



# **PASTOR NOBODY**

Encouragements for  
God's forgotten heroes

John Benton

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## Introduction

The majority of churches are fairly small. They are located in out of the way towns. If you are called to be a pastor it is quite likely to be one of these you have taken on or will take on.

You may well labour there for many years and not become well-known, or a conference speaker etc. That's the reality of the statistics. When your church people mention you to other Christians, they are likely to be met with the response, 'Pastor Who?' Your name will be unfamiliar.

The work of the ministry has its joys but basically is hard and repetitive. Each week there are people to visit, study to be done and the Sunday deadlines to be met. A pastor of an ordinary church is unlikely to be well-paid. You didn't go into this career for the money. Maybe you aren't particularly proud of the church building – it's probably a bit broken down in some backstreet. And that is where you spend a lot of your time in a cold, damp backroom of the chapel, studying and praying.

What is more, the conferences you go to often tend to tell you that you are way behind the times and you've been doing it all wrong anyway. 'You shouldn't be applying Scripture like that....or doing evangelism like that...'

### **Almost anonymous**

You are a 'nobody'. Actually, in entering the ministry, you chose to be a nobody – certainly in the eyes of the world. And it's more than likely the same in the eyes of the wider church. Maybe you set out in ministry hoping to become the twenty first century equivalent of C. H. Spurgeon (and there's nothing wrong with that. The church could do with another Spurgeon). But now it is clear that is very unlikely to happen. You are almost anonymous. It doesn't seem like the greatest 'life-story' to be living.

It's a struggle to be a nobody. It is not easy to embrace obscurity. Our sinful pride wants profile and recognition and even applause. Our contemporary culture encourages us in such ideas because the air we breathe today is all about self and celebrity. People have become 'lovers of themselves', 2 Timothy 3.2. We are influenced to think similarly. So we swim against the tide, not just in what we believe, but in our very mode of existence. We want to live for Christ alone – but there is that in us which would also like some recognition for ourselves.

This struggle is well known to the New Testament. Jesus' disciples went through the same temptations. Commenting on James and John seeking celebrity status at Jesus' right hand in glory, Calvin writes: 'This story is a clear mirror of human vanity. It teaches that ambition or some other fault of the flesh is often entwined with a right and godly zeal, so that Christ's followers have a different aim from what they should.' In Matthew's version other members of family get involved. Their mother wants them to be prominent men too. There can be all kinds of pressure on us to 'succeed'.

How can we learn to be content and accept the lowly work to which God has called us to dedicate our lives? How can we cope with feeling forgotten, neglected and unimportant in ministry? How can we be 'pastor nobody' and be okay with that? This is a vast subject and a life's battle. In this booklet we will simply try to build a framework of 5 basic ideas to help us cope.

## **1: A Theology for the Forgotten**

We will always find life hard to handle unless we see ourselves and our existence in the context of God. He is our Father and ultimately our environment, Acts 17.28. There's much that could be said here, but a 'go-to' passage is Isaiah 40. It would be good to open your Bible there at this point.

The background is that God's people are going to be in exile for 70 years (a whole lifetime!). Crushed and defeated, it will feel like God has forgotten them, they don't matter to him. They are complaining, 'My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God,' v27. And in that 'forgotten' state, their great temptation will be to forget, to give up on God. They feel forgotten and that leads to a failure to remember who God is. The Lord has to challenge them twice, 'Do you not know? Have you not heard?' v21 v28. Again he asks, 'Has it not been told you from the beginning?' v21. It's same for us.

In our state of seeing ourselves as forgotten and unimportant men, we tend to let go of what we really should know about God. The very things we have preached to others since the beginning of our ministries somehow lose their reality and get lost to our thinking. They get neglected amidst the everyday battle of our lives.

But though we may have forgotten these things, God is still God. He has not diminished. He is still there.

### **Feeling abandoned by God?**

Let me just flag up 10 attributes of God mentioned here in Isaiah 40 – and relate them to the kinds of things we tell ourselves when we're 'nobodies.' It's a theology for forgotten people.

God's faithfulness The prophet says 'Here is your God' v9 to a nation in exile because of sin, v2. Pastor, you may be thinking, 'I'm so sinful and useless I wouldn't be surprised if God has given up on me.' The exiles may well have thought this. After all, the exile was a judgment on the nation for sin. But no, God had not washed his hands of them. 'Here is *your* God', Isaiah writes. God is faithful to his imperfect people.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah is writing years in advance to speak into this discouragement. Isaiah's ministry took place during the eighth century BC, whereas the exile would occur in the sixth century BC.

God's knowledge God gave this message to the prophet Isaiah over 100 years before the exile. This is a striking example of God's omniscience. It is not as if God has only just found out about it. Their sufferings as refugees in the foreign empire of Babylon is all known to God years in advance. And you too, pastor, are known to God. Just as he created and knows the stars in the sky so that not one of them is missing, v26, so he knows you and your situation. Never doubt it.

God's sovereignty When we labour in obscure places and seem to make so little progress, then doubts assail us. As far as the exiles were concerned, the foreign powers had triumphed. Jerusalem had been captured. Babylon had won. Doubts will insinuate their way into our minds too. 'Is secularism just too much for God?' Such thoughts will make us feel even more like 'nobodies' who are simply wasting their lives for a mistaken cause. But the answer of Isaiah 40 and indeed of subsequent history is a resounding 'No!' The actuality is summed up like this: 'Surely the nations are like a drop in the bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust,' v15. To the shopkeeper weighing out his wares the fine dust is insignificant. It makes no difference to his dealings. 'He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing,' v23. The world may say the Church is finished. But they are totally wrong. God rules. His purposes will come to pass. And pastor, you are part of the Sovereign's plans.

God's love In our small and rundown situation, we can doubt this too. You might not admit it to others but pastor, are you cynically telling yourself: 'well God's building his church but elsewhere. He doesn't care about us!' But that is not true. For all those who are suffering, the Lord tells the prophet, 'Comfort, comfort my people,' v1. That repetition underlines God's loving concern. The Lord, 'carries us close to his heart,' v11. You are special to him. Just as he calls each of the stars by name, v26, so he knows your name.

God's wisdom Hidden from the limelight, we may assess what God has tasked us with very negatively. 'It's senseless. My work seems pointless', we may be telling ourselves. But though we may not understand, God's wisdom is above ours. Isaiah reminds us, 'Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counsellor. Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, or who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?' v13,14. Are you pastor, putting yourself forward to be the one who should tell the Lord what he should do and what he is getting wrong in your neck of the woods? Actually, he is wise beyond our grasp.

Calm down. Remember the histories of the 3 Js - Joseph, Job, Jesus. In each case everything appeared to be disastrous but it ended in triumph. Joseph seemed forgotten in a dungeon but 'God meant it for good,' Genesis 50.20. He was wise enough to know what he was about.

God's worth Again let's try to get inside your mind, pastor. In forgotten situations has the question ever occurred to you, 'am I sacrificing the best years of my life for nothing?' Perhaps you wonder where your childhood dreams have gone about making something of yourself – making 'a real difference' in the world. There is nothing wrong with such dreams. But actually, you have been called to something far higher. You have been summoned to serve the God who created all things and who is in himself of greater worth than all the universe. 'Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals for burnt offerings. Before him all nations are as nothing; they are regarded as worthless and less than nothing,' v16. Of course, the world and its people are worth something. But there is something about God himself which is totally incalculable. He is of infinite worth. And he has named you to be his servant.

God's eternity Secularism tells us that religion is on the way out. It will fade as mankind becomes more intelligent and capable. The propaganda can have an effect on us. We are tempted to ask, 'Am I just serving a God who is past his sell-by date? Somehow the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems beyond him?' But that is not true. 'The LORD is the everlasting God,' v28. Jesus is risen from the dead in the power of an endless life. Your work is not bound by the up and down fashions of what fallen humanity finds credible at any moment in time. Your work in Christ is eternal.

God's reality Does all this really matter? The 'tacit atheism' of the contemporary world will tell us that Christianity is just one of many religions and we are simply serving a figment of our own, or someone else's, imagination. But the facts of history refute that. Against all the seeming odds, the Jewish people did return from exile in Babylon just as Isaiah said they would. Instead of being lost like so many other ancient civilizations, they are still with us today. The idols come to nothing. But you serve the living God. 'To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?', v18. The idols are man-made, v19-20, but our God is real.

God's incomparability Sometimes the church takes you for granted, pastor. It makes much more of people like businessmen, lawyers and doctors in the

congregation than it does of you. Whereas ministers used to have some social standing, today they tend not to – sadly even among Christians. Especially this is true in the UK. You have given your whole life to the church and yet some in the congregation look upon you as some kind of eccentric who couldn't find anything better to do with his life. Again, this can help to make the pastor feel like a 'nobody.' But again, Isaiah would disagree. He would tell you that your work is incomparable, because you serve a God who is beyond compare. He is 'the Holy One', v25.

God's availability At the end of this wonderful chapter, Isaiah gets very practical. We can feel like a 'nobody' especially when we are tired and worn out. The exiles were no doubt tired of hard work and second-class citizenship in a strange land. They needed strength to carry on. And so do we as pastors. When we feel ourselves crushed by our circumstances and the demands of the church, we ask ourselves (perhaps with a note of despair in our voice) 'where can I turn?', 'I'm worn out?' Having given us a breathtaking view of the God we belong to, Isaiah gives us some encouragement by reminding us of how God is close by to empower us. 'He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint,' v31.

What a storehouse of theology we find here for those struggling with feeling abandoned by God. It is a mini course in systematics written specifically for forgotten people.

### **Take your own advice**

This is a theology for weary pastors crushed by their situation. Pastor nobody – you have to plug in to these attributes of God. One of the problems with us is that we are so used to telling other people what they should do that we are sometimes out of practice at taking notice ourselves of what God says. Pastor, you and I need these truths about God. Review them often. Apply them to your own life.

And when, in his Providence, something happens which very much indicates God hasn't forgotten you – note it in your diary and hold on to it. Take a quiet prayer day once a quarter to reflect on God and his goodness. Hope in him. Wait upon him. Instead of living on the attention of others – live on God. He is your audience. He appreciates you.

## **2: A Christology for the Ambitious**

It is right to have ambitions. God made human beings in his image and to be purposeful in life. He set Adam and Eve the task of filling the earth, subduing it, Genesis 1.28, and hence bringing out its full potential. Hence we are made, not for laziness, but to be achievers in life.

To have ambitions in our ministry is natural. But, of course, in our fallen state we have to face the fact that ambition can now take a sinful turn. Do we want to see the church grow for the glory of Christ or for the glory of our own name? Do we wish to be a great preacher in order to see many sinners saved or to enhance our own reputation? The 'successful church' can become a ministry idol.

All pastors have to battle with these temptations, but the pastor who feels himself to be overlooked and of no account may well have to battle in a way others do not. As we grapple with this problem, it helps to focus afresh on the Lord Jesus Christ himself and to consider his ministry. Now he is rightly exalted to the highest place. But during his time on earth that was definitely not the case.

### **Embracing Obscurity**

A very helpful book titled *Embracing Obscurity*<sup>2</sup> compares the descriptions Scripture gives of Christ and Satan. When I read this, I found it very striking. It's a message the church, and especially its pastors, need to contemplate today. The great description of Christ is, of course, found in Philippians 2.5-11. But in Isaiah 14.12-16, we have a description of the overthrow of the king of Babylon – worldliness inspired by Satan. Similarly, Ezekiel 28.12-17 speaks of the King of Tyre. These texts give insight into Satan's attitude. Consider the comparison.

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<sup>2</sup> *Embracing Obscurity: becoming nothing in the light of God's everything*, by Anonymous, B&H Publishing, 2012

| <b>Christ</b><br>Philippians 2.5-11  | <b>Satan</b><br>Isaiah 14.12-16 / Ezekiel 28.12-17                                      |
|--|---|
| Is by very nature God, v6  | Is by nature a creature of God, Ezekiel 28.15   |
| Did not cling to or use his rightful position to his own advantage, v7                     | Pursued deity even though it did not belong to him, Isaiah 14.13-14                     |
| Humbled himself and made himself of <u>no</u> reputation, v7                               | Bragged and plotted incessantly in his heart, Isaiah 14.13-14                           |
| Came to serve the people he had created, v7  | Sought to rule over those he did not create, Isaiah 14.13-14                            |
| As God he stepped down to become man   | As an angel tried to step up to become equal with 'the Most High'                       |
| Chose obedience to the will of God, even though that path included obscurity and death, v8 | Rebelled against God. Beauty, wisdom and privileges weren't enough, Ezekiel 28.12-15,17 |
| <b>Therefore...</b>  | <b>Therefore...</b>   |
| God has highly exalted him, v9   | God has cast him down, Isaiah 14.12; Ezekiel 28.17                                      |
| Every knee will bow to him in heaven and earth, v10  | Heaven and earth will marvel at his destruction, Isaiah 14.16                           |
| God is glorified in his Son, v11   | God is glorified in judgment  |
| <b>Life summarized</b>   | <b>Life summarized</b>  |
| <i>Humility followed by honour</i>   | <i>Pride followed by humiliation</i>  |

The well-known exhortation of Philippians is 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus....' That applies to pastors too.

As we compare Jesus and the devil, how sobering to think to ourselves, 'which pattern is my life actually following?' We have to ask of our motives and path in ministry, 'Am I really like Christ or more like Satan?'

We are pastors, servants of God. But how sobering it is to realize that once Satan was once a servant of God. And it was pride which made him fall.

Notice how Paul applies this very fact to leadership in the church. As he gives instructions about the appointment of elders in a local congregation, he writes: 'He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil,' 1 Timothy 3.6. And, of course, it is not only young men or the recently converted who are prone to pride. It can happen at any stage in ministry. Perhaps the starkest way I can put this is to ask, 'What makes the difference between an angel and a demon?' The answer is one word – pride.

Why do we find it so difficult to be 'unknown'? A lot of it has to do with pride.

### **The humble God**

This is a Christology, a way of understanding the Lord Jesus Christ, meant to humble those of us who are in the ministry and to put the brake on that selfish ambition and drive for status.

In the light of Philippians 2, here is another way to summarize the challenge to us all: 'If God has been humble, who on earth do I think I am to be proud?' – too proud to be an obscure pastor! Sometimes we have to step back from ourselves and ask, 'Who do you think you are?'

God has privileged you to be a pastor. He has entrusted you with his two most precious possessions – his truth and his church. But, forgive me for asking, are you too like Satan? The privileges God has given you are not enough for you. Here is a Christology for the ambitious pastor to contemplate. Sometimes we have to get down on our knees and search our hearts and confess our sins as pastors.

It's good to have ambitions for God's kingdom. But let's make sure that they are really for God's kingdom and not primarily about us.

### **The exalted Christ**

Going back to Philippians 2, we must not forget that the life of Jesus does not end with his humiliation. It terminates with him given the Name above all others in glory.

Paul's point as he writes to the Philippians is ultimately to encourage them. The humble path here might be difficult and even excruciating at times for us. But following Christ, it arrives in glory. We are to keep that in mind during our darkest and most painful moments. If we look for comfort here on earth, we will be disappointed. But this place is not the last stop on the journey. Pastor, keep your eyes on the destination.

The words of the puritan Richard Baxter are wise: 'It is contrary to the nature of faith for a believer to seek peace in earthly enjoyments. Our present pilgrimage is a prison, yet alas, we too commonly do this. By this we kill our comforts and complain they are missing. It is folly to expect any stable peace or solid joy that does not come from Christ as the fountain. O that Christians would learn to live with one eye on Christ crucified and the other on his coming in glory! If everlasting joys were more in our thought, spiritual joys would abound more in our hearts. No wonder you are comfortless when heaven is forgotten.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Voices from the Past: Puritan Devotional Readings, Volume 1*, Edited by Richard Rushing, Banner of Truth, 2009

### 3: A Soteriology for the Overlooked

We are by nature dreadful sinners – we know it. We deserve the wrath of a holy God – we know it. Conscience rings out loud and clear. We are pastors, yet we fail so often. We can despair of ourselves. Yet the grace of God promises us salvation. And the linchpin of it all is our union with Christ.

#### **Union with Christ**

In this context of thinking about ourselves as ‘nobodies’, it is helpful to remember again that our salvation is nothing to do with our achievement or our status. It is to do with being joined to Jesus.

- That union with Christ has its roots in eternity past. Its origins are of old in God the Father’s decree of election. God is worthy of our praise because, ‘he chose us in him’ – chosen in Christ – ‘before the creation of the world,’ Ephesians 1.3. Elsewhere Paul reminds us of the free grace involved in election. God ‘has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time...’ 2 Timothy 1.9. Our union with Christ was begun not by ourselves, but by God in eternity past.
- That union was the basis for Christ, the Son’s, substitutionary work at the cross. One of the ways the NT sees that union is Christ being the husband and the church being his bride and the two are ‘one flesh’ – he taking our sins, acting on our behalf. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church’, Ephesians 5.31, 32. Christ, by this union, is the head of the church and so can rightly act as our representative. And so it is that Paul exhorts husbands to ‘love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...’ Ephesians 5.25. Through our union with him, we are justified ‘in Christ’, Romans 8.1.
- That union became effective for us as God the Holy Spirit brought us to personal repentance and faith. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes and brings us to trust the Lord Jesus so consciously uniting us to Christ – thus making us righteous in God’s sight. We despair because our sins are great. But Christ is greater. ‘But now a righteousness from God, apart

from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe', Romans 3.21, 22. Because of Christ and our union with him by faith, we need despair no more. 'We have been justified through faith, we have peace with God,' Romans 5.1.

The whole of our salvation centres on our union with Christ effected by the Persons of the Trinity. The Father chose us in Christ. We are redeemed in Christ, the Son. The Holy Spirit brought us to faith in Christ.

This is our experience as Christians, and this is what we preach as pastors. And, of course, we must preach this to ourselves.

### **Unrecognizable**

But having laid this firm foundation and seen our high privilege of being one with Jesus, there is something of which we need to take note. In a number of places the NT reminds us that this union with Christ is not something recognizable by the world.

We are 'nobodies.' We are overlooked people, perhaps even despised people. It adds to our sense of despair. But we should not expect any different because all that makes for our salvation and the great privileges of who we have become in Christ are concealed from the eyes of our fellow men and women. In that sense, ours is a cryptic salvation.

Let's remind ourselves of some of the Bible passages which teach this.

Colossians 3.1-4: 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.'

We have died to the world. The kind of life we live is not something the sinful world could ever understand and certainly could never applaud. Our lives are hidden from the world just as Christ is at present hidden behind the clouds of glory in heaven. But the day will come when we are recognized. It is not yet. We are united to Christ. Therefore our day of recognition is when Christ returns. So don't despair. Learn to accept your present obscurity.

1 John 3.1-2: 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.'

We should not expect to be people of profile – Jesus wasn't. If the people of the world couldn't recognize the Son of God, they won't recognize us, God's adopted children. Joined to Jesus we should expect neglect. But again the text reminds us that this will not always been the case. We may be overlooked now. But that is not the end of the story.

Galatians 6.14: 'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.'

Paul says that the world has become like a dead corpse to us. That includes the world's craving to fit in, to be accepted and its desire for self-promotion. And the converse is true too. He says he has been crucified to the world. People, like us Christians, who don't want to fall in and get in step with the world's values of self, style and celebrity, stink to the world. We are like a bad odour in their nostrils. The cross in which we rejoice because we recognize our sins finds no place in a self-righteous world – and nor do we.

### **Celebrity in the church?**

'It's not from the world I want profile – but the church!' Do I hear a pastor silently saying something like that to himself? 'After all I've given my life to serve the church, haven't I?'

Paul addresses that in 1 Corinthians. The Corinthians' concern was with celebrity preachers. Paul condemned their attitude as infantile and worldly. And this is how he sums up his own attitude to all this.

1 Corinthians 4.1-5: 'Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore,

judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.'

Paul's down-to-earth thrust is, 'I'm no longer interested in what the world thinks – or even what other Christians think of me – I have an audience of one – God!' His assessment alone is the one that counts.

Churches ought to give their leaders love and respect, 1 Thessalonians 5.12, 13; Hebrews 13.17. But sadly often they don't. We must remember that before all else we primarily serve not the church, but the Lord.

However, though we are totally insignificant to the world, because of our salvation 'in Christ' we are of huge significance before God. We are forgiven, healed, adopted, heirs of the world to come. The fallen, frustrated creation stands on tiptoe waiting for us to be revealed, Romans 8.21. The revealing of our true identity in Christ goes hand in hand with the transformation of the universe! Let's live on our union with Christ and such thoughts as these.

#### 4: An Ecclesiology for the Downtrodden

Have you ever been startled by the beginning of Acts? 'In my former book Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach,' Acts 1.1.

It is that word 'began' which makes us sit up and take notice. What Luke wrote in his Gospel was evidently only the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The implication is, of course, that the Lord Jesus Christ continued to be at work through his church from heaven in the power of the Spirit, in what Luke now records in Acts.

This is underlined by the fact that whatever the church or the apostles are recorded as doing in Luke's second volume is done 'in the name of Jesus'. It is he who is actually acting and is responsible for what happens, Acts 3.6; 4.10; 16.18. The Christians are merely his agents.

And this is further underlined by the fact that we find that so many aspects of what happens in the Acts seem to closely parallel incidents with Jesus in the Gospels. As readers we find ourselves reacting by saying to ourselves, 'that is so like Jesus.' Let me give you a few simple examples:

- Acts 7.60. As he is martyred, Stephen with his dying breath prays, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' That is so similar to the prayer of Jesus as he is crucified, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,' Luke 23.34.
- Acts 9.40. As the apostle Peter raises Dorcas from the dead, we are reminded of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter. He puts everyone outside the room, v40, just as Jesus did, Mark 5.39. And the words which Peter uses, 'Tabitha get up,' v40 are so similar to the Aramaic of Jesus addressing the little girl, '*Talitha kourai*', Mark 5.41, that we can't help but notice.
- Acts 12. 3,4. When Peter is arrested following the martyrdom of James the brother of John, he is put in prison and faces death as King Herod wishes to please the Jews. The fact that it happens at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, that is during Passover time, again reminds us of the Passion of Jesus. In Peter's case though, an angel does come to rescue God's servant.

- Acts 23.2. Just as Jesus, at his trial before the Sanhedrin, was struck in the presence of the high priest, Matthew 26.67, the apostle Paul is given the very same treatment.

There are more examples we could find. But the implication is that by his Spirit, the Lord Jesus is continuing his ministry through his church. And we believe, of course, he is doing the same today. And, of course, what we are identifying here follows on somewhat from our previous chapter. We are united to Christ. The church is therefore seen as the body of Christ. Indeed, as Paul found in his previous existence as Saul of Tarsus, to persecute the church is to persecute Jesus himself, Acts 9.4. We are the body on earth through which the exalted Christ still acts in the power of his Spirit. Here is a great insight which gives us our understanding of the church – our ecclesiology.

### **In our Master's footsteps**

But the particular emphasis we need to highlight here is this. Because we are the body of Christ, then that just as Jesus was treated, so the church will be treated. Jesus spelled this out to his disciples. 'No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me,' John 15.20, 21.

With this in mind, we find some striking parallels in Jesus' teaching between himself and his church. In the NT the 'last days' include the whole period from the Day of Pentecost to the Second Coming of Christ, Acts 2.17. That being the case, the apostles lived in the last days and so do we.

In Mark 13 the Lord teaches about the 'last days' in the run up to his return and the judgment of the world, of which the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Romans would be a foretaste. In the next chapters, Mark 14 and 15, we are given the eye-witness account of the 'last days' of Jesus before his crucifixion. When we compare the two, we find repeatedly that what will happen in the 'last days' of world history (which is also the church age) finds initial expression in what happens to Jesus in his Passion. The parallels between Mark 13 and Mark 14 – 15 are very striking. Again, let us sketch out some of the links.

| THE CHURCH / WORLD   | JESUS CHRIST  |
|--|---|
| Temple defiled and destroyed, Mark 13.2, 14                    | Temple curtain torn in two, Mark 15.38                      |
| 'Many will come in my name' to deceive, Mark 13.6              | Barabbas (= son of father) is chosen, by crowds Mark 15.11  |
| Christians will stand before councils and governors, Mark 13.8 | Christ stands before Sanhedrin and Pilate, Mark 14.53; 15.1 |
| Christians will be betrayed, Mark 13.12                        | One of the disciples betrays Jesus, Mark 14.17; 14.44, 45   |
| Christians will be beaten and killed, Mark 13.9, 12            | Jesus is beaten and crucified, Mark 15.15, 19, 25           |
| The world will be deprived of light, Mark 13.24                | Darkness as Jesus is on the cross, Mark 15.33               |
| The Son of Man will come in the clouds, Mark 13.26             | Christ witnesses to his coming in the clouds, Mark 14.62    |

More parallels can be uncovered as we widen the investigation to include other Gospels. For example, Jesus speaks of earthquakes in the last days, Mark 13.8 and Matthew records an earthquake as Jesus died, Matthew 27.51. Jesus says that not only will Christians stand before councils and governors but before kings, Mark 13.8. Luke records that during the night of his arrest, Jesus was taken to stand before King Herod, Luke 23.6-11.

### **The cross and then the crown**

Enough has been said for us to realize that, generally speaking, the experience of the church – and therefore of its pastors and teachers – will follow the same kind of trajectory as that of the Lord Jesus Christ. Any public applause he may have gained, as at his entry into Jerusalem, was fickle and very fleeting. It should not surprise us if the faithful church and its pastors are treated similarly. Broadly the experience of Jesus was one of facing opposition and eventually persecution from the world. So too, the church will be a despised down trodden group of people in the world.

Looking at the path Jesus had to tread, it pains us to say it, but the truth is that even his disciples let him down. One of the chief disciples, Peter, denied he ever knew Jesus. Another disciple, Judas of course, betrayed him to death. It is very difficult for pastors when the church does not get behind them but instead gives

them a rough time. But when that happens, pastor, you should not conclude that the gospel is not true and that you have been wasting your time. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, record that the very same things happened to Jesus himself.

We are not to have unrealistic expectations of the church or what life as a pastor should be. Don't be downcast when you or your congregation feel yourselves to be undistinguished and always struggling at some level. The 'prosperity gospel' and sadly, also comfortable, glossy evangelicalism are both a lie.

Here, in this life, like Jesus, the church is called to carry a cross, Mark 8.34. But a crown of glory awaits! <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> If you want to follow through on this it is worth studying the way the apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians, defends his ministry against the claims of the glamorous 'super-apostles' who were trying to take over the church in Corinth. His argument is fundamentally that true ministry is marked not by ease and charisma, but by being patterned on the earthly ministry of Jesus.

## **5: A Piety for the Unnoticed**

The most important part of our work as pastors is a hidden work. What really counts in the ministry takes place in secret.

This is because when it comes to spiritual things, it is the activity of God, the Holy Spirit that counts. God's word to Zerubbabel concerning the restoration of Jerusalem after the exile is God's word to us too: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty,' Zechariah 4.6. The NT church was powerless without the ongoing operations of the Holy Spirit, Acts 1.8.

The point not to miss is that the Lord Jesus tells us that there is an indissoluble bond between the action of the Spirit and our prayers. 'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him,' Luke 11.13. And for Jesus, prayer is not an ostentatious thing but a hidden and humble thing. It fits most easily with those who are happy to accept being unnoticed.

The piety in which Jesus encourages us is the piety of the secret place.

- 'Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven,' Matthew 6.1.
- 'But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret,' Matthew 6.3.
- 'But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you,' Matthew 6.6.
- 'When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you,' Matthew 6.17, 18.

Our most important labour will be secret and unseen. We may be obscure and unknown pastors, but so what? Christ calls us to embrace our hiddenness. Withdraw to the place of prayer, accept it and rejoice in it! We need to

understand afresh the significance of being unseen men.

### **The pastor's prayers**

Such secret piety is eschatologically of enormous significance. The prayers of God's people – including those of pastors – rise, like sweet incense, to God's throne in heaven. The book of Revelation explains.

'When he (Christ) opened the seventh seal, there was a silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.

'Another angel who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer with the prayers of the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up to God from the angel's hand. The angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it to the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

'Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them...'  
Revelation 8.1-6

As the subsequent verses explain, the trumpets are judgments which come on earth, warning of the coming day of judgment and so calling people to repentance. The silence in heaven, prior to these judgments, is related to the prayers of the saints (including pastors!).

The great Bible commentator Leon Morris says, 'The saints appear insignificant to men at large. But in the sight of God they matter. Even great cosmic cataclysms are held back on their account. And the praises of angels give way to silence so that the prayers of the saints may be heard.'<sup>5</sup> God listens to our prayers. Our prayers are tied up with the worldwide acts of God.

Leon Morris goes on to quote Thomas F. Torrance: 'What are the real master-powers behind the world and what are the deeper secrets of our destiny? Here is the astonishing answer: the prayer of the saints and the fire of God. That means that more potent, more powerful than all the dark and mighty powers let loose in the world, more powerful than anything else, is the power of prayer set ablaze by the fire of God and cast upon the earth.'

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<sup>1</sup> *Revelation: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, by Leon Morris, page 119, IVP, 1977

It is not the politicians or CEOs of multi-national corporations who are the real shakers and movers – but those in the secret place of prayer.

Jesus, through his cross, has cleansed us and made the way into God's presence open for us that we might pray. The world, the wider church and even perhaps your own congregation may think you are Pastor Nobody. Let them. But as you embrace the secret place of prayer, that could not be further from the truth.

### **Conclusion**

We must not let our assessments of ourselves and the significance of our ministries be determined by worldly notions of fame and celebrity.

Our thinking about our unseen status must be shaped and constrained by the unseen God and the unseen world of the Spirit.

Our main concern is not to be famous, but to be faithful.

'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'  
Matthew 23.