



I am leaving you with a gift – peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So do not be troubled or afraid. - John 14:27

April 28th **The Shofar** Acts 8:26-40

I've just found out that my best friend has blocked me from his Instagram stories for the past six years.

When I first read this, I had a bit of a laugh because the whinge was so trivial. But it was not unique. Complaints and woes today, like always, seem to be mostly trivial. It made me go back and do a bit of reading. The United Nations World Food Programme states that there are **925 million** who do not have enough food to eat. **Five million** children under five die each year because of malnutrition. According to the World Bank, **half the world population** lives on less than \$2.50 per day. To say we have lost the plot would be a massive understatement. To claim that we would not do that, that it does not reflect my attitudes and understandings is not a way out. By silence we so often allow other contemporary positions and beliefs to control us: never offend, let people be themselves, make no judgments, it is better to shut up than to challenge someone for their non-biblical ways of thinking and speaking.

The Gospel puts this into perspective when Jesus warns us *I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.* (**Matthew 25:35-36**).

When our first priority is ourselves and our own needs, the trivial becomes super important. We are blind to the others all around us who are truly suffering because we are investing so much in sorting out the slow speed of our internet, or lamenting the fact that our morning train ride to work is always late.

This is nothing new. It can be explained, in part by the absence of God in the lives of people. Had God been the perspective through which we engaged with our world, our priorities would be elsewhere. The ancient people of Israel illustrate that for us perfectly well.

While their wilderness accommodations may not have been five-star, we know that God took great care of His people. Miraculous care. He had just brought them out of slavery in Egypt through an array of astounding miracles (**Exodus 7-12**). He protected them from the Egyptian army, and then guided them through the parting of the Red Sea (**Exodus 14**). He delivered food and water for them in extraordinary ways (**Exodus 16-17**). But the Israelites came down with a case of "spiritual amnesia" and began to take those miracles for granted. They wanted more! They were rich in God's plan and provision, but like we often do, they developed a "first world" mentality. Look at **verses 4-6**: "...and the people of Israel also began to complain. "Oh, for some meat!" they exclaimed. "We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the cucumbers,

melons, leeks, onions, and garlic we wanted. But now our appetites are gone. All we ever see is this manna!"

This is a story we should read at least once a year. Manna, of course, was God's miraculous meal ticket for His people. This miraculous food source fell from heaven on the camp daily. **Verse 8** says it tasted like pastry baked with olive oil. Fresh Focaccia out there in the wilderness? No complaints there! Plus, it was easy to gather, and it was free!

What are our treasures?

This must have been an ongoing problem within the faith communities of Israel and the Church. In **1 Timothy 6:6-8** the great apostle Paul wrote, *True godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content.*

Here is another sad quote from today's Sunday Times...**I have been dating a guy for 11 months, but he won't have sex.** I am sure God is just as interested in this distressed woman's concerns over a lack of sex as he would be if she was also struggling with cancer. God our Heavenly Father is there for all our needs it is just that we might not like the answer He offers.

We should always remember Paul's words in **Philippians 4:6** *Do not be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks.* When it comes to prayer, we should not worry that our prayer requests and petitions are too trivial, too small, or too self-centred for God. If our problems are big enough to make us worry, they're big enough for God to be worried about us (not necessarily our problems).

Another biblical text can assist us here, **1 Peter 5:6-7**... *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.*

My best friend is giving me the ick.

I cannot help but wonder about the lifestyle of the people writing into the newspaper seeking advice, but they clearly need a better loadstone to guide them. I try to make my first response to challenges, difficulties or problems the response of Mary to the massive curve ball thrown at her by God. She, a virgin, was to

conceive and have a son. Now that is a problem, and it was one she resolved in a way we should all seek to imitate...*Let it be done to me according to your will.*

Mary did not begin with voicing her concerns and by raising *but what if...* questions. Her first response was to view these things in the light of her God. It did not resolve her anxieties necessarily. What it did was to affirm her confidence that whatever was to come her way the grace of God would be there to strengthen and to comfort her. She was not going to be on her own.

If the lady posting her moment of crisis in the Times had turned to God in prayer, I wonder what she would have found, what God might have been telling her? I would suggest she might have had in mind the kind of teaching her Son would later pass onto His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount... *Seek first God's kingdom and what God wants. Then all your other needs will be met as well (Matt 6:33).* It is by living under the Rule of God, by submitting ourselves in humility to God's Law (as proclaimed by Jesus Christ), that those things unsettling us, frightening us or just making us pathetically miserable, can be resolved. The caveat to that is to remind ourselves how problems and disappointments will be a feature of our lives until the Lord returns in glory. Only then will all of our woes be wiped away.

I LOOK SO UGLY IN PHOTOS, IT'S HIT MY SEFL-ESTEEM

I would like to think this problem is a bit of a lark on the part of a writer. However, in a world where outward appearances are of such importance, it does have a ring of truth about it. Once more the starting point for giving a reply to this would be to go back to Almighty God in whose image and likeness we are made. We must reassure ourselves that the very humanity Jesus took up on the incarnation is the same humanity shaping who we are. We are precious and valuable, and a vital part of what God is doing in the world. Ugly or not, God has put us on this earth because we have a part to play and once we know that we are able to deal with our perceived ugliness.

We can go back again to St Paul on this starting point for dealing with our problems... *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).* For Paul, problems are not problems if our first step in all things, good and bad, is a step towards Jesus.

A dictionary definition of a problem is that it *is a situation, question, or thing that causes difficulty, stress, or doubt.* But if we are talking about mathematics, we see the same word in a very different light: a math's problem is *a problem is a statement or equation that*

requires a solution. Now, instead of causing stress our problem offers us an opportunity to pursue a whole range of reflective possibilities.

Sex with my husband is unfulfilling so I had an affair

The Lord has filled my heart with joy; how happy I am because of what he has done! . . . how joyful I am because God has helped me! (1 Samuel 2:1)

These words of celebration are not the kind of words we would expect to be coming from a person struggling with life transforming problems, someone in a state of deep despair. On the contrary. They sound like the testimony of someone who is living in joyous victory, is full of confidence. They are the words of **Hannah**, a woman whose life was weighted down with problems. Her problems arose because she one of two wives of Elkanah but was unable to bear children. The other wife laughed at her and made her life miserable because she was barren. **Hannah** was overcome by a spirit of sadness, and she wept many tears because of these problems. She lost her appetite. Her sadness was a problem for her husband, too, because he loved her very much.

How then could a woman with such problems be the same one who spoke the words of **1 Samuel 2:1**? Knowing how to answer that question sits at the heart of our ability to deal with all that comes our way in life, both the good and the not-so-good. She took her problems to God. She made a commitment that God had been waiting to hear. The commitment brought peace to her heart even before her problems were solved.

St Paul went further in clarifying the spiritual approach to all that troubles us. A starting point must be our own spiritual approach to life. Problems are problems only when they interrupt and challenge the normal way we approach life under the reigning of God.

Spiritual preparation is of great importance to finding the Joy of God in all that we do and is essential if we are to be successful in problem solving. It is a bit late when we find ourselves already immersed in a problem that we discover is perhaps too big to manage on our own and so turn to God. The Almighty is not meant to be our last port of call .

We need to ensure our lives are built on the firm foundation of the person and teachings of Jesus who is both our Lord and Saviour. Then our problems will not be problems. They will be opportunities for us to celebrate the loving mercy of God, occasions in which we can sing songs of thanksgiving for the presence of a God who walks with us. With that spiritual relationship with God, it becomes natural for us to appreciate what Paul says in **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, 21, 22:** *Be joyful always, pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances. . . . Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.*