upon His life - and neither do we. Rather, Joseph was sent, or sown, to a context where he was processed by the circumstances that God had prepared for him. Enter 'trouble and persecution', which comes because of the word.⁵

The apostle Peter wrote, 'Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though something strange were happening to you'.⁶ Discipleship is a process in which every son of God must continue if they are to be fully engaged in, and sanctified to, their priestly service. The writer of Hebrews acknowledged that 'no discipline seems pleasant at the time but sorrowful, but to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness'.⁷

Joining the contrary circumstance in life

The story of Joseph causes us to consider how we approach and participate in the contrary circumstances in life. For instance:

1. Do you cry out to God, your parents or church leaders, requesting that you be relieved of the pressure that you are under?
2. Do you seek to be rescued and restored to your familiar comforts and to regain control over your life?
3. Do you draw back in unbelief and become offended at God or at those whom you live with or serve with?
4. Or do you engage in the context, knowing that God has specifically designed the circumstances for your life, and is working through them to train you according to your sanctification?

4 Joh 4:24

5 Mat 13:21

6 1Pe 4:12

7 Heb 12:11

LESSONS IN FIRST LOVE

God uses real-life pressures to process us, bringing our coping and survival mechanisms to the surface, so that they can be removed. As we stay in place and are joined to Christ, we will be conformed to His death. The outcome is that these projections, which act as an alternative to our sanctification, can be crucified, giving us clarity about who we really are.

Staying in place (abiding) through the difficult circumstances of life is only achieved by the faith that God supplies by His word. When we receive His faith, we have capacity to join His sufferings. When we join them by faith, participation in the sufferings of Christ is the means by which we can be delivered from living by fleshly principles, thus enabling us to fulfil God's will and not our own. We are enabled to do the will of God, however unpleasant it is. We are no longer tempted to author an alternate will, because we're being delivered of our desire to do what seems right in our own eyes.

The Most High God rules

In Joseph's life, there were several times when he was unfairly treated. On every occasion, Joseph proved that he feared God more than man. We know this because at no point did he remove himself from the process or react to his circumstances. Joseph never became a victim of the circumstances. This is because he knew that 'the Most High God rules in the kingdoms of men', and that nothing could harm him or come against him.⁸ As he lived in the fear of the Lord and accepted his circumstances as from the hand of the Lord, he continued to prosper.

It is the will of God that every son will come to fruitfulness. This means that they will grow in their sanctification, and bring forth fruit according to their name. As it was for Joseph, so it will be for us, so that 'after we have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called us to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore us, secure us, strengthen us, and establish us'.⁹ This means that God is faithful to establish us according to our sanctification as we remain faithful in the sufferings that refine us.

Joseph was established and sovereignly placed by the Lord as the overseer of food distribution in Egypt. He was appointed in this way so that he would come into direct contact with his brothers as they came looking for food. God produced in

8 Dan 5:18

9 1Pe 5:10

them the need for food, because of the famine, and placed Joseph in their path to be the only one who could meet that need.

You have bread

As He did with Joseph, the Lord is giving us the bread of life to feed those who are hungry. Although our natural eyes may not yet see it, there is a famine in the land, and God is producing a cry in the heart of men that they would come looking for us. He will place us, too, in the direct pathway of those who are seeking life. As soon as their storehouses of grain run dry, people will seek for the bread we have.

The Lord desires to send you ahead, to be established and trained in the works of your name, so that you might feed and sustain the weary one with a word. You will go down into the ground and, like a seed, 'die' among those with whom you've been sown. But as you endure by the faith of God, He will raise you up and bring others with you, in your 'sheaf'.

Firstfruits - Study Questions

- The call of God invites us to choose what God has chosen for us. What are the current circumstances of your life that are providing opportunity for you to be trained and established in God's call for your life?

- Joseph never became a victim of the various circumstances of his life? Consider his several responses and describe how we can be helped by the example he provided.

- Jesus said 'every branch that does not bear fruit He takes away and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit'. Joh 15:2. Describe an example of pruning in your life.

GLOSSARY

Ancient hatred	An offence passed on from one generation to the next, resulting in bitterness, violence and anger against God's covenant people. Eze 35:5. Esau's hatred towards his brother became 'the ancient hatred', corrupting all subsequent generations of his family. Only the gospel can break the power of this stronghold.
Birthright	The right to inherit the blessing of being a son of the Father. Esau despised his birthright and, as a result, was unable to inherit the blessing of God according to name. If we refuse to be sanctified to our name, we will lose the birthright of sonship. In other words, we lose our sonship altogether.
Blessing	The inheritance of the divine nature for those who are born of God. The blessing of Abraham was the promise of God to make him a son of God. In Christ, the blessing of sonship that was promised to Abraham has been made available to all.
Bread	A scriptural symbol for what sustains life. The word of God is the bread of life that is spoken to us in the fellowship of the body of Christ. The Lord gives bread to those who hunger for righteousness. God has appointed shepherds to feed His flock with the word proceeding from His mouth.

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Calling	The invitation to be the son whom God has planned. There is no higher calling in life than to be a son of God. While we are all called to be sons of God, only you can be the son of God whom God predestined you to be. The principle of calling was established by God in Isaac.
Carnality	Trying to serve God according to our own way (as opposed to by the Spirit). A carnal person sets their mind on the things of the flesh, and attempts to please God by the mechanisms and desires of the flesh. The temptation to be carnal is to try to be 'like God', being the source of the knowledge of what is good and evil.
Chastening	The training and discipline of the Father upon His sons. The Father chastens those whom He loves in order that they might be trained according to their sanctification, which is His will. We bring forth the fruit of righteousness as we submit to God's chastening. Chastening is for the purpose of the formation of the life of Christ in us.
Choice	God gives every individual the liberty of choice, and their choice has eternal consequences. Every individual is accountable before God for how they respond to His election concerning their life. No-one is predestined to damnation.
Discipled	Trained by the instruction of God and, therefore, equipped to fulfil His call. We have used the term 'discipled' to explain this process.
Discipleship	The training of sons of God, which sanctifies them to their name and works. A disciple is a learner. They remain trainable throughout life. A person is made a disciple when they are delivered from the bondage of fear, and receive the capacity to hear and receive the word of God. This is having the ear of a disciple. In a spirit of faith, they are enabled to believe and confess with the mouth of a disciple that they are a son of God. A disciple continues to receive and obey the word of the Lord. Moreover, they are able to instruct, or disciple, others. This is having the tongue of disciples. Isa 50:4-5.
Elect of God	Those who accept and honour God's election for their life. The elect of God embrace their predestination and fulfil the works that God has chosen for them. They make their calling and election sure by choosing what God has chosen for them.

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Election	God's plan for every individual; what He has sovereignly chosen. This includes their God-given name and the works that God has planned for them to do. This is the unique predestination that God chose from before the foundation of the world. Our election is not based upon our natural capacities, family lineage, achievements or expectations. The principle of election was established by God in Jacob.
Firstfruits	A firstfruits Christian brings forth the fruit of God's life, according to name. They have put off the propensities of their flesh and, instead, walk by the Spirit. They manifest the fruit of the word that is proclaimed. They are addicted to the ministry of the saints.
Foreknowledge	The knowledge of God from before the foundation of the world. The name of every person was discussed and known by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit before the beginning of creation. Every person is foreknown by name and predestined to become a son of God. Our foreknown name was recorded in the Lamb's book of life. A person is born of water when they receive the incorruptible seed of their foreknown name.
Heavenly places	Where we have fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and with other sons of God. It is the context of first love. Sons of God have been raised to dwell in heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, as the context of fellowship. A person who accepts their need to change and to be delivered from living by their own law, and also accepts that the Lord is causing them to grow in the capacity to live in first love, is already in heavenly places. Heavenly places is the paradise of God.
Image	Any definition of who we think we are, which is not received from God. An alternative perspective of life that is contrary to God's will. A projection; a self-chosen profile.
Inheritance	An adopted son or daughter in the Father's house is entitled to the wealth that belongs to the Father. This is the inheritance of the divine nature, which is the life of God. A child conceived as a member of a covenant house is brought forth as a son of God, and has already been blessed with the inheritance of the divine nature. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit has been given to us as the firstfruits of our full inheritance as sons of God. Through the Holy Spirit, we are able to express our sonship in firstfruits measure. In the new heavens and earth, we will receive our sonship as an eternal inheritance. We press in, by faith, to obtain

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the full inheritance that we are entitled to as a son of the Father.

Irrevocable	God's predestination for a person is unchangeable. God does not regret His choice, and He does not doubt that what He chose is the very best for each one. God does not change His mind.
Ministry of reconciliation	God has given to us the ministry of reconciliation, which is the capacity to recover people to relationship with God and with others. This ministry removes enmity. It enables brethren to dwell together in unity. Also, it is the capacity to recover believers to the Father's plan for their lives.
Name	Signifies the truth of who God intended a person to be, as a son or daughter of God. A person's name is foreknown by God and is recorded in the Lamb's book of life. A person receives the incorruptible seed of their foreknown name when they are born of water. Furthermore, when we seek the Lord in prayer, 'in secret', He promises to reveal the truth of our name and works. Every person has identity but, without Christ, a person is not aligned to their God-given name. Instead, they desire to make a name for themselves or covet the name of another.
Overseer	A firstfruits elder to whom Christ has given authority and sight for the purpose of leading within His church.
Perspective	How we view ourselves, others, and the situations of our life. We either exercise an earthly perspective or a spiritual one. It is only possible to have a spiritual perspective when we have been set free of the fear that governs the way we see things. Then we receive spiritual capacity to hear, see and understand what the Lord is promising to us. Christians walk by faith, not by natural sight or fallen perspectives regarding the circumstances of life.
Predestination	The name and works of every son of God, foreknown by God and recorded in the Lamb's book of life. Predestination defines sonship.
Propensities	The habitual fallen mechanisms and desires that are motivated by 'another law'. To live in first love, a person must be joined to a process through which their fallen propensities are removed from their life. As we participate in the sufferings of Christ, the propensities of our other law are removed. The life of God is transferred to us, and we are enabled to live by the power resident in His life. Jacob

Glossary

	learned that the blessing of election could not be obtained through his fleshly schemes and fallen propensities.
Pruning	Discipline and adjustment for the purpose of growth and increased fruitfulness. Every son of God who bears fruit is pruned by the Father.
Reconciliation	The restoration of relationship with God and with others. And the removal of all impediments to our fellowship. The whole world was reconciled to God through the death of Christ. However, a person is only saved by receiving His life. When they look on Christ whom they have pierced, and mourn in repentance, they are restored to relationship with God. The peace of God is the outcome of being reconciled to Him. Jacob recognised that he could not be restored to God's purpose for his life until he sought to be reconciled to his brother.
Root of bitterness	The fruit of longstanding offence and unforgiveness. A root of bitterness is the enmity, hatred and anger that grows towards another person. A root of bitterness will affect a person's emotional wellbeing and relationships. It will eventually defile that person, and others, because they draw others to sympathise with the injustice of their situation.
Sanctification	The reality of who God is and who He created us to be. Our sanctification is who God named us to be, along with the works that He prepared for us to do in Christ, before He created the heavens and the earth. Sanctification is foundational to our participation in the fulfilment of the will of God. Sanctification is proven by offering, not imposed upon others by comparison and argument.
Self-validation	The sense of approval that a person derives from the success of their self-defined pursuits or from their association with others. Motivated by fear, a person will either seek personal validity and empowerment from association with others or they will endeavour to 'find themselves' through their own fleshly efforts.
Sober judgement	Rightly thinking about yourself and others, resulting in works that multiply the life of God by revealing another person's name.

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Sovereignty of God	The authority and rule of God. The Most High God rules in the affairs of men. There is nothing that transpires outside the realm of His sovereignty. God's choice concerning a person's predestination is not impacted upon by any other influence. God simply chose that.
Sufferings	Through baptism, we are joined to the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, and have an ongoing participation in His travail. Christ suffered for all humanity. He gathered up all human suffering into Himself and granted us the privilege of having fellowship with Him in His sufferings. He gives us a share of His sufferings, which become a discipline for us, working an eternal weight of glory. By participating in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, we are changed from one degree of glory to another.
Training	God's discipline instructs us so we bear fruit. Training brings forth fruit if we are willing to receive the cut of the cross that is purging, cleansing or pruning elements that hinder our fruitfulness. Submission to the discipline of God trains us in the way of our sanctification.
Travail	The process by which the life of Christ is formed in a son of God. The Holy Spirit enables a person to join the travail of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit through prayer. Travail also describes the ongoing work of disciple-messengers who labour to see sons of God receiving the life of Christ and bearing fruit.
Works of sonship	The participation of a son of God in the body of Christ, appointed by God. Works of sonship belong to a person's name, and have been written in the Lamb's book of life. We present ourselves, by faith, to do the works of sonship and to reveal the righteousness of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, these works will be an expression of our sonship life in firstfruits measure.