

## Simply the Best?

‘Simply the best...’ goes the refrain of a well-known popular song.

There is no room for modesty in today’s competitive world. Everything is about being the best. We want our children to be the best at reading or swimming. We want them to get the best secondary education and, later, the best jobs. The ‘grade inflation’ of GCSE and A-Level exams has opened the way for almost everyone to be ‘the best’!

In the musical *The Producers*, much of the comedy stems from this very notion being turned upside down:

We find the worst play ever written, we hire the worst director in town... we hire the worst actors in New York and open on Broadway... (*The Producers*)

The fictional producers hit upon the idea that a huge sum of money could be made from a guaranteed flop. Could something good really come from something so bad? The answer will be revealed later!

This unlikely model is surely not one which could be used to describe God’s dealings with man. Surely God is interested in the holiest, mildest, cleanest-living person to make his work a success, the best of the best rather than the worst of the worst? Surely history tells of great men and women who have done amazing things in God’s name? Surely the Bible itself is overflowing with examples of ‘God’s heroes’?

I undertook an e-mail survey which asked people from all walks of life and beliefs to find a few words to describe all or any of the following ‘famous names’ of the Bible: Jacob, Moses, Jonah, Isaiah and Paul. The answers came flooding back, mainly citing such words as ‘brave’, ‘great’ and ‘full of faith’.

These descriptions are perfectly valid; however, just like reading a school report and omitting all the bad bits, they refer to the triumphant end of each story rather than the unlikely beginning. Let’s look at these beginnings now; you may be in for some surprises!

**Jacob:**            **Triumphant end:** Chosen to be father of the 12 tribes of Israel

**Unlikely beginning:** A liar and usurper who cheated his brother out of his birthright.

**Moses:**           **Triumphant end:** Leads the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Faithful and brave through many dangers.

**Unlikely beginning:** Full of fear, unbelief and cowardice: ‘I am slow of speech and slow of tongue’ (Ex. 4:10). Needed his brother Aaron to speak for him!

**Jonah:**            **Triumphant end:** Preached to the city of Ninevah with power and the people repented, saving the city from destruction.

**Unlikely beginning:** When presented with the task, ran away as fast as he could.

**Isaiah:** **Triumphant end:** Prophesied the coming of Christ in great detail.

**Unlikely beginning:** When called by God, was stricken because of his ungodliness, 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips...' (Isaiah 6:5)

**Paul:** **Triumphant end:** Brought Christianity to the Gentile (non-Jewish) world for the first time, suffering persecution and imprisonment along the way.

**Unlikely beginning:** Led the persecution of Christians and even had some put to death.

These men, then, started out as the worst of the bunch in their own different ways. What happened to them all? How did they change from worst to best? The answer is that they didn't! They were changed by God. The reason we are given the whole story in the Bible, warts and all, is so that we can understand that there was no way that any of these men could have made themselves holy. We can see this when we look at the middle of these stories.

**Jacob** knew God's presence with him in visions throughout his long exile from home, and was finally brought to full salvation after wrestling with God. He was given the name 'Israel' and reconciled with his brother.

**Jonah** was brought to repentance in a dramatic way: 'Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah' (Jonah 1:17), and his prayer inside the fish is answered, 'You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God' (Jonah 3:6). Only then was he safely restored to land and enabled to accomplish what had seemed like an impossible task.

**Isaiah** is given an instant remedy for his unsuitability to enter God's presence; one of the angels in his vision touches his lips with a live coal from the altar saying: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away and your sin purged' (Is. 6:7). Only then can Isaiah confidently declare that he can complete the task in question, 'Here I am! Send me.'

**Paul** is struck to the ground whilst 'still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord' (Acts 9:1) and faced with the Lord Jesus Christ himself. He is dramatically converted and baptised, and immediately starts preaching that Christ is the Son of God.

Any true Christian today will be able to tell a similar story; some perhaps as dramatic, others less so, but with the same theme, that God has had mercy on them, changing them from what they once were and giving them spiritual life and a safe, wonderful eternal home. Remember, when you're looking at a Christian you are seeing the end of the story. That person praying or reading their Bible could well have been previously setting cars on fire, causing a family break-up or simply living a life with

no thought of God! Christians, whether living now, 200 years ago or 3000 years ago, are simply normal people who have been changed entirely by God's hand upon them. But how can God do this? How can he forgive someone who may be the worst of the worst and make them holy? The answer is through the Lord Jesus Christ. God sent his Son into the world to be born and to grow up a human being just like us, but with one essential difference- he was entirely without sin. He was truly, 'the best'! He lived the perfect life that we never could, and, dying on the cross, took the punishment for the sins of his people on to his own sinless self. God's justice was completely satisfied and that is how anyone who comes to Christ in repentance and faith can be forgiven and made righteous, regardless of their background or history.

And does this apply to me, though? I don't think I'm that bad!

Every human being descended from Adam and Eve is a sinner- not because of what we do or don't do but what we are. As Paul explains in the letter to the Romans: 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'; whether a little short or very short!

If we search ourselves honestly we know that this is true. Measured by God's standards rather than those of society, we are the worst. Yet we have seen the hope. We have these examples of unlikely people being completely turned around by God's grace in Christ to show us one very important thing- no one is past saving. As the hymn writer says, 'And, if free grace, why not for me?'

And the end result of *The Producers*? The show with the worst possible components surprises everyone by turning out to be the biggest of hits. In a similar way, God gives the weak and the ungodly the wonderful gift of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. To be brought from darkness into light, to have all sins forgiven, to enjoy friendship with God and new life for eternity- now that is simply the best!

*Samantha Jellett, 2006*