

A clear focus

Readings: Gen 17:1 – 7, 15 – 16, Mark 8:31 – 38

There is a song called “Bling” subtitled: Confessions of a king. Does anyone know it? The words are haunting.

I awoke on the roadside
In the land of the free ride
And I can't pull it any longer
The sun is beating down my neck

... I ran with the devil
Left a trail of excuses
Like a stone on the water
The elements decide my fate¹

The troubled one is feeling very sorry for themselves with some justification. They go on to say: I feel my vision slipping in and out of focus.

From there the story becomes slightly more hopeful a good Samaritan helps the one in trouble.

The story is a mixture of doubt and hope though it finishes on an optimistic note. It's about struggling to cope with failure and how easy it is to lose focus on the goals we set in our lives. A recurring question is: How do you know you are right?

That is such a good question for us today – if we are honest, most of us ask ourselves that question a lot of the time.

I want to apply the gist of that question to our focus on life. How do we know where we are going? How do we know what God wants for us? How do we know that God is for us and has a good plan for our life?

We can know the answers to these questions. We can have assurance that God loves us and God has good things for us, even in the midst of difficulties, our focus can be clear. Even when we can't see the big picture, God will show us enough to be secure in him. God will show us that we are loved and held in God's arms. God will show us the next step we are to take. We can have a clear focus, even if it is not a long-range focus.

Let's have a look Abram and Sarai. They find themselves in the poo really.

Earlier God visited Abram in Haran. God said “Leave your homeland and go to a new country.” We can hardly imagine the kind of upheaval that meant for them. What a mission!

¹ Brandon Flowers, The Killers Bling (Confessions of a King)

They couldn't just hire a removal van. They didn't have Skype to stay in touch with the parents they left behind. They didn't even really know where they were going. Anyway go they did.

In Genesis 17 God challenges Abram to walk before him and be blameless. Abram's response? To fall flat on his face in front of God.

Abram has met the Visitor before – 4 times before actually. He is getting to know God but he understands how hard it will be to fulfil God's challenge – hmmm 'walk before me' – okay that might be possible, mostly. But 'be blameless.' Sheesh – God has got to be kidding. And Abram falls down in humility.

Probably he is thinking something like:

You are God, I am Abram. I'm gonna stuff this up God. I can't do it. I can't hold that kind of focus for much longer than an hour or two on a really good day. What am I going to do on a bad day?

As always God comes back with a promise:

You are going to be the forebear of many nations. And I'm changing your name. You are no longer Abram. Now you are Abraham.

The meaning of both names is similar – exalted father. So why does God bother renaming him? Does God just want to add in another syllable to make it longer; sound more important?

The change of a name is much more important than that. It reveals Abram's change in status. So what is the new status? With each one of God's visits, Abram is becoming more of a partner with God. God responds to Abram's words and actions. They have a dialogue. They are becoming friends and not just Master / Servant. Abram's name change to Abraham is a formal recognition of their friendship. ²

God views Abraham as someone he can trust; someone he can have a mutual relationship with. That friendship requires something of both parties. God will provide many offspring. Abraham must choose again and again to honour his friendship with God; to keep his focus on that relationship. Rights always come with responsibilities. You must keep my covenant, our agreement to walk together. Friends trust each other and look to each other to keep their promises. Abraham and Sarah both need to keep their focus on God and not try to do stuff on their own. They have already learned that complicates things unnecessarily.

Now let's have a look Jesus at Jesus perspective on focus.

Jesus and his followers are walking around some of the local villages sharing the Good News about God's Kingdom. The followers or apprentices are on a learning journey as they watch how Jesus does stuff and hear his amazing teaching. At one stage Jesus asks them who they think he is. Peter, whom I love, gets it right for a change: "You are the Christ."

² The New Testament describes Abraham as a friend of God. James 2:23

Peter had a clear focus for a bit; then his focus was completely clouded by what Jesus said the Christ would have to suffer. How on earth can having to die be good news? Peter didn't get what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. When what Jesus said didn't align with his ideas Peter totally lost his focus and in doing so, he lost the plot.

Not only did Peter lose his focus but he tried to make Jesus lose his. I suppose at least he didn't do it publicly. Peter told Jesus off away from the others. But it's essential that Jesus maintains his focus – that he keeps moving towards God's plan.

Jesus won't be distracted by Peter's clouded vision. "Get behind me Satan" is more severe than Peter deserves surely? But is it? Peter runs the danger of perverting God's plan as he tries to make Jesus lose his focus. It doesn't work. Peter gets both barrels from Jesus who will not be diverted from his purpose.

Jesus uses this moment to clarify what the focus of his followers, all his followers – now and then – needs to be. We, who follow Jesus, are Jesus' friends. Just like Abraham was/is still God's friend and partner. We are partners with God – through Jesus.

So yay! That means we get to suffer like Jesus. Jesus died. We too must die – to our self-focused way of being. We must exchange that self-focus to a God-focus.

Being God-focused means living in the shadow of the cross. It is an on-going process; it involves lots of little decisions. We decide again and again to give up what we want and go with what God wants.

That will be painful at times; but, it also life-giving. As we focus on God, we see who we are in Jesus Christ. We see we can live in the Holy Spirit's power,. Perhaps God doesn't give us a new name like he did Abram and Sarah, but he does give us a new identity, a new status in Christ. That status is one of a friend and partner with God-self - amazing!

Jesus lost his status, through the demeaning and shameful cross, in order that we might enjoy status as friends of God.

Sometimes lose our God-focus when life gets complicated. Sometimes the devil steps in and tricks us. Sometimes we are just silly unfocused human beings. We can lose our way.

But the Lord always provides opportunities for us to refocus on him, to realign ourselves with God's will and God's way. As we look to the Lord, he will provide the way we should walk – sometimes that clarity only reveals one step at a time. Sometimes the pathway further ahead is clear. However that is for us, as long as we focus on the Lord, we will stay on track.

Like Brandon Flowers, who wrote the song I quoted in the beginning, we will have times where we are discouraged and confused. We will have times where we are

not sure where we are going. But in the midst of despair and discouragement, God will give us the next step for us to take. God will give us that because God's love for us is consistent and more powerful than we can begin to imagine.

It feels like we are alone sometimes. It does. We must not pretend otherwise. But our feelings let us down, because God is always with us. God has a plan for our lives no matter how old or frail we are. God has good things for us as we focus on him and his love.

Often the good things come in the middle of trouble and strife. Whatever season you find yourself in right now, whether your focus is clear or whether life seems very muddled, the Lord wants to come to you. Won't you let him?

Open your hearts and invite him to bring you clarity. Invite our Almighty God to show you a way through the things you are facing right now. Allow yourself to see just how loved you are by God.