

Week Four
Reading

WHO ME?



REALITY

No, not me. I'm not the one you're looking for.

Yes, I heard Christ's job description...

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

And I heard how that job description is transferred to me...

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. (John 20:21)

Which sounds good in theory, but let's talk reality.

For starters, I'm untrained. I don't know what to do or how to do it. I don't know the Scriptures. I don't know how to answer probing questions about the cross of Christ or why we believe what we believe. I don't know how to talk to people about their problems and hardships. I might be able to put up a front, but it won't take but a few questions to punch holes in that front and display my inadequacies. Even more, if I do know answers to other's questions, I'm notoriously impatient. I'll tell them what I know, but people won't do it. There are others who know what to do, how to do it, and have the patient disposition needed to get it done. I'm not one of those.

There's more.

I'm broken. Yes, I know, everyone's broken, but there's more to it than that. It's not just that I'm broken; it's that as much as I'd like to think about God's grand plans, I can't think past my own worries and wounds. Sure, I'd like to invest my life toward an eternal cause, and maybe one day I will. For now, I'm tangled up in my own mess, and I don't see that changing anytime soon. I'm just not in a place where I can easily think about others. I don't have my own life figured out. I know some things, and I don't expect to know all things, but I do expect more than I'm experiencing right now. I expect greater clarity, greater focus, a greater sense of living my life well. I suppose some of that might come by thinking about others, but I've done that, and it was okay, but it wasn't great. Thinking about others and serving others can get very messy very quickly. I've got enough struggle in my own life.

And let's be clear. This is not an effort to squirm my way out of responsible living, so I can do what I really want to do.

This is reality.

I have weaknesses. I have shortcomings. I have obligations. I have struggles. I have hardships. I have flaws.

This is not whining and grumbling. This is an honest assessment of reality.

WHO ME?

To which Scripture offers a surprising response.

RESPONSE

The response is not found in an isolated passage of Scripture. It's no minor theme or obscure verse. The response is found in the entire thrust of Scripture. From beginning to end, Scripture speaks to these very objections. In passage after passage, through story after story, through the twists and turns of the unveiling of God's message to humanity, we discover that all of the above is not an inhibitor to participating in the body of Christ but a prerequisite—a requirement. Deny the above assessment of reality, and it's unlikely you're ready. Embrace the above, and life could get very interesting.

Let's roll back the clock, find an early starting point, and bring our thoughts, step by step, back to the present day.

ABRAHAM

Let's go back to Abraham.

To Abraham was given a vision of worldwide impact. God spoke to him saying,

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. (Genesis 12:2)

Which from our perspective sounds grand but reasonable. Of course this is God's promise to Abraham. Abraham is, after all, the father of the Jewish nation. We'd expect nothing less from God's interaction with this man.

Consider, though, that God dropped this vision into Abraham's view, not as a young newlywed hoping to start his family, but when the man was seventy-five years old. Sarah, his wife, was sixty-six years old and childless. To say Abraham would father a nation bordered on ridiculous.

The situation then went from bad to worse.

Time passed and nineteen years later Sarah was still childless. That initial vision must have seemed like a cruel joke. Somewhere around Abraham's ninety-ninth birthday, God spoke to him again, saying, "*I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you*" (Genesis 17:6).

Abraham's response was predictable: "*He laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'*" (Genesis 17:17)

It was as if God not only wanted to influence the world through this couple, but wanted to do so in a manner that sent a message.

The message...

My power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

MOSES

From Abraham, let's step forward in time. Consider Moses.

By the time of Moses, Scripture tells us that Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, "*were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them*" (Exodus 1:7). At the time of Moses, however, this multiplied family was in a precarious situation. The nation of Israel

WHO ME?

was without a home. They lived in the land of Egypt and were subject to the Egyptians as slaves. Time and again they cried out to God begging for deliverance. It was a difficult existence, but God heard their cries and took action.

God tapped Moses, an unlikely subject, a fugitive from the law who years before had murdered an Egyptian. The murder had driven Moses to the desert where he was now tending sheep. While Moses was tending sheep, God spoke to Moses, calling him to fight for his people's freedom, saying, "*The cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt*" (Exodus 3:9-10).

This all, of course, sounds reasonable to our ears. This is Moses, after all, the legendary figure of Jewish history. Consider, though, that not only was Moses a fugitive from the law, but he battled insecurity, feeling totally inadequate for the job. Moses had seen leaders, and he wasn't one of them. To God, he said,

Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? (Exodus 3:11)

The conversation continued and Moses' objections got specific...

O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue. (Exodus 4:10)

To which one might expect God to correct Moses' view of himself, "No, Moses, you're a great speaker. You can rally the troops and motivate the masses. Don't be so hard on yourself, Moses." But God doesn't do this. Rather, to Moses God says,

Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say. (Exodus 4:11-12)

It was as if God not only wanted to liberate the Israelites through Moses but wanted to do so in a manner that sent a message.

The message...

My power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

GIDEON

From Moses, let's step forward in time. Consider Gideon.

The people of Israel were liberated from Egypt, but as is common in humanity, they wandered into and out of closeness to God. In a season of wandering they were oppressed by a neighboring nation, the Midianites. Scripture tells us that "*Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds*" (Judges 6:2).

In the midst of the oppression, the Israelites changed their ways and again cried out to God. Because of their repentance, God tapped Gideon, through whom he intended to restore Israel's freedom. Like Moses, Gideon was a reluctant leader.

Gideon's acceptance of God's call to action was reluctant, but his follow through was impressive. This man kicked into high gear and rallied thirty-two thousand Israelites to take up arms against the Midianites. Now one might think that this display of leadership would impress God. God's response, though, was stunning:

You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. (Judges 7:2)

WHO ME?

Too many?! Isn't that the idea?! Should Gideon not seek to overpower the Midianites, to ensure their victory, to protect his fellow countrymen from getting routed?!

God explained his statement. Not only did he want the Israelites delivered, but wanted to ensure they would not *"boast against me that her own strength has saved her"* (Judges 7:2).

What followed was a reduction of troops from thirty-two thousand warriors to a small band of three hundred men. They were less than 1 percent of their previous size, and through this tiny army, God delivered the Israelites.

It was as if God not only wanted to liberate the Israelites through Gideon but wanted to do so in a manner that sent a message.

The message...

My power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

DAVID

From Gideon, let's step forward in time. Consider David.

David was young, and Saul was king. It was during this time that Israel squared off against the Philistines. The events that followed are legendary. Goliath, the mammoth-size Philistine, taunted the Israelites, challenging any one of their warriors to represent their entire nation and take him on in a man-to-man battle. This challenge from Goliath put Saul's perspective, and the perspective he'd nurtured in his warriors, on display. Listen carefully to how Saul and his army are described:

On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified. (1 Samuel 17:11)

David, on the other hand, had a radically different perspective. Too young to qualify for the Israelite draft, David is merely visiting his brothers at their military outpost. He hears Goliath's taunts, and rather than cower in fear, he rises in courage. Compare the just-mentioned description of Saul and his army to David's war cry against Goliath:

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." (1 Samuel 17:45).

Both Goliath and Saul trusted in human strength and human competencies. They worshipped their swords and their spears. David, on the other hand, worshipped Almighty God, and his God whipped their god.

It was as if God not only wanted to defeat the Philistines but wanted to do so in a manner that sent a message.

The message...

My power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

THE APOSTLES

From David, let's step forward in time. Consider Christ's apostles.

WHO ME?

Jesus enters the scene, and among other things, he builds into the lives of twelve unlikely apostles. These twelve apostles would follow Jesus from town to town, witness his power, and be trained by his life and teaching. Unbeknown to them, Christ was preparing them. Within a few short years, he would entrust the advancement of his kingdom to these unlikely candidates for significant responsibility. In one place, Scripture refers to Peter and John as “*unschooled, ordinary men*” (Acts 4:13), a description generally reflective of the entire group. Jesus did not choose them for their charm and charisma. Even more, his training of them was not a training in how to impress the nations with their own insight and intellect. As they traveled from town to town, teachable moments emerged that enabled Christ to point these early followers to the true strength that would empower their influence.

On one such occasion, Christ attracted a massive crowd of more than five thousand people. They were in a remote place, and there was clearly no source of food sufficient to feed the entire group. The story is no doubt familiar to many, but an insight into Christ’s perspective is often missed. To Philip, Christ asked, “*Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?*” (John 6:5). John then records this observation:

He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. (John 6:6)

In other words, Christ wanted to see if his apostles were getting it. Would they be mesmerized by their inadequacies, or would they see these inadequacies as an opportunity for God to display his power? A few moments later, Christ is dividing five small loaves of bread and two small fish, and it is from this pathetic supply of resources that he feeds the entire mob of people.

It was as if God not only wanted to care for a group of hungry people but wanted to do so in a manner that sent a message.

The message...

My power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

EARLY CHURCH

From the apostles, let’s step forward in time. Consider the early church.

After Christ’s death and resurrection, he commissioned his followers with orders that stand to this day.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

In other words, their mission would not be to wrestle political control from Rome or any other earthly power. Their mission was to carry the astounding news of Christ to every corner of the globe. It’s as if he was saying “Don’t limit your work to Israel. Don’t limit your work to familiar roads and familiar people. Go beyond the horizons and explain to the world that God can be their God through the grace and power of the cross.”

Which makes Christ’s final command to them odd and surprising.

In Christ’s final days on earth, after the resurrection, he gave them this command:

Do not leave Jerusalem. (Acts 1:4)

Why?

WHO ME?

If in one breath he tells them to “*make disciples of all nations,*” why in the next would he tell them to not leave Jerusalem? Today, this might make sense. Maybe they would reach the world through media, books, and the Internet, but this is the ancient world. If the message is going to ring out from Jerusalem, they would have to leave Jerusalem.

Christ explains:

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:4-5)

Days later, he goes further:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

They would wait because the Spirit would empower their ministry. To leave Jerusalem without the Spirit would be to leave Jerusalem with the limitations of human strength. Human strength would not change hearts. Human strength would not open eyes and ears. Human strength might be able to trick people or manipulate people, but human strength would not inspire or equip inside-out transformation.

Weeks later, during an event called Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out on these early followers, and their lives and ministries now had power. On that very day, by the power of the Holy Spirit, about “*three thousand were added to their number*” (Acts 2:41). One wonders how many followers they could have manipulated toward temporary loyalty through their own strength and cleverness. Such manipulation would have been worthless. They might have gained an external following, but the followers would be inauthentic without the Spirit granting new hearts.

It was as if God not only wanted, and wants today, to reach people with his astounding news but wants to do so in a manner that sends a message.

The message...

My power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

TROUBLING

That’s all good.

We get it.

Sort of.

There’s something in it all that simultaneously inspires but still gives cause for pause. What are we to do? Pick a direction, wave the magic prayer wand, and then expect everything to go perfectly? There are other stories in Scripture. What about the stories of intense failure? And by failure, we’re not just talking about something that was attempted and didn’t work. That happens. We get that. We’re talking about intense failure, people-get-hurt-failure, the kind of failure that follows the withdrawal of God’s blessing. Does God withdraw? Does he withhold his blessing?

Roll back the clock. Consider the battle of Ai.

Somewhere between the above-mentioned times of Moses and Gideon, the people of Israel believed they were following God by battling the people of Ai. They had just defeated the people of Jericho in a miraculous battle. God was with them. They were certain of it. When considering the upcoming battle

WHO ME?

with Ai, the commanders informed Joshua, Israel's leader, that they need not send the entire army to Ai. They said, just "send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary all the people, for only a few men are there" (Joshua 7:3).

Then the shocker.

So about three thousand men went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted and became like water. (Joshua 7:4-5)

Why? What happened? The people of Ai were known to be an evil people. The people of Israel were following God's commands, were they not? They had experienced success after success. God was showing his power through their weakness, and now they were routed by an army perceived as not even worthy of their entire effort.

Scripture tells us that Joshua tore his clothes, fell down before the ark of God, and cried out in prayer. He and the others were deeply disturbed and deeply confused. God's response to these prayers was forthright.

The LORD said to Joshua, "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction." (Joshua 7:10-12)

The following day, a prayerful search was conducted. It was discovered that Achan, an Israelite warrior, had violated the command of God in the previous battle against Jericho, and had kept plunder for himself. Achan explained, "I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath" (Joshua 7:21).

Achan didn't trust. He didn't believe God would truly provide for him, so he wrested control. No more waiting on God to give him what he needs. He would do what he wanted to do and bury the evidence in his tent. Such actions are highly instructive to this day.

Confessed sin, sin that has been brought into the open and dealt with before God and others, is never, not once, held against a person in Scripture. But high-handed disobedience, sin that is buried in one's tent, is a breach of the very trust that unleashes God's power. Through the march of Scripture, we do not see God pointing to his people's inabilities, shortcomings, or failures. We do see an uncompromised expectation of trust. If, like Achan, a person's present actions display lack of trust through buried and continued rebellion, that person should have very low expectations of God's presence in his actions.

Which brings the story to us.

Us

Consider the present day.

The Garden of Eden is behind us. The New Jerusalem is before us. We're somewhere between the two, and we're invited to participate in the creative process. To do so is to adopt the above-mentioned job description embraced by Christ and passed along to us. This is no minor calling. Consider it line by line from Isaiah 61:1-2:

...he has anointed you to preach good news to the poor.

WHO ME?

...he has sent you to bind up the brokenhearted.

...he has sent you to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.

This is a calling to enrich the lives of those spiritually and physically impoverished. It is a calling to be healers—physicians of the soul—a people who restore the brokenhearted. This is a calling to be liberators from oppression—freedom fighters—a people who engage the spiritual battles to break others free from the entanglement and enslavement of sin. It is a calling that takes anyone and everyone interested in participating far beyond their natural and limited abilities.

Which is why the very first line is so critical...

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me.
(Isaiah 61:1)*

If we are to be physicians of the soul, freedom fighters, liberators from enslavement, then the foolish are not those who feel inadequate but the self-sufficient. Our lives can contribute to something grand, but participation is not something to take lightly. Participation in the body of Christ is not a call to add a little volunteerism to our lives. It's not a call to simply sign up for a service project or throw a few dollars toward our favorite charity.

Participation in the body of Christ is a call to a life entrusted to God and empowered by his Spirit. Consider the following stunning promise, spoken from the early church, with faraway lands and distant generations in mind:

And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2:38-39)

The power of the Holy Spirit was not just offered to the early church to get things going. To those early listeners it was promised that the Holy Spirit is for “*you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.*”

That's us.

Available to us is a power that takes us beyond our natural abilities. From generation to generation, God has made a habit of taking his followers beyond their expectations. Empowerment by the Spirit means we will likely be called to step outside our comfort zones. We will feel foolish, like Abraham, who was both elderly and childless, but believed he'd father a nation. We will feel vulnerable, like Gideon, who obeyed God and whittled his earthly security to 1 percent of its previous strength. We will feel weak, like David, who was small in stature but mighty in Spirit. We will feel unqualified, like the apostles, who were recognized as both unschooled and ordinary.

Yes, we have limitations. We have weaknesses. We have shortcomings. We have obligations. We have struggles. We have hardships. We have flaws. If we're expecting that a prerequisite to participating in the body of Christ is the removal of these limitations, we've not only missed isolated moments in Scripture, but we've missed the message of Scripture altogether. Our limitations are there for a reason. God not only wants to see his kingdom spread from person to person throughout the entire world, but he wants this to happen in his power, with his strength, by his Spirit, not by our craftiness and control.

It's as if God not only wants us to participate in the re-creation of the new earth and New Jerusalem but wants us to do so in a manner that sends a message.

The message...

WHO ME?

My power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

WHO ME?

Week 4, Reading p. 99

WHO ME?

Week 4, Reading p. 100