



The NIPs

Not Important People, and the God who keeps choosing them

Fourteen parts · 72 passages, printed in full

A Moabite widow in the corners of somebody else's field, the eighth son nobody called in,
a nobleman with unclean lips, a young man sinking in the mud, a priest with no temple,
a herdsman who was never clergy, a priest's son who chose camel hair,
and a thief with minutes left to live.

*"But to this man will I look:
to him who is poor and of a contrite spirit,
and who trembles at my word."*

ISAIAH 66:2

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Scripture from the World English Bible

The Opposite of a VIP

and why God keeps choosing them

You know what a VIP is. Very Important Person. The rope, the reserved seat, the entrance nobody else uses.

This teaching is about the opposite. I call them **the NIPs. Not Important People**. And here is the thesis, and I want to state it as bluntly as I can, because the whole Bible states it bluntly and we keep softening it: **God is not impressed by the guest list, and He has spent the entire book choosing the people who were not on it.**

Not tolerating them. Not making room for them at the back. **Choosing** them, on purpose, again and again, when there were obvious better candidates standing right there.

A Moabite widow gleaning in somebody else's field ends up as the great grandmother of the king. The eighth son, left out with the sheep because nobody thought to call him in, gets the anointing oil. A priest's son with a guaranteed career walks out into the desert to eat locusts. A prophet is told to lie in the dirt, and God's favourite name for him is son of dust. And when the Son of God finally arrives, He is announced to men on a night shift, He recruits fishermen and a tax collector, He gives the longest theological conversation in the Gospels to a Samaritan woman with five failed marriages, and He hands the first news of the resurrection to a woman whose testimony would not have been accepted in any court in that world.

That is not a series of accidents. It is a **method**, and God tells us why He uses it.

So we are going to walk the whole argument in order. First the principle, in God's own words. Then the Messiah's own bloodline, which is full of the wrong sort of people. Then Ruth, then David, and the verse about a rejected stone that Yeshua picked up and applied to Himself. Then the prophets, one by one, with their actual personalities, because they were not marble statues, they were a nobleman with unclean lips, a young man weeping in the mud, an exiled priest with no temple, and a farmer who insisted he was not a prophet at all. Then John, who was born a VIP and chose not to be. Then the gallery of NIPs around Yeshua. Then His sermons against the whole idea of buying access to God. And finally the answer to the question **why**, because the answer is not what most people think.

One honest word before we start, and there is more at the back. **Poverty is not holiness, and being unimportant is not a virtue you can manufacture**. The Bible is full of wealthy people God loved and used. What God opposes is something more specific and much more common: **the assumption that status buys access**. Hold that distinction and this teaching will free you. Lose it and it turns into a different kind of pride.

The Fourteen Parts

the story in the order it happened

I	Where God Says He Looks <i>the principle, stated in His own words</i>	before any story
II	Four Women in the Family Tree <i>the genealogy of the Messiah</i>	the first page of the New Testament
III	Ruth of Moab <i>Bethlehem, in the corners of somebody else's field</i>	the days of the judges
IV	The Eighth Son Nobody Called <i>Bethlehem, at Jesse's house</i>	the anointing of David
V	The Stone the Builders Threw Away <i>the temple courts</i>	Tuesday of the last week
VI	A Broken Heart Is the Offering <i>David's repentance, and Yeshua's teaching on it</i>	across a thousand years
VII	Isaiah: The Nobleman With Unclean Lips <i>the Temple, in the year King Uzziah died</i>	the eighth century before Christ
VIII	Jeremiah: The Young Man in the Mud <i>Jerusalem, and a cistern under it</i>	the last years before Babylon
IX	Ezekiel: A Priest With No Temple <i>Babylon, by the river Chebar</i>	the exile
X	I Was No Prophet <i>Bethel, Sinai, and a winepress in Ophrah</i>	across the centuries
XI	John: The Priest Who Walked Into the Desert <i>a priestly family, then the Judean wilderness</i>	the years before the ministry
XII	The Gallery <i>all around Yeshua</i>	the three years
XIII	The Sermons Against the Rope <i>dinner tables, temple courts, an upper room</i>	throughout the ministry
XIV	Why: What God Does With an Empty Cup <i>the reason behind the whole pattern</i>	now

Where God Says He Looks

the principle, stated in His own words · before any story

Start with the sentences where God simply tells us His method, because everything else in this teaching is illustration.

And notice how strange the Isaiah verse is. It comes immediately after God says that His hand made everything that exists. Having established that He owns the universe, He then tells you the one address He looks toward, and it is not a palace or a temple. It is a **crushed person who trembles at what He says**.

Paul, writing centuries later to a congregation in a status-obsessed Greek city, gives the same principle with the reasoning attached, and it is savage: God deliberately picked **the things that are not**, so that nobody could boast.

GOD NAMES THE ADDRESS HE LOOKS TOWARD

Thus says Yahweh, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build to me? And what place will be my rest? For all these things has my hand made, and all these things came to be," says Yahweh: "but to this man will I look, even to him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word."

ISAIAH 66:1-2

AND WHERE HE SAYS HE LIVES

For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite."

ISAIAH 57:15

THE BEATITUDE, IN BOTH FORMS

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

MATTHEW 5:3-5

LUKE LEAVES OUT THE QUALIFIER

He lifted up his eyes to his disciples, and said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for God's Kingdom is yours. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." ... "But woe to you who are rich! For you have received your consolation."

LUKE 6:20-21, 24

PAUL, WITH THE REASON ATTACHED

For you see your calling, brothers, that not many are wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, and not many noble; but God chose the foolish things of the world that he might put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world that he might put to shame the things that are strong. God chose the lowly things of the world, and the things that are despised, and the things that are not, that he might bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should boast before God.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-29

AND IT WAS THE RULE FROM THE VERY BEGINNING

Yahweh didn't set his love on you nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all peoples: but because Yahweh loves you, and because he would keep the oath which he swore to your fathers.

DEUTERONOMY 7:7-8

WHERE YOU STAND

Read Isaiah 66:1-2 standing on the Temple Mount lookout, with the largest man-made platform of the ancient world in front of you. God says, what kind of house will you build me, and then names the only house He goes to. The view does the arguing.

THE HEBREW WORD

עָנָו · **Anav** — poor, afflicted, humble, bowed down. It is the word used of Moses, that he was more anav than any man on earth. In Hebrew, poverty of circumstance and humility of spirit sit inside one word, which is why Matthew and Luke can both be quoting Him accurately.

WE PRAY

Lord, You made everything, and You told us the one place You look. Make us that place. Poor in spirit, trembling at Your word, and easy to fill. Amen.

Four Women in the Family Tree

the genealogy of the Messiah · the first page of the New Testament

Now look at the Messiah's own paperwork, because Matthew does something in his opening chapter that no ancient genealogist would ever do by accident.

Jewish genealogies of that period ran through the men. Matthew inserts **four women**, and he does not pick the obvious ones. Sarah is not there. Rebekah is not there. Instead we get **Tamar**, who got justice out of her father-in-law by disguising herself as a prostitute. **Rahab**, an actual prostitute, in Jericho, a Canaanite. **Ruth**, a Moabite widow. And **Bathsheba**, whom Matthew refuses even to name, calling her only *the wife of Uriah*, which keeps the murdered husband in the family tree forever.

Every one of them is an outsider, a scandal, or both. This is the first chapter of the New Testament, the credentials page, and it reads like a confession. God did not clean up the line before He came down it.

THE LIST, WITH THE WOMEN IN IT

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. ... Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar. ... Salmon became the father of Boaz by Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed by Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse. Jesse became the father of King David. David became the father of Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah.

MATTHEW 1:1, 3, 5-6 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

AND THE PROMISE THE WHOLE LIST IS ANSWERING

In your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.

GENESIS 22:18

WHERE YOU STAND

Read Matthew 1 out loud sometime, all of it, and do not skip the names. It is the least glamorous chapter in the New Testament and it is a manifesto. Four irregular women and a murdered man's name, printed in the family tree of God's Son, on purpose, at the top of the page.

THE HEBREW WORD

תולדות · **Toledot** — generations, a genealogy, literally the begettings. It is the word that structures the book of Genesis: these are the toledot of Adam, of Noah, of Shem. Hebrew does not treat a family tree as decoration. Toledot is how the Bible tells you what God is doing across time, and He put these four women in it.

WE PRAY

Lord, You came down a bloodline You did not sanitise, and You wrote the outsiders into the first page. Then there is room in Your family for ours. Thank You. Amen.

Ruth of Moab

Bethlehem, in the corners of somebody else's field · the days of the judges

Now slow down, because Ruth is the clearest NIP case study in the Bible and she is in the Messiah's direct line.

Stack up her disadvantages. She is a **Moabite**, and Moab's origin story in Genesis is one of the ugliest passages in scripture, and there is a **law in Deuteronomy** specifically excluding Moabites from the assembly to the tenth generation. She is a **widow**, with no husband, no sons and no property. She is a **foreigner** in Judah, with an accent everybody could hear. And she is **poor enough to glean**, which means walking behind other people's harvesters picking up what they drop.

There is no category of vulnerability in that society that she does not belong to.

And notice the mechanism that feeds her: a law in Leviticus that commands farmers **not to harvest the corners of their own fields**, on purpose, and to leave the edges for the poor and the foreigner. God built a NIP allowance into the agricultural law of the land. Ruth eats because God had legislated for people exactly like her centuries earlier.

Then a wealthy landowner named Boaz does something with his money that is the opposite of what the rich usually do in these stories: he uses it to redeem somebody who has no claim on him. And four verses from the end of a short book about a foreign widow, the genealogy arrives like a thunderclap.

THE LAW THAT EXCLUDED HER

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into Yahweh's assembly; even to the tenth generation shall no one belonging to them enter into Yahweh's assembly forever.

DEUTERONOMY 23:3

THE VOW SHE MADE ANYWAY

Ruth said, "Don't urge me to leave you, and to return from following you, for where you go, I will go; and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Yahweh do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me."

RUTH 1:16-17

THE LAW THAT FED HER

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not glean your vineyard, neither shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the foreigner. I am Yahweh your God.

LEVITICUS 19:9-10

SO SHE WENT OUT TO THE EDGES OF A FIELD

Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me now go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter." She went, and came and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz.

RUTH 2:2-3

AND A RICH MAN USED HIS MONEY THE OTHER WAY ROUND

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses today, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, from the hand of Naomi. Moreover, Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, I have purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead on his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his place. You are witnesses today."

RUTH 4:9-10

THE LAST FOUR VERSES, WHICH CHANGE EVERYTHING

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife; and he went in to her, and Yahweh enabled her to conceive, and she bore a son. ... The women, her neighbors, gave him a name, saying, "A son is born to Naomi;" and they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

RUTH 4:13, 17

WHERE YOU STAND

Stand in a barley field in the Judean hills near Bethlehem in the spring and look at the edges. The corners of the field are the whole doctrine: God wrote poverty relief into the property law and then walked His own great-great-grandmother into it. Ruth gleaned within sight of the town where the Messiah would be born, and she is the reason He was born there at all.

THE HEBREW WORD

גואל · **Goel** — a redeemer, a kinsman with the right and the duty to buy back what a relative has lost. It is what Boaz becomes for Ruth, and it is one of the great titles of God: **my Goel lives**, says Job. The word means a rich relative choosing to spend money he did not have to spend, on somebody who could not repay him. Now read the Gospel again.

WE PRAY

Lord, You wrote a Moabite widow into Your own family and left the corners of the field for people like her. Be our Goel. And make us the kind of people who leave the edges unharvested. Amen.

The Eighth Son Nobody Called

Bethlehem, at Jesse's house · the anointing of David

This is my favourite scene in the Hebrew Bible on this subject, and the detail that matters is almost a joke.

God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a king from Jesse's sons. Samuel arrives, Jesse produces his boys, and Samuel starts at the top: Eliab, the eldest, tall and impressive. And God says something to him that should be written over every hiring committee and every ordination service in the world.

Then seven sons pass by, and none of them is the one. And Samuel has to ask the question, which means **nobody in that house had thought to include the eighth**. He was out with the sheep. Not hidden, not forbidden, simply not considered, because in that family he was the boy who watched the animals while the important people met the prophet.

They had to send for him. The king of Israel had to be **fetched**.

GOD CORRECTS THE PROPHET'S EYES

Yahweh said to Samuel, "Don't look on his face, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him: for Yahweh sees not as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks at the heart."

1 SAMUEL 16:7

SEVEN SONS, AND THEN A QUESTION

Jesse made seven of his sons to pass before Samuel. Samuel said to Jesse, "Yahweh has not chosen these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your children here?" He said, "There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is keeping the sheep." Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent, and brought him in. ... Yahweh said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the middle of his brothers: and the Spirit of Yahweh came mightily on David from that day forward.

1 SAMUEL 16:10-13 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

AND HOW DAVID HIMSELF DESCRIBED HIS OWN STANDING

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people. All those who see me mock me. They insult me with their lips. They shake their heads.

PSALM 22:6-7

THE SONG HE MUST HAVE KNOWN BY HEART

Who is like Yahweh, our God, who has his seat on high, who stoops down to see in heaven and in the earth? He raises up the poor out of the dust. Lifts up the needy from the ash heap, that he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people.

PSALM 113:5-8

WHERE YOU STAND

Bethlehem is a small town on the ridge road, and the fields below it are still grazed. The boy who was left out there with the animals became the standard every later king was measured against, and a thousand years later the angels announced his descendant to men doing exactly the same job on the same hillside at night. God has a pattern, and the pattern involves shepherds.

THE HEBREW WORD

לֵבָב · **Levav** — the heart, and in Hebrew that means the whole inner person, mind and will and not only the feelings. God says man looks at the eyes, He looks at the levav. It is not a sentimental sentence. It means God assesses the part of you that decides things.

WE PRAY

*Lord, You did not choose the tall one. You sent for the boy nobody counted. Look at our levav, and be merciful about what You find there.
And keep us from measuring people the way Samuel almost did. Amen.*

The Stone the Builders Threw Away

the temple courts · Tuesday of the last week

Now watch Yeshua pick up the NIP doctrine and apply it to Himself, using a line from David's own hymn book.

Psalm 118 was sung by pilgrims coming up to the Temple, and in the middle of it there is a builder's image: a stone the professionals looked over, rejected, and left on the site, which ended up as the **cornerstone**, the one that sets the line for the whole building.

In the last week of His life, standing in the temple courts, arguing with the men who ran the place, He quotes it at them and then adds the sentence that makes it unmistakable. **Did you never read this?** The builders in the parable are the professionals. And the discarded stone is Him.

That is the whole teaching in one image. Heaven's cornerstone is the material the experts rejected.

THE PSALM THE PILGRIMS SANG

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is Yahweh's doing. It is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that Yahweh has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it!

PSALM 118:22-24

AND YESHUA, QUOTING IT ABOUT HIMSELF

Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected was made the head of the corner. This was from the Lord. It is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you, God's Kingdom will be taken away from you, and will be given to a nation producing its fruit." ... When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he spoke about them.

MATTHEW 21:42-43, 45 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

ISAIAH HAD ALREADY DESCRIBED WHAT HE WOULD LOOK LIKE

For he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no good looks or majesty. When we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised, and rejected by men; a man of suffering, and acquainted with disease. He was despised as one from whom men hide their face; and we didn't respect him.

ISAIAH 53:2-3

AND THE APOSTLES BUILT THEIR WHOLE MESSAGE ON IT

He is the stone which was regarded as worthless by you, the builders, who was made the head of the corner. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that is given among men, by which we must be saved!

ACTS 4:11-12

WHERE YOU STAND

Walk along the southern wall of the Temple Mount and look at the enormous Herodian ashlar, some weighing hundreds of tons, cut and set by the finest builders in the empire. Then remember what He said standing a few metres from them, about a stone those builders had thrown away. Forty years later their masonry was in a heap at the foot of the wall, where you can still see it. His stone is still holding a building up.

THE HEBREW WORD

אבן · **Even** — a stone. And Hebrew hides a pun in this verse that English cannot carry: the word for builders is **bonim**, and the word for sons is **banim**, from the same root **banah**, to build. The **bonim** rejected the even, and the rejected stone turned out to be the **Ben**, the Son. In this language, building and sonship are the same family of letters.

WE PRAY

Lord, the professionals looked at You and left You on the ground, and You became the corner that holds everything. Do that with what we have discarded, starting with ourselves. Amen.

A Broken Heart Is the Offering

David's repentance, and Yeshua's teaching on it · across a thousand years

Here is the deepest link between David and Yeshua, and it is not the throne. It is a theory of **how a sinner gets back to God**, and Yeshua teaches David's version of it.

David committed adultery and arranged a murder. He was the king; he could have paid for any sacrifice in the kingdom. Read what he says instead, in the psalm he wrote about it. He says that God does not want the animal. That if sacrifice were the currency, he would gladly pay it, and it is not the currency. **The offering God accepts is a broken heart.**

That is not a small idea in a system built on sacrifices. It is a radical claim from inside the system, by the man who built the Temple's plans, and the prophets pick it up and hammer it: I desire mercy and not sacrifice.

Now put Yeshua's most famous parable about prayer next to it. Two men in the Temple. One is a genuinely observant, generous, disciplined religious man who lists his real achievements. The other is a collaborator who will not lift his eyes, beats his chest, and prays **eight words** which are almost a quotation of David's psalm. And Yeshua says the tax collector went home right with God, and the good man did not.

He is teaching Psalm 51. And He quotes Hosea's version of it twice, both times to religious professionals who were criticising Him for eating with the wrong people.

DAVID, AFTER THE WORST THING HE EVER DID

Have mercy on me, God, according to your loving kindness. According to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions. My sin is constantly before me. Against you, and you only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight.

PSALM 51:1-4

AND THE SENTENCE THAT CHANGED HOW A WHOLE RELIGION PRAYS

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me. ... For you have no delight in sacrifice, or else I would give it. You have no pleasure in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

PSALM 51:10, 16-17

WHERE GOD IS, ACCORDING TO DAVID

Yahweh is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves those who have a crushed spirit.

PSALM 34:18

YESHUA TELLS THE SAME DOCTRINE AS A STORY

He spoke also this parable to certain people who were convinced of their own righteousness, and who despised all others. "Two men went up into the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed to himself like this: 'God, I thank you, that I am not like the rest of men, extortionists, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far away, wouldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

LUKE 18:9-14

AND THE PROPHET'S LINE HE QUOTED TWICE AT RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONALS

For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

HOSEA 6:6

ONCE WHEN THEY COMPLAINED ABOUT HIS DINNER GUESTS

When the Pharisees saw it, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do. But you go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

MATTHEW 9:11-13

WHERE YOU STAND

Stand on the Southern Steps, where both men in that parable would have climbed to reach the temple, and read the parable there. Then look at the mikvaot at the bottom of the stairs, where everybody washed before going up. Both men were ritually clean. Only one of them went home right with God.

THE HEBREW WORD

דָּכָא · **Dakka** — crushed, contrite, ground down. It is the word in Isaiah 57:15 for the person God lives with, and it is in David's psalm for the heart God will not despise. Hebrew does not offer a tidy word here. It means genuinely broken, and it is the one offering the Bible never says God rejects.

WE PRAY

*Lord, we would rather bring You anything than a broken heart, and it is the only thing You have said You will not despise. So here it is.
God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Amen.*

Isaiah: The Nobleman With Unclean Lips

the Temple, in the year King Uzziah died · the eighth century before Christ

Now the prophets, and I want you to meet them as people rather than as voices, because their personalities are all over their books once you look.

Isaiah is the closest thing to a VIP in the prophetic gallery. He has easy access to kings, he argues with them face to face, his Hebrew is the most sophisticated in the Bible, and Jewish tradition places him inside the royal family's circle. If any prophet had standing, it is this one.

And look what happens the moment he actually sees God. He does not feel honoured. He falls apart, and the thing he says about himself is a confession about his **mouth**, which was the one thing he was good at. *I am a man of unclean lips.* The orator's professional advantage is the first thing to disintegrate in the presence of holiness.

Then God does something to him that only makes sense in this whole teaching: He cleans him with a burning coal off the altar and asks a question into the room, and the aristocrat answers like a servant. **Hineni. Here I am. Send me.**

And that same refined nobleman will later be told to walk around **naked and barefoot for three years** as a living sign. So much for standing.

THE YEAR HE SAW IT

In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each one had six wings. With two he covered his face. With two he covered his feet. With two he flew. One called to another, and said, "Holy, holy, holy, is Yahweh of Armies! The whole earth is full of his glory!"

ISAIAH 6:1-3

AND WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HIMSELF

Then I said, "Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips: for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of Armies!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar. He touched my mouth with it, and said, "Behold, your iniquity is taken away, and your sin forgiven." I heard the Lord's voice, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am. Send me!"

ISAIAH 6:5-8

AND LATER, THE DIGNITY GOD ASKED HIM TO GIVE UP

At that time Yahweh spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, "Go, and loose the sackcloth from off your waist, and take your shoes from off your feet." He did so, walking naked and barefoot. Yahweh said, "As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot three years for a sign and a wonder concerning Egypt and concerning Ethiopia..."

ISAIAH 20:2-3

THE MAN HE DESCRIBED WAS A NIP TOO

Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of Yahweh been revealed? For he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no good looks or majesty. When we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

ISAIAH 53:1-2

WHERE YOU STAND

Isaiah 6 happened in the Temple, on the mountain you can see from the Mount of Olives lookout. Read it there. The most eloquent man in the Bible met God in that building and the first thing he lost was his confidence in his own mouth.

THE HEBREW WORD

טָמֵא · **Tamei** — unclean, ritually impure. It is a technical word from the sacrificial system, and Isaiah applies it to his **lips**, not his hands or his clothes. He is a professional speaker declaring his own instrument unfit for service, in the only place in the country where uncleanness actually mattered.

WE PRAY

Lord, the first thing that broke in Isaiah was the thing he was best at. Touch our mouths with fire from Your altar. And when You ask who will go, let us be the ones who answer hineni. Amen.

Jeremiah: The Young Man in the Mud

Jerusalem, and a cistern under it · the last years before Babylon

Jeremiah is the most emotionally exposed man in the Bible, and if you have ever wanted to quit something God gave you, he is your prophet.

He starts by refusing on grounds of age. He is a **na'ar**, a boy, and he says plainly that he does not know how to speak. God overrules the objection without flattering him.

Then look at the life he actually got. He was forbidden to marry or have children, as a living sign. He wrote a scroll and the king cut it up and burned it column by column. He was beaten and put in the stocks. He was accused of treason by his own people for telling them the truth about the war. And at the low point they lowered him into a **cistern**, and the text gives one detail that has stayed with me for years: **there was no water in the cistern, but mire, and Jeremiah sank in the mire.**

And the most honest paragraph any minister has ever written is his. He accuses God of overpowering him, says he is a laughing stock all day long, announces that he is finished, will not speak in that name again, and then admits that he cannot stop, because the word has become **a burning fire shut up in my bones**.

THE CALL, AND THE EXCUSE

Now Yahweh's word came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I sanctified you. I have appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord Yahweh! Behold, I don't know how to speak; for I am a child." But Yahweh said to me, "Don't say, 'I am a child;' for you must go to whomever I send you, and you shall say whatever I command you. Don't be afraid because of them; for I am with you to deliver you," says Yahweh.

JEREMIAH 1:4-8

THE COST HE WAS TOLD TO PAY IN HIS OWN BODY

Yahweh's word came also to me, saying, "You shall not take a wife, neither shall you have sons or daughters, in this place."

JEREMIAH 16:1-2

THE CISTERN

Then they took Jeremiah, and threw him into the dungeon of Malchijah the king's son, that was in the court of the guard. They let down Jeremiah with cords. In the dungeon there was no water, but mire; and Jeremiah sank in the mire.

JEREMIAH 38:6

AND THE MOST HONEST THING ANY PREACHER EVER WROTE

Yahweh, you have persuaded me, and I was persuaded. You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I have become a laughing-stock all day. Everyone mocks me. ... If I say, "I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name," then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in. I can't contain it.

JEREMIAH 20:7, 9

WHERE YOU STAND

There are cisterns all over this land, bell-shaped, cut into the rock, and at the bottom of an empty one there is always mud. If you are ever standing beside one, look down and read Jeremiah 38:6. God's answer to His most faithful spokesman was not rescue from the pit. It was a foreign eunuch named Ebed-Melech with some rags and a rope, and that is often exactly how deliverance arrives: through somebody nobody would have listed.

THE HEBREW WORD

נַעַר · **Na'ar** — a boy, a youth, a servant lad. It is the word Jeremiah uses to disqualify himself, and God does not tell him it is untrue. He tells him not to **say** it. Sometimes the honest self-assessment is accurate and still not the point.

WE PRAY

Lord, You called a boy who could not speak and would not let him hide behind it. When we sink in the mire, send us the rope, even by the hands of somebody unexpected. And keep Your word burning in our bones. Amen.

Ezekiel: A Priest With No Temple

Babylon, by the river Chebar · the exile

Ezekiel is the hardest of them to be, and his NIP status is a matter of professional annihilation.

He was **a priest**. That was his identity, his training and his family's inheritance, and a priest without a temple is unemployable in the deepest sense: his whole existence was tied to a building he could no longer reach. Then he was deported a thousand kilometres to a canal in Iraq and given his call there, in unclean territory, among refugees.

And notice what God calls him. Ninety three times in his book God addresses him as **ben adam**, son of man, which in Hebrew means son of Adam, son of dust, mortal, human being. Of all the titles available for a priest and a prophet, God picked the one that means *you are made of ground.*

What God asked of him is almost unbearable. Lie on your side for months. Cook your food over dung. Shave your head and weigh the hair. And then the sentence that stops every reader: his wife, whom the text calls **the desire of your eyes**, would die, and he was forbidden to mourn her publicly, as a sign to the nation.

And this is the man to whom God gave the vision of the dry bones, and the promise of a heart of flesh replacing a heart of stone. The most humiliated prophet got the most hopeful visions in the Bible. That is not a coincidence either.

THE NAME GOD GAVE HIM

He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." ... He said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the children of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me."

EZEKIEL 2:1, 3

HE SAT DOWN AMONG THE REFUGEES AND SAID NOTHING FOR A WEEK

Then I came to them of the captivity at Tel Aviv, who lived by the river Chebar, and to where they lived; and I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.

EZEKIEL 3:15

THE HARDEST INSTRUCTION GIVEN TO ANY PROPHET

Also Yahweh's word came to me, saying, "Son of man, behold, I will take away from you the desire of your eyes with a stroke; yet you shall neither mourn nor weep, neither shall your tears run down." ... So I spoke to the people in the morning; and at evening my wife died. I did in the morning as I was commanded.

EZEKIEL 24:15-16, 18

AND TO THIS MAN, THE DRY BONES

He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I answered, "Lord Yahweh, you know." ... "Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live."

EZEKIEL 37:3, 5

AND THE PROMISE OF A NEW HEART

I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh.

EZEKIEL 11:19

WHERE YOU STAND

There is a detail in Ezekiel 3:15 that startles every Israeli who reads it: the settlement of exiles he sat down in was called **Tel Aviv**, the hill of spring, and the founders of the modern city took its name from this verse. A city of return, named after a camp of exiles, out of the book of the most displaced prophet in scripture.

THE HEBREW WORD

בֶּן־אָדָם · **Ben adam** — son of man, and adam comes from adamah, ground. So God's chosen name for His prophet was **son of dust**, ninety three times. And centuries later Yeshua would take that exact title for Himself, more than any other. The Son of God's favourite name for Himself was the one God gave to a humiliated exile.

WE PRAY

Lord, You called Ezekiel son of dust and then showed him a valley of bones coming to life. Remind us what we are made of, and breathe on it. Take out the stone and give us a heart of flesh. Amen.

I Was No Prophet

Bethel, Sinai, and a winepress in Ophrah · across the centuries

Now a short gallery of men who told God, on the record, that He had the wrong candidate. Read their opening lines together and a pattern appears that is almost comic.

Amos gives the bluntest curriculum vitae in the Bible. Confronted by the official priest of the royal shrine and told to go home, he answers with what amounts to: I am not one of you, I never was, I have no theological training, I keep livestock and I look after fig trees, and God took me from behind the flock.

Moses, the most educated man in the story, argues for four chapters and finally admits he is not a good speaker. Gideon, when an angel calls him a mighty warrior, points out that he is hiding in a winepress, from the smallest clan, and the least in his own father's house.

Nobody in this book volunteers because they feel qualified. The ones who feel qualified are usually the problem.

AMOS, TO THE PROFESSIONAL CLERGY

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you." ... Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman, and a farmer of sycamore figs; and Yahweh took me from following the flock, and Yahweh said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

AMOS 7:10, 14-15 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

MOSES, ARGUING

Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ... Moses said to Yahweh, "O Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before now, nor since you have spoken to your servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue."

EXODUS 3:11; 4:10

GIDEON, IN A WINEPRESS

Yahweh's angel appeared to him, and said to him, "Yahweh is with you, you mighty man of valor!" ... He said to him, "O Lord, how shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is the poorest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house."

JUDGES 6:12, 15

AND HOSEA, WHO WAS ASKED TO MARRY HIS OWN SERMON

When Yahweh spoke at the first by Hosea, Yahweh said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of prostitution and children of unfaithfulness; for the land commits great adultery, forsaking Yahweh."

HOSEA 1:2

WHERE YOU STAND

Amos came from Tekoa, in the Judean desert south of Bethlehem, and he walked north to deliver his message to the wealthiest, most religious establishment of his day. If you stand in that wilderness you understand his vocabulary: this is a man who thought in livestock and drought, and he told the royal chaplain to his face that he was not clergy and never had been.

THE HEBREW WORD

בֹּקֵר · **Boker** — a herdsman, a cattleman. It is the word Amos chooses for himself in front of the priest, and it is almost identical to boker, morning, but from a different root entirely. He was not being humble as a technique. He was giving his occupation.

WE PRAY

Lord, You keep recruiting from outside the profession. Take us from behind whatever flock we are following, and do not wait until we feel qualified, because we never will. Amen.

John: The Priest Who Walked Into the Desert

a priestly family, then the Judean wilderness · the years before the ministry

Now the man Tai wanted, and once you see his birth certificate the story is astonishing.

John was **priestly on both sides**. Luke is careful about it in his opening verses: his father Zechariah was a priest of the division of Abijah, and his mother Elizabeth was **of the daughters of Aaron**. That is as good as religious pedigree gets in that world. John had a guaranteed career: the rota, the linen, the incense, the sacrifices, the income, the standing in Jerusalem. His father was literally serving in the Holy Place when the angel came.

And he walked away from every bit of it.

He went out to the Judean wilderness, wore **camel hair and a leather belt**, and ate locusts and wild honey. And that outfit is not eccentricity, it is a **quotation**: it is exactly how the Bible describes Elijah. John dressed as a sermon.

Then he stood in the Jordan and preached against the very establishment he was born into, and specifically against the idea that inherited status counts for anything: **do not start telling yourselves that you have Abraham as your father**.

Yeshua's verdict on him is the highest compliment He ever paid a human being, and then it has a second half that turns the whole thing on its head. And notice, finally, how John died: in a dungeon, executed as a party favour for a dancing girl, with no trial worth the name. The greatest man born of women, killed to save a drunk king's embarrassment. And before that, from his cell, he sent to ask whether he had been right about everything, and Yeshua did not shame him for the question.

THE PEDIGREE HE WAS BORN WITH

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the priestly division of Abijah. He had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. They were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord.

LUKE 1:5-6

THE LIFE HE CHOSE INSTEAD

In those days, John the Baptizer came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" ... Now John himself wore clothing made of camel's hair; with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.

MATTHEW 3:1-2, 4

WHICH WAS A DELIBERATE QUOTATION

They answered him, "He was a hairy man, and wearing a leather belt around his waist." He said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."

2 KINGS 1:8

AND HE PREACHED AGAINST INHERITED STATUS

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance! Don't say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father;' for I tell you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."

MATTHEW 3:7-9

HIS OWN SUMMARY OF HIS CAREER

He must increase, but I must decrease.

JOHN 3:30

YESHUA'S VERDICT, IN BOTH HALVES

As they went away, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and much more than a prophet. ... Most certainly I tell you, among those who are born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptizer; yet he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he."

MATTHEW 11:7-9, 11

AND FROM PRISON, HE ASKED WHETHER HE HAD BEEN WRONG

Now when John heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to him, "Are you he who comes, or should we look for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. Blessed is he who finds no occasion for stumbling in me."

MATTHEW 11:2-6

WHERE YOU STAND

Stand at the ford by Jericho, where the Judean wilderness comes down to the river, and look at the country he chose. There is nothing out there. A man with a guaranteed seat in the Temple looked at the whole arrangement and walked into that, on purpose, and the crowds came out of the city to find him. Notice which direction the traffic went.

THE HEBREW WORD

מִדְבָּר · **Midbar** — wilderness, desert, the uninhabited place. Israel was formed in it, Elijah fled to it, and John chose it. Some hear the word **davar**, word, inside midbar, and preach that the wilderness is where God speaks. That is a sermon rather than etymology, but John's whole life is an argument for it.

WE PRAY

Lord, John had every credential and he traded them for camel hair and a river. Free us from the seat we are protecting. He must increase, and we must decrease. Amen.

The Gallery

all around Yeshua · the three years

Now walk through the room with me and look at who He gathered, because it is the most consistent thing about His whole ministry and it cannot be explained as coincidence.

The shepherds. Working men on the night shift, whose job made keeping the purity laws almost impossible. Heaven skipped the palace four miles up the road and told them first.

Mary. A teenage girl in a village so small it appears nowhere in the Hebrew Bible, who answered an angel and then sang a song about God pulling rulers off their thrones. Read the Magnificat again and notice that it is a revolutionary anthem in the mouth of a nobody.

The fishermen. Manual workers with boats and nets and no rabbinical training. **Matthew**, a collaborator with the occupying power, called out of a customs booth with the same two words.

The woman at the well. Wrong nation, wrong gender, wrong marital history, drawing water at noon, which is when you go if you are avoiding people. She gets the longest theological conversation recorded with Him anywhere, and the first time He says plainly to any human being: **I am he.**

The woman with the haemorrhage. Twelve years ritually unclean, therefore untouchable, therefore excluded from the Temple and probably from her own family's meals. She spent everything on doctors. She touches His clothes from behind, hoping not to be noticed, and He stops the whole procession to find her and calls her **Daughter**, which He calls nobody else in the Gospels.

Mary Magdalene, out of whom seven demons went, made the first witness of the resurrection in a legal culture that would not accept her testimony. **Bartimaeus**, a blind beggar the crowd tried to silence. **The widow** with two of the smallest coins in circulation, whom He pointed at in the middle of the wealthiest courtyard in the country. **The children**, whom the disciples kept shooing away. **The thief on the cross**, with no baptism, no restitution, no good works and no time, who got a promise in the present tense: **today.**

FIRST TOLD TO MEN ON A NIGHT SHIFT

There were shepherds in the same country staying in the field, and keeping watch by night over their flock. Behold, an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be to all the people. For there is born to you today, in David's city, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

LUKE 2:8-11

A VILLAGE GIRL SINGS A REVOLUTION

My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, for he has looked at the humble state of his servant. For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed. ... He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down princes from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things. He has sent the rich away empty.

LUKE 1:46-48, 51-53

THE LONGEST CONVERSATION, GIVEN TO A SAMARITAN WOMAN

A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ... The Samaritan woman therefore said to him, "How is it that you, being a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ... The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah comes, he who is called Christ. When he has come, he will declare to us all things." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who speaks to you."

JOHN 4:7, 9, 25-26 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

THE ONLY WOMAN HE EVER CALLED DAUGHTER

A certain woman, who had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things by many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better; but rather grew worse, having heard the things concerning Jesus, came up behind him in the crowd, and touched his clothes. For she said, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be made well." ... He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be cured of your disease."

MARK 5:25-28, 34 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

THE WIDOW HE POINTED AT

He looked up and saw the rich people who were putting their gifts into the treasury. He saw a certain poor widow casting in two small brass coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow put in more than all of them, for all these put in gifts for God from their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, put in all that she had to live on."

LUKE 21:1-4

THE CHILDREN THE DISCIPLES WERE SHOOING AWAY

They were bringing to him little children, that he should touch them, but the disciples rebuked those who were bringing them. But when Jesus saw it, he was moved with indignation, and said to them, "Allow the little children to come to me! Don't forbid them, for God's Kingdom belongs to such as these. Most certainly I tell you, whoever will not receive God's Kingdom like a little child, he will in no way enter into it." He took them in his arms, and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

MARK 10:13-16

AND THE LAST-MINUTE ONE, WHO HAD NOTHING TO BRING

He said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." Jesus said to him, "Assuredly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

LUKE 23:42-43

WHERE YOU STAND

At Jacob's Well in Shechem you can drink from the water the Samaritan woman came to draw, forty metres down through rock. Very few places on earth let you taste the same water two stories of the Bible tasted. Then remember who He chose to have that conversation with, and how carefully she had timed her trip to avoid meeting anybody.

THE HEBREW WORD

בת · **Bat** — a daughter. He used it once, for a woman who had been untouchable for twelve years and had just broken the rules to reach Him. Of all the words available, He gave her a **family** word. She came to steal healing and He handed her a relationship.

WE PRAY

Lord, You told the shepherds first, You argued theology with the woman at the well, and You called the untouchable one Daughter. Do not let us build a church with a rope across the front. Amen.

The Sermons Against the Rope

dinner tables, temple courts, an upper room · throughout the ministry

Now the direct attacks, because He did not only prefer the NIPs, He **argued** against the system that ranked people, and He did it more often than almost any other subject.

Take the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and notice a detail almost everybody misses. It is the only parable in which Yeshua **gives a character a name**, and He gives it to the beggar. The rich man, who presumably had a famous name in that city, is anonymous forever. The name that survives is the one nobody knew.

Take the wedding-seat teaching, where He tells guests to stop choosing the good places and then tells hosts something even more disruptive: when you make a feast, do not invite the people who can invite you back.

Take the rich young man, who is sincere, moral and devout, and who cannot follow because of what he owns. And note carefully what Yeshua says afterwards, because Mark preserves the precise wording: how hard it is **for those who trust in riches**.

And take the last night. In the middle of the Passover, with the cross hours away, the twelve are arguing about which of them is the greatest. He does not lecture them. He takes off his outer clothing, wraps a towel round his waist and starts washing feet, including two pairs belonging to men who are about to betray and deny him.

THE ONLY NAMED CHARACTER IN ANY OF HIS PARABLES IS A BEGGAR

Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day. A certain beggar, named Lazarus, was taken to his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Yes, even the dogs came and licked his sores. It happened that the beggar died, and that he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died, and was buried.

LUKE 16:19-22

STOP CHOOSING THE GOOD SEATS, AND CHANGE YOUR GUEST LIST

When you are invited to a marriage feast, don't sit in the best seat, since perhaps someone more honorable than you might be invited by him ... For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. ... "When you make a feast, don't call your friends, nor your brothers, nor your kinsmen, nor rich neighbors, or perhaps they might also return the favor, and pay you back. But when you make a feast, ask the poor, the maimed, the lame, or the blind; and you will be blessed, because they don't have the resources to repay you."

LUKE 14:8, 11-14 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

THE MAN WHO COULD NOT FOLLOW BECAUSE OF WHAT HE OWNED

Jesus looked at him and loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But his face fell at that saying, and he went away sorrowful, for he was one who had great possessions. Jesus looked around, and said to his disciples, "How difficult it is for those who have riches to enter into God's Kingdom!" The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus answered again, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter into God's Kingdom! It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter into God's Kingdom."

MARK 10:21-25

HE NAMED THE MECHANISM: THEY LOVE THE FRONT ROW

In his teaching he said to them, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk in long robes, and to get greetings in the marketplaces, and the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts: those who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."

MARK 12:38-40

AN ARGUMENT ABOUT STATUS, HOURS BEFORE THE CROSS

There arose also a contention among them, which of them was considered to be greatest. He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are greatest among them are called benefactors. But not so with you. But one who is the greater among you, let him become as the younger, and one who is governing, as one who serves. ... But I am among you as one who serves."

LUKE 22:24-27 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

AND WHAT HE WAS THANKFUL FOR

At that time, Jesus answered, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you hid these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in your sight."

MATTHEW 11:25-26

WHERE YOU STAND

Sit in the Southern Steps or any ancient synagogue and find where the best seats were, because they are always identifiable, usually the stone benches nearest the front. Then read Mark 12:38-40 out loud sitting in one of them. It is a very uncomfortable place to hear that verse, which is the point.

THE HEBREW WORD

כבוד · **Kavod** — glory, honour, weight. It comes from **kaved**, heavy. In Hebrew, to honour somebody is to treat them as **weighty**, and that is exactly what the men in the front row wanted: to be the heavy ones in the room. The word for God's glory and the word for human self-importance are the same word, which is precisely why the Bible keeps warning us about who is carrying the weight.

WE PRAY

Lord, You named the beggar and left the rich man anonymous. Reorder our guest lists and our seating plans. And make us people who serve, since that is where You put Yourself. Amen.

Why: What God Does With an Empty Cup

the reason behind the whole pattern · now

So why? Not because poverty is charming, and not because God has a grudge against the successful. There are two reasons in the text, and they are both stated outright.

The first is about glory having one address. Paul says God chose the nothings so that no flesh could boast. Gideon's army was cut from thirty two thousand to three hundred for exactly this stated reason: *lest Israel brag against me, saying, my own hand has saved me.* When God works through the obviously capable, the credit gets confused. When He works through the obviously incapable, there is only one possible explanation, and that is not God protecting His ego. It is God protecting **us** from a lie about where our life comes from.

The second is about capacity. Paul says we carry the treasure in **clay jars**, cheap pottery, so that the power is visibly not ours. And Yeshua's own summary of His mission, quoted from Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue on the first day, is that He was sent to the poor, the captives, the blind and the crushed. Not because those are His favourite categories of human being, but because **an empty cup is the only kind that can be filled.**

That is the whole thing. VIP status is a full cup. It is not evil, it is just occupied. What God needs from any of us is room, and NIPs tend to have more of it, which is a description of their situation rather than a compliment about their character.

And then there is the last argument, which is not an argument at all. **God became a NIP.** Born to a teenage girl in an occupied province, laid in a feeding trough, raised in a village of no reputation, working as a tradesman until He was thirty, homeless during His ministry, executed as a criminal between two thieves, and buried in a borrowed grave. If closeness to God required importance, the incarnation makes no sense at all.

He did not send a memo about humility. He moved into the neighbourhood.

REASON ONE: SO NOBODY CAN TAKE THE CREDIT

God chose the lowly things of the world, and the things that are despised, and the things that are not, that he might bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should boast before God.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:28-29

WHICH IS WHY AN ARMY WAS CUT TO THREE HUNDRED

Yahweh said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel brag against me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'"

JUDGES 7:2

REASON TWO: THE POTTERY HAS TO BE OBVIOUSLY CHEAP

But we have this treasure in clay vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

AND THE POWER ACTUALLY WORKS BETTER IN WEAKNESS

He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Most gladly therefore I will rather glory in my weaknesses, that Christ's power may rest on me. ... For when I am weak, then am I strong.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9-10

HIS OWN JOB DESCRIPTION, READ OUT ON THE FIRST DAY

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

LUKE 4:18-19

AND HE IDENTIFIED HIMSELF WITH THEM PERMANENTLY

Then the King will tell those on his right hand, "Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me." ... "Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

MATTHEW 25:34-36, 40 (ABRIDGED FOR READING)

BECAUSE HE EMPTIED HIMSELF FIRST

Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, didn't consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, yes, the death of the cross.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

WHERE YOU STAND

Go into the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem through the Door of Humility, a stone doorway so low that every visitor has to bend, whatever their rank. Then go down to the grotto. God arranged His own arrival so that nobody could reach it standing up straight. The architecture preaches before a guide says a word.

THE HEBREW WORD

כֶּלִי · **Keli** — a vessel, a container, a tool. Everything in the Tabernacle was a keli, and the word simply means something made to hold what somebody else puts in it. A keli has no value from its contents and no power of its own. The only question ever asked of a vessel is whether there is room in it.

WE PRAY

Lord, You cut the army down so the glory would have one address, and You put the treasure in cheap pottery on purpose. Empty us enough to be useful. And thank You that when You came, You came as one of us, and not as one of the important ones. Amen.

An Honest Note on the Chronology

where the Gospels differ, and what I have done about it

Now the honest note, because a teaching this satisfying is easy to push one step too far, and the step too far does real damage.

One. Poverty is not holiness. Nothing in the Bible says that being poor makes a person righteous or that being rich makes a person wicked. Abraham was extremely wealthy and is called the friend of God. Job was the richest man in the east before and after. Joseph of Arimathea's money bought the tomb, and Nicodemus paid for a hundred pounds of burial spices. Lydia ran a business in purple cloth and hosted the first church in Europe. The women in Luke 8 **funded the ministry out of their own possessions**. Zacchaeus gave away half and kept half, and Yeshua declared salvation had come to his house. If this teaching leaves you thinking God prefers empty bank accounts, I have taught it badly.

Two. What is actually condemned is trust and assumption. Read Mark 10:24 again in the wording Mark preserved: how hard it is **for those who trust in riches**. That is the target, and it can be hit by a poor man with a grasping heart as easily as a rich one. Alongside it sits the assumption that status buys access to God, which is the thing John attacked at the river, the thing the parable of the two men in the temple dismantles, and the thing Yeshua kept overturning at dinner tables.

Three. Blessed are the poor: Luke and Matthew are not identical, and you should not flatten either. Matthew says poor **in spirit**; Luke simply says **poor**, and then adds a woe to the rich for balance. The temptation is to use Matthew to make Luke comfortable. Do not do it. The Hebrew word behind both, **anav**, genuinely carries poverty of circumstance and lowliness of spirit in one breath, so both Gospels are quoting Him correctly. Hold them together and let them be uncomfortable.

Four. A few things above are inference rather than statement. That Isaiah was of noble birth is a very old and reasonable tradition based on his access to kings and the quality of his Hebrew, and the Bible never says it outright. That John gave up a guaranteed priestly career is a fair reading of Luke 1:5, since priesthood was inherited, but Luke does not spell out the renunciation. And how a Moabite could legally enter the assembly, given Deuteronomy 23:3, is a genuine puzzle that Jewish tradition has discussed for two thousand years. **The book of Ruth does not explain it. It simply does it, and then puts her in the king's genealogy,** which may be the most eloquent answer available.

Five. Do not perform this. The moment being a NIP becomes a spiritual achievement, it has turned into the very thing it was curing. The tax collector in the parable was not using a technique. He was telling the truth about himself, in eight words, and he did not know he was in a parable. You cannot manufacture a broken heart, and God has never asked anybody to.

What is left when all that is said is still the largest fact in the book. **God keeps choosing the people who were not on the list.** A Moabite widow in the corner of a field. The eighth son out with the sheep. A boy who could not speak. A priest with no temple. A herdsman with no training. A priest's son in camel hair. Shepherds, fishermen, a collaborator, a Samaritan woman at noon, an untouchable woman in a crowd, a widow with two coins, a thief with minutes to live. And the Son of God Himself, in a feeding trough, in an occupied province, in a village nobody respected. **That is the pattern, and it is very good news, because it means the rope was never real.**

The Rope Was Never Real

He did not send a memo about humility. He was born to a teenage girl in an occupied province, laid in a feeding trough, raised in a village of no reputation, and executed between two thieves. If closeness to God required importance, the incarnation makes no sense at all.

*“Because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers,
you did it to me.”*

MATTHEW 25:40

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