

“What would Jesus do?”

Part Six.

After hearing Rev Beverly Sealy’s sermon on the kingdom of God and having phoned Calvin back in the UK to say he would share his testimony at the Candlelight service in a few weeks time Nigel felt inspired. He went and bought a KFC bargain bucket for Willie, the town drunk. Nigel found the whole event a bit of a let down, it wasn’t the green shoot of the kingdom he was hoping for. Willie insisted on a two litre bottle of coke rather than a cup so that it could last him the day in this hot Barbados sunshine. It then took Nigel a long while to convince Willie that he could sit down and eat in the restaurant. They were paying customers he told Willie who had been thrown out so many times for urinating in inappropriate places. Once they had sat down Nigel couldn’t help but notice the smell even though they were sitting opposite each other. He was also a little irritated that Willie didn’t eat all his food. It wasn’t exactly the “Mother Teresa” moment Nigel had been hoping for. As he left Willie on the curb he wondered why he’d really bought the meal; was it to help someone else or to give himself a good feeling?

After a few more days relaxing in the sun and thinking about what he’d heard of God’s kingdom in church he met up with Rev. Beverly Sealy. The Rector had a small study at the back of the pink wooden, slatted church. Nigel entered and noticed how unassuming the study was. Rev. Sealy sat on a hard plastic chair behind a small, worn desk. Nigel sat on a tatty green armchair next to the open window. He could hear and smell the crashing waves of the ocean a few hundred metres away.

“You wanted to see me young man?” The elderly Rector peered over his glasses at Nigel.

“Ummm, yes sir.” Why was Nigel calling him *sir*, he could only be about ten years older than Nigel, who was in his early sixties?

“Well?”

“Ummm... Well, what you said about the kingdom of God on Sunday, about us being and bringing shoots of God’s kingdom into this world. It struck me.”

“Good, that was the aim.” Rev. Sealy smiled as he rested his chin on his intertwined fingers, his elbows on the desk. Nigel noticed Rev. Sealy’s left shirt sleeve cuff was frayed.

“Well, you said Jesus didn’t just want to get us into heaven but he wanted to get heaven into us. I think that’s what you said anyway...” Nigel was dying to tell him that he used to be a minister, that he’d been in the club, but he didn’t think Rev. Sealy would be impressed by this fact.

“You listened well young man. Yes, we should be a taste of heaven here on earth.”

“But how?” Nigel knew he should know the answer but he didn’t.

Rev. Sealy opened his Bible and read aloud: “Only let us live up to what we have already attained. Philippians 3:16.” He shut his Bible and sat back on his plastic chair; it creaked.

“Oh, thanks...” said Nigel not really meaning it. *The usual vacuous pastoral advice that I used to dollop out because I didn’t really know the answers* he thought.

“Don’t be so British young man! You want real answers. Well here it is. Look; Paul tells these Christians to live up to what they have already attained. What have they attained? They received the kingdom of God the moment they invited the King to sit on the throne of their lives. And what did the King do when he ushered in the kingdom?”

“Ummm... died for us on the cross to take our sins away.”

“Yes, yes and yes again!” Rev. Sealy banged his desk with his fist in delight. “But he did so much more. He defeated death, sin and Satan himself. As Christians we don’t need to fear death, it isn’t the end for us. Also, our relationship to sin and Satan have been completely changed; Satan doesn’t need to rule in our lives now.”

“But I still sin,” interrupted Nigel.

“Yes, you do indeed, but you are free not to. Sin has been loosened in your life because of what Jesus has done. The Holy Spirit dwells within you and fights against *the sin that so easily entangles* as the book of Hebrews puts it.”

“So why do I sin then?”

“Because Satan tempts you to, because you enjoy it, so that you can escape the pressures of this life, so that you can add excitement to your boring life. The reasons are myriad.”

“But I hate myself after I’ve sinned.”

“What a waste of time and energy.”

“What do you mean?” Nigel asked.

“Jesus didn’t die for you to feel guilty about your sin and hate yourself. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, but that’s different. We are convicted in order to repent, to turn around, to change our thinking and our lives. Then God wants us to move on. Michael Quoist put it beautifully in one of his prayers. He wondered if the greatest sin wasn’t the act itself, but laying in the dirt of it afterwards feeling sorry for ourselves.”

“But I want to show God I’m sorry.”

“Look,” Rev. Sealy pointed a finger at Nigel. “God knows your heart. He knows if you’re sorry or not. He doesn’t need some grand internal piety performance from you. *Live up to what you’ve already attained* as that verse put it. What have you attained? The kingdom within in you; not fully to be sure, but you have experienced it. You have a living relationship with the King. Invest in this above all other things. Invite King Jesus into everything you do. Believe what the Scriptures say about you. You are forgiven, washed clean, filled with the Holy Spirit, a child of the living God, a co-heir with Jesus, a partner in the kingdom of God, a heaven carrier, a stranger in a foreign land, a worker of shoots of kingdom wonder.”

“That’s lovely,” replied Nigel.

“What! That’s it? That’s lovely. It’s not lovely. It’s unbelievably believable. It’s intoxicating.”

“But how do I live it?”

“Notice that Paul uses the plural in this verse. We, as the body of Jesus, should always be reminding each other of who we already are. We do that through how we talk about each other behind our backs, by the way we care for each other, how we pray for each other. Imagine if every Christian sent someone in their church a letter or email every week telling them of their kingdom qualities? I know of a man in this church who gave his father a letter like that last year for Christmas telling him of the ways he had seen Jesus in him. This father wasn’t particularly spectacular and he knew it. When he read his son’s letter he cried saying it was the best Christmas present he’d ever had.”

Nigel wished he'd written a letter like that to his wife before she'd died ten years ago.

“You see, what's your name? Sorry, I should have remembered that, but at my age, well...”

“Nigel... its Nigel.”

“That's right, Nigel.” Rev. Sealy pushed his glasses up his bony nose. “You see, we hear so much about how we are sinners and it's true. But what if we lived up to what we've already attained? Let's be convicted by the Holy Spirit but not held down and condemned by Satan. There's a massive difference between conviction and condemnation. Paul wrote somewhere in the Bible that *there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* and told us in Galatians that *it was for freedom that Christ has set us free*. Are you free Nigel?”

“Ummm...”

“Wrong answer!” Rev. Sealy banged the desk again. Nigel actually jumped. “You are free, even if you don't feel it. Surround yourself with Christian friends who live like this in front of your eyes.”

“Imagine you had a child...” Nigel thought of his daughter Helen who was coming on Christmas Eve “... who lived in fear of putting a foot wrong with you. You'd do everything within your power to show them that you loved them. That's what God has done for us through King Jesus and allowing us to be carriers of his Kingdom.”

“I will pray for you and then you shall leave this place changed.” Rev. Sealy began to pray before Nigel could even get his head bowed into the proper evangelical position for praying.

He left that church changed. He had made a decision to live up to what he had already attained in Jesus.

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Christmas Eve. The Candlelight service. The church was packed. Nigel's daughter arrived earlier in the day and is sitting near the front. Nigel was a bit annoyed; no, more disappointed, when she told him she'd have to leave after lunch tomorrow to go to her boyfriends families for Christmas tea; Nigel didn't even know she had a new boyfriend.

The choir performed, carols were sung, candles flickered and then Nigel got up to share his testimony.

“I used to be a minister; a rather dry and stale one.” People looked around at each other, surprised at not knowing about Nigel's past life. “That was until Zoë came to Trusselbridge church, a lonely drug addict who changed most of us – me the most probably. Then there was the fire in which Zoë died and we lost the church building. A few months later, as church numbers dwindled, I lost my job and came to live here. I pretty much lost my faith until I got a letter from a lovely older lady in the church. I came to the Alpha Course here because Calvin invited me, but I pretended I wasn't a Christian.”

Calvin smiled although there was a look of slight alarm in his eyes having not known anything about Nigel being a minister and a Christian before the course.

“Why didn't I tell him all this when he invited me to the Alpha Course? Why haven't I told you, my church family, it since? To begin with I was offended that Calvin didn't recognise that I was a Christian. And then it just became hard to own up to who I was.”

“But I’ve realised that I’ve spent most of my Christian life thinking about how bad I am, about how I don’t make the grade. I have always come to God like a street urchin with my cap in hand. But that’s not who I am in God’s eyes. To be sure I am a sinner and God hates sin. But because of Jesus my life has been changed. It has taken me decades to begin to grasp that even though I became a Christian in my teenage years. I am not a failed minister. I am a child of the living God.”

Nigel went on to use a few of the phrases Rev Sealy had spoken over him. It felt good to see himself as God saw him. He sat down and they sang the *Calypso Carol*.

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Helen had chatted to people, who seemed friendly and genuinely interested in her, over mince pies and cups of tea after the service. As they walked home they didn’t share a word. Nigel started several conversations in his mind, but none came out of his mouth. They got back to Nigel’s flat.

“Would you like a coffee love?”

“Yes please dad.”

Nigel made the coffee as Helen put the tv on and then turned it off again. “There’s nothing on,” he heard her mutter from the other room.

“Here you are. You don’t have sugar do you?”

“No dad. Thanks.” She took the coffee mug, warming her hands as she gently blew on its surface.

Nigel sat down beside her. After a few minutes he cleared his throat. Helen smiled.

“What?” asked Nigel.

“You always used to do that when I was young if you wanted to say something.”

“Do what?”

“Clear your throat. Mum and I would often laugh about it.”

Just saying the word *mum* took the conversation in a different direction. Helen wiped her eye, hoping her dad hadn’t seen the tear. But he had.

“I miss her too honey.”

Helen bent over and began to cry. Nigel put a hand gently on her back. After a few minutes she looked up: “It’s just... I heard what you said tonight. I thought it was good. But, well, no offence dad... But do you really believe all that stuff.”

“What stuff Helen?”

“About God knowing and loving you.”

Nigel thought for a moment. “Yes I do. There was a time when I would’ve been scared to actually think and answer that question because I wasn’t sure what I believed. I was paid to speak about those things.”

“And when mum died?”

“When mum died I put my faith in God on hold. I didn’t stop believing, I just chose to not think about it.”

“So what changed things?” Helen put her cup of coffee on the beige carpet.

“Do you remember I spoke about Zoë?”

“Yes, the girl who died in that fire.”

“Yes, that was her. Well, I had a dream in which you were on drugs, not her. And you had died from an overdose. I would’ve done anything to stop that and knew I had to help Zoë as well. She changed my views on things.”

“But then there was the fire. Where was your God in that?”

“I’m not sure Helen. I’m still not sure.”

“So God let you down then?”

“No. That would only be true if I viewed life as something that gets better and better all the time. But I don’t think life is like that. There are ups and there are downs. But God is with us through it all.”

“So where was God when mum died and when Zoë died? Why didn’t he stop those things happening? If he loved me he wouldn’t have taken mum from me.”

Helen yawned, making her dad yawn as well.

“Look Helen, this is a massive subject. We can chat about it tomorrow after lunch if you’d like. I’ve got some ideas of answers.”

“I need to get off fairly quickly after lunch remember. I’m spending tea with Mike’s family.”

“Oh yes... Well we could maybe chat before lunch then?”

“That would be good.”

Helen lent across and hugged her father and held on. Nigel stroked her hair as he’d done when she was a young child.

“Love you pops.”

“Pops? You haven’t called me that in years.”

“We haven’t chatted like this in... well, never.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I left these kinds of chats to your mum.”

“Well you’ll have to do them from now on.”

“It will be my pleasure. I’ll bring you a cup of tea at 7:00.”

“Can’t you make it 8:00?”

“7:30.”

“Alright, 7:30.” She got up from the couch. Lent down and kissed Nigel on the top of his head. “Love you,” she said and made her way to bed.

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The next morning they went for a long walk together. There was a slight drizzle in the air. They continued their conversation from last night and Helen did most of the talking. Nigel just told her about the hope he had in Jesus and how he saw God’s kingdom in the world around him in the everyday things. He didn’t think he explained things very well as he was still trying to get to grips with it himself.

They got home and enjoyed lunch together. The turkey was dry, the potatoes were hard and the gravy was lumpy. But apart from that it was lovely. She chatted excitedly about her plans to possibly go travelling in 2010. he suppressed the urge to tell her to do something constructive.

“What are you going to do next year dad?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe I’d do some short-term mission work for a couple of weeks or so. But I’ll see how the year pans out. At my age you can’t make too many plans”

“Don’t be so soft old man,” she smiled at him across the table.

After lunch they washed up together, watched the Queen’s speech and then Helen went to Mike’s.

“Dad, can we meet up more often like this? Every couple of months or so?” She’d said standing in the doorway before she left.

“That would be good Helen. Let me know when you have a free weekend and we’ll sort something out.”

A while later Nigel settled down to watch the afternoon film when the phone rang. It was Helen.

“Dad I love you.”

“I know that honey. What?” He sensed she wanted to say something else.

“A big part of me wants the faith, or whatever you call it, that you’ve got dad but I just can’t quite connect all the dots yet. Pray for me, but please be patient.”

“Will do honey. Love you.”

They hung up and Nigel fell asleep in front of *The Magnificent Seven*.