



↗ CHARACTER



## HOW'S YOUR PERSPECTIVE?

“A mother enters her daughter’s bedroom and sees a letter over the bed. With the worst premonition, she reads it, with trembling hands:

It is with great regret and sorrow that I’m telling you that I eloped with my new boyfriend. I found real passion and he is so nice, with all his piercings and tattoos and his big motorcycle. But it’s not only that mom, I’m pregnant and Ahmed said that we would be very happy in his trailer in the woods. He wants to have many more children with me and that’s one of my dreams. I’ve learned that marijuana doesn’t hurt anyone and we’ll be growing it for us and his friends, who are providing us with all the cocaine and ecstasies we may want. In the meantime, we’ll pray for the science to find the AIDS cure, for Ahmed to get better, he deserves it. Don’t worry Mom, I’m 15 years old now and I know how to take care of myself. Some day I’ll visit for you to know your grandchildren. Your daughter, Judith

PS: Mom, it's not true. I'm at the neighbor's house. I just wanted to show you that there are worst things in life than the school's report card that's in my desk's drawer...I love you!"

(Anonymous Email)

2

Perspective is a wonderful thing, isn't it? Within a ten-minute period I heard that a college friend's father unexpectedly passed away over the weekend followed by a student stopping by to inform me of his car accident in which no one was hurt, but he was obviously still upset about it. Life isn't always what you expect it to be.

As children we are always taught that we can do anything or be anyone. Life isn't always that easy though: accidents tragically take loved ones from us, hearts are broken, dreams die, thorns in our flesh repeatedly pierce us, doors close, we experience unfulfilling jobs, people long for a child or long for a spouse, and we wake up and ask "where has the time gone? Is this where I thought I would be? Is this how I thought my life would be?" Life isn't always what you expect it to be.

And yet, throughout Scripture it is clear that, "in his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). In speaking with a dear friend this weekend, she reminded me that many of the great saints' lives in Scripture were drastically different than they thought they would be. As I drove home today, I scribbled down a few examples who come to mind, mainly, Moses, Paul, and Abraham.

Moses grew up as an Egyptian leading a pampered life in Pharaoh's palace. His world came crashing down when he witnessed an Egyptian guard beating a Hebrew slave. Sensing the injustice, Moses stepped in and ended up killing the guard. Realizing his act had become public knowledge, he fled. Soon after, he saved a flock of victimized women. A thankful father, Jethro, asked Moses to serve as a shepherd with him. Moses' second phase of life as a shepherd ran smoothly until God spoke to him and convinced the reluctant Moses to liberate His people. Not surprisingly, the Lord knew what He was doing. He knew the culmination of Moses' experiences would prepare him for his ultimate calling. Life isn't always what you expect it to be.

In the same way, Paul, reared in a financially successful home, and by age thirteen Saul (Paul), a Roman and a Jew, was an avid scholar who traveled to Jerusalem to study under the world renowned, Gamaliel. In Philippians he states, “If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (Philippians 3:4-6). Paul was a young man who had the world by the tail and yet, the Lord had a different plan for him. He transformed Paul’s passion, intellect, and zeal once used to destroy the church to build the church instead. Life isn’t always what you expect it to be.

Unlike his colleagues, Abraham was Israel’s founding father – a man of great faith who walked with God in obedience and enjoyed intimate fellowship with God. At age seventy-five he was called to leave his “country, [his] people, and [his] father’s household and go to the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). In addition, the Lord promised to make him into a great nation, bless him and his offspring, as well as give glory to his name. Years passed and Abraham’s wife remained barren. On numerous occasions, Abraham lied in order to make things go his way; he was far from perfect. And yet on the whole, Abraham remained faithful in the midst of extreme adversity. Then, when hope had run short, the Lord blessed him with a child whom he eventually asked Abraham to sacrifice. Life isn’t always what you expect it to be.

All of these men had to withstand extreme adversity, times of uncertainty and times of waiting. These challenges all served their purpose, to prepare these men so that they might give God the most glory by their lives. J.I. Packer suggests in *Knowing God* that “our perplexing trials: These things are written for our learning, for the same wisdom that ordered the paths which God’s saints trod in Bible times orders the Christian’s life today. We should not, therefore, be too taken aback when unexpected and upsetting and discouraging things happen to us now. What do they mean? Simply that God in his wisdom means to make something of us which we have not attained yet, and he is dealing with us accordingly.” Ultimately, our

heart's desire should be to give God the most glory. God has wonderful things in store for our lives if we can stay the course, remain obedient, and never give up hope in His promises. In those challenging times when our lives aren't what we expect them to be, do you

4 find yourself asking, "where's God?"

Here's an illustration that might help refocus your gaze: Where's Waldo? Where's Waldo? Yes, that red and white striped shirt, glasses wearing young lad who enjoys hiding himself in pictures. You know he's in the picture, but sometimes he is easier to find than others. The more time spent staring at Where's Waldo pictures the easier it is to find him because you know what he looks like. In the same way, the clearer the picture you have of Christ, the easier it will be to find him in the midst of all the confusion. Fixate your eyes on Christ, and everything else will fall by the wayside. Let the saints' lives of the past serve as hope for your future. Life isn't always what you expect it to be, but stay obedient, cling to His promises and it can be even better: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6).



## SEASONED ADVICE:

Nancy Beach, 47, Teaching Pastor/Programming Director at Willow Creek Community Church, Barrington, Illinois: In my twenties, I learned that I could experience the loss of a dream and trust God to redirect me toward another fulfilling passion. After college, my dream was to become a producer/director of high impact, excellent films and/or television programs. I sincerely believed my pursuit of that dream would most honor God with the gifts entrusted to me. My plan was to marry late (if at all) and move to Los Angeles. But then I met Warren, and in just ten months we chose to get married. That proved to be a great decision by far, but Warren's business was squarely planted in the Chicago area. So was a church I helped launch called Willow Creek. Our church had a very bumpy first few

years, caused by the sins and immaturity of all of us young leaders. I was hurt in the early years of the church, and very tentative about continuing ministry there. But my heavenly Father guided me to invest my artistic gifts and dreams in the local church, specifically at Willow. I thought at first that was a loser option. Twenty-one years later, I am deeply grateful for a ministry adventure I never could have imagined. God replaced my original dream with one that fits me, stretches me, and fulfills me to my toes. I could never have predicted this in my twenties. I had no idea. And now when life doesn't go according to my plans, I try to remember that God just might have a better idea...



## POINTS TO PONDER:

1. How is your life different than you expected it to be?
2. What adversity has been the most difficult to overcome?
3. What have you learned through that adversity?