

PILATE

In Jesus' day, any death sentence had to be approved by the Roman official in charge of the administrative district. Pontius Pilate was governor of the province of Judea, where Jerusalem was located. When the Jewish leaders had Jesus in their power and wanted to kill him, they had to obtain Pilate's permission. So it was that early one morning Pilate found a crowd at his door demanding a man's death.

Pilate's relationship with the Jews had always been stormy. His Roman toughness and fairness had been weakened by cynicism, compromises, and mistakes. On several occasions his actions had deeply offended the religious leaders. The resulting riots and chaos must have made Pilate wonder what he had gotten himself into. He was trying to control people who treated their Roman conquerors without respect. Jesus' trial was another episode in Pilate's ongoing problems.

For Pilate, there was never a doubt about Jesus' innocence. Three separate times he declared Jesus not guilty. He couldn't understand what made these people want to kill Jesus, but his fear of the pressure the Jews would place on him made him decide to allow Jesus' crucifixion. Because of the people's threat to inform the emperor that Pilate hadn't eliminated a rebel against Rome, Pilate went against what he knew was right. In desperation, he chose to do wrong.

We share a common humanity with Pilate. At times we know the right and choose the wrong. He had his moment in history and now we have ours. What have we done with our opportunities and responsibilities? What judgment have we passed on Jesus?

Strength and accomplishment:

- * Roman governor of Judea

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * He failed in his attempt to rule a people who were defeated militarily but never dominated by Rome
- * His constant political struggles made him a cynical and uncaring compromiser, susceptible to pressure
- * Although he realized Jesus was innocent, he bowed to the public demand for his execution

Lessons from his life:

- * Great evil can happen when truth is at the mercy of political pressures
- * Resisting the truth leaves a person without purpose or direction

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Judea
- * Occupation: Roman governor (or procurator) of Judea
- * Relatives: Wife: unnamed
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, Caiaphas, Herod

Key verses:

“Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all. But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you one at the Passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you the King of the Jews?” (John 18:38, 39).

Pilate’s story is told in the Gospels. He is also mentioned in Acts 3:13; 4:27; 13:28; 1 Timothy 6:13.

ZACHARIAS

Zacharias was told before anyone else that God was setting in motion his own visit to earth. Zacharias and his wife, Elisabeth, were known for their personal holiness. They were well suited to doing a special work for God. But they shared the pain of not having children, and in Jewish culture this was considered not having God's blessing. Zacharias and Elisabeth were old, and they had stopped even asking for children.

This trip to the Temple in Jerusalem for Zacharias's turn at duty had included an unexpected blessing. Zacharias was chosen to be the Priest who would enter the Holy Place to offer incense to God for the people. Suddenly, much to his surprise and terror, he found himself face to face with an angel. The angel's message was too good to be true! But Zacharias did not respond to the news of the coming Savior as much as he expressed doubts about his own ability to father the child the angel promised him. His age spoke more loudly than God's promise. As a result, God prevented Zacharias from speaking until the promise became reality.

The record of the prayer in Luke 1 is our last glimpse of Zacharias. Like so many of God's most faithful servants, he passes quietly from the scene once his part was done. He becomes our hero for times when we doubt God yet are willing to obey. We gain hope from Zacharias that God can do great things through anyone who is available to him.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Known as a righteous man
- * Was a priest for God
- * One of the few people to be directly addressed by an angel
- * Fathered John the Baptist

Weakness and mistake:

- * Momentarily doubted the angel's promise of a son because of his old age

Lessons from his Life:

- * Physical limitations do not limit God
- * God accomplishes his will, sometimes in unexpected ways

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Priest
- * Relatives: Wife: Elisabeth. Son: John the Baptist

Key verses:

"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years" (Luke 1:6, 7).

Zacharias's story is told in Luke 1.

ELISABETH

In societies like Israel in which a woman's value was largely measured by her ability to bear children, aging without children often led to personal hardship and public shame. For Elisabeth, a childless old age was a painful and lonely time during which she remained faithful to God.

Both Elisabeth and Zacharias came from priestly families. For two weeks each year, Zacharias had to go to the temple in Jerusalem to attend to his priestly duties. After one of those trips, Zacharias returned home excited, but speechless. He had to write down his good news, because he couldn't give it any other way. And what a wonderful surprise he had for his wife - their faded dream would become an exciting reality! Soon Elisabeth became pregnant, and she knew her child was a long-hoped-for gift from God.

News traveled fast among the family. Seventy miles to the north, in Nazareth, Elisabeth's cousin, Mary, also unexpectedly became pregnant. Within days after the angel's message that she would bear the Messiah, Mary went to visit Elisabeth. They were instantly bound together by the unique gifts God had given them. Elisabeth knew that Mary's son would be even greater than her own, for John would be the messenger for Mary's son.

When the baby was born, Elisabeth insisted on his God-given name: John. Zacharias's written agreement freed his tongue, and everyone in town wondered what would become of this obviously special child.

Elisabeth whispered her praise as she cared for God's gift. Knowing about Mary must have made her marvel at God's timing. Things had worked out even better than she could have planned. We too need to remember that God is in control of every situation. When did you last pause to recognize God's timing in the events of your life?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Known as a deeply spiritual woman
- * Showed no doubts about God's ability to fulfill his promise
- * Mother of John the Baptist
- * The first woman besides Mary to hear of the coming Savior

Key lessons from her life:

- * God does not forget those who have been faithful to him
- * God's timetable and methods do not have to conform to what we expect

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Homemaker
- * Relatives: Husband: Zacharias. Son: John the Baptist. Cousin: Mary
- * Contemporaries: Joseph, Herod the Great

Key verses:

“And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blesses is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord” (Luke 1:43-45).

Elisabeth’s story is told in Luke 1:5-80.

MARY

Motherhood is a painful privilege. Young Mary of Nazareth had the unique privilege of being mother to the very Son of God. Yet the pains and pleasures of her motherhood are understood by mothers everywhere. Mary was the only human present at Jesus' birth who also witnessed his death. She saw him arrive as her baby son, and she watched him die as her Savior.

Until Gabriel's unexpected visit, Mary's life was quite satisfactory. She had recently become engaged to a carpenter, Joseph, and was anticipating married life. But her life was about to change forever.

Angels don't usually make appointments before visiting. Mary found the angel's greeting puzzling and his presence frightening. What she heard next was the news almost every woman in Israel hoped to hear - that her child would be the Messiah, God's promised Savior. Mary did not doubt the message, but rather asked how her pregnancy would be possible. Gabriel told her the baby would be God's son. Her answer was the one God waits in vain to hear from so many other people: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). Later, her song of joy to Elisabeth shows us how well she knew God, for her thoughts were filled with his words from the Old Testament.

Within a few weeks of his birth, Jesus was taken to the Temple to be dedicated to God. There Joseph and Mary were met by two prophets, Simeon and Anna, who recognized the child as the Messiah and praised God. Simeon added some words to Mary that must have come to her mind many times in the years that followed: "A sword shall pierce through thy own soul" (Luke 2:35). A big part of her painful privilege of motherhood would be to see her son rejected and crucified by the people he came to save.

Are you, like Mary, available to be used by God?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * The mother of Jesus, the Messiah
- * The one human who was with Jesus from birth to death
- * Willing to be available to God
- * Knew and applied God's Word

Lessons from her life:

- * God's best servants are often plain people available to him
- * God's plans involve extraordinary events in ordinary people
- * A person's character is revealed by his or her response to the unexpected

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Nazareth, Bethlehem
- * Occupation: Homemaker
- * Relatives: Husband: Joseph. Cousins: Zacharias and Elisabeth. Children: Jesus, James, Joses, Juda, Simon, and daughters

Key verse:

“And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word: (Luke 1:38).

Mary’s story is told throughout the Gospels. She is also mentioned in Acts 1:14.

JAMES

Jesus singles out three of his 12 disciples for special training. James, his brother John, and Peter made up this inner circle. Each eventually played a key role in the early church. Peter became a great speaker, John became a major writer, and James was the first of the 12 disciples to die for the faith.

The fact that his name is always mentioned before John's indicates that James was the older brother. Zebedee, their father, owned a fishing business where they worked along with Peter and Andrew. When Peter, Andrew, and John left Galilee to see John the Baptist, James stayed back with the boats and fishing nets. Later, when Jesus called them, he was eager as his partners to follow.

James enjoyed being in the inner circle of Jesus' disciples, but he misunderstood Jesus' purpose. He and his brother even tried to secure their role in Jesus' Kingdom by asking Jesus to promise them each a special position. Like the other disciples, James had a limited view of what Jesus was doing on earth, picturing only an earthly kingdom that would overthrow Rome and restore Israel's former glory. But above all, James wanted to be with Jesus. He had found the right leader, even though he was still on the wrong timetable. It took Jesus' death and resurrection to correct his view.

James was the first of the 12 disciples to die for the Gospel. He was willing to die because he knew Jesus had conquered death, the doorway to eternal life. Our expectations about life will be limited if this life is all we can see. Jesus promised eternal life to those willing to trust him. If we believe this promise, he will give us the courage to stand for him even during dangerous times.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * One of the 12 disciples
- * One of a special inner circle of three with Peter and John
- * First of the 12 disciples to be killed for his faith

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Two outbursts from James indicate struggles with temper (Luke 9:54) and selfishness (Mark 10:37). Both times, he and his brother, John, spoke as one

Lesson from his life:

- * Loss of life is not too heavy a price to pay for following Jesus

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Galilee
- * Occupation: Fisherman, disciple
- * Relatives: Father: Zebedee. Mother: Salome. Brother: John
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, Pilate, Herod Agrippa

Key verses:

“And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire. And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you? They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory” (Mark 10:35-37).

James’ story is told in the Gospels. He is also mentioned in Acts 1:13 and 12:2.

MARTHA

Many older brothers and sisters have an irritating tendency to take charge, a habit developed while growing up. We can easily see this pattern in Martha, the older sister of Mary and Lazarus. She was used to being in control.

The fact that Martha, Mary, and Lazarus are remembered for their hospitality takes on added significance when we note that hospitality was a social requirement in their culture. It was considered shameful to turn anyone away from your door. Apparently Martha's family met this requirement very well.

Martha worried about details. She wished to please, to serve, to do the right thing - but she often succeeded in making everyone around her uncomfortable. Perhaps as the oldest she feared shame if her home did not measure up to expectations. She tried to do everything she could to make sure that wouldn't happen. As a result, she found it hard to relax and enjoy her guests, and even harder to accept Mary's lack of cooperation in all the preparations. Martha's frustration was so intense that she finally asked Jesus to settle the matter. He gently corrected her attitude and showed her that her priorities, though good, were not the best. The personal attention she gave her guests should be more important than the comforts she tried to provide for them.

Later, following her brother Lazarus's death, Martha could hardly help being herself. When she heard Jesus was finally coming, she rushed out to meet him and expressed her inward conflict of disappointment and hope. Jesus pointed out that her hope was too limited. He was not only Lord beyond death, he was Lord over death - the resurrection and the life! Moments later, Martha again spoke without thinking, pointing out that four-day-old corpses are well on their way to decomposition. Her awareness of details sometimes kept her from seeing the whole picture, but Jesus was consistently patient with her.

In our last picture of Martha, she is once again serving a meal to Jesus and his disciples. She has not stopped serving. But the Holy Bible records her silence this time. She has begun to learn what her younger sister already knew, that worship begins with silence and listening.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Known as a hospitable homeowner
- * Believed in Jesus with growing faith
- * Had a strong desire to do everything exactly right

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Expected others to agree with her priorities
- * Was overly concerned with details
- * Tended to feel sorry for herself when her efforts were not recognized
- * Limited Jesus' power to this life

Lessons from her life:

- * Getting caught up in details can make us forget the main reasons for our actions
- * There is a proper time to listen to Jesus and a proper time to work for him

Vital statistics:

* Where: Bethany

* Relatives: Sister: Mary. Brother: Lazarus

Key verse:

“But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me” (Luke 10:40).

Martha’s story is told in Luke 10:38-42 and John 11:17-45.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

There's no getting around it - John the Baptist was unique. He wore odd clothes and ate strange food and preached an unusual message to the Judaeans who went in to the wastelands to see him.

But John did not aim at uniqueness for its own sake. Instead, he aimed at obedience. He knew he had a specific role to play in the world - announcing the coming of the Savior and he put all his energies into this task. Luke tells us that John was in the desert when God's word of direction came to him. John was ready and waiting. The angel who had announced John's birth to Zacharias had made it clear this child was to be a Nazarite - one set apart for God's service. John remained faithful to that calling.

This wild-looking man had no power or position in the Jewish political system, but he spoke with almost irresistible authority. People were moved by his words because he spoke the truth, challenging them to turn from their sins and baptizing them as a symbol of their repentance. They responded by the hundreds. But even as people crowded to him, he pointed beyond himself, never forgetting that his main role was to announce the coming of the Savior.

The words of truth that moved many to repentance goaded others to resistance and resentment. John even challenged Herod to admit his sin. Herodias, the woman Herod had married illegally, decided to get rid of this desert preacher. Although she was able to have him killed, she was not able to stop his message. The one John had announced was already on the move. John had accomplished his mission.

God had given each of us a purpose for living, and we can trust him to guide us. John did not have the complete Holy Bible as we know it today, but he focused his life on the truth he knew from the available Old Testament Scriptures. Likewise we can discover in God's Word the truths he wants us to know. And as these truths work in us, others will be drawn to him. God can use you in a way he can use no one else. Let him know your willingness to follow him today.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * The God-appointed messenger to announce the arrival of Jesus
- * A preacher whose theme was repentance
- * A fearless confronter
- * Known for his remarkable life-style
- * Uncompromising

Lessons from his life:

- * God does not guarantee an easy or safe life to those who serve him
- * Doing what God desires is the greatest possible life investment
- * Standing for the truth is more important than life itself

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Judaea

- * Occupation: Prophet

- * Relatives: Father: Zacharias. Mother: Elisabeth. Distant cousin: Jesus

- * Contemporaries: Herod, Herodias

Key verse:

“Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11).

John’s story is told in all four Gospels. His coming was predicted in Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 4:5; he is mentioned in Acts 1:5, 22; 10:37; 11:16; 13:24, 25; 18:25; 19:3, 4.

NICODEMUS

God specializes in finding and changing people we consider out of reach. It took awhile for Nicodemus to come out of the dark, but God was patient with this “undercover” believer.

Afraid of being discovered, Nicodemus made an appointment to see Jesus at night. Daylight conversations between Pharisees and Jesus tended to be antagonistic, but Nicodemus really wanted to learn. He probably got a lot more than he expected - a challenge to a new life! We know very little about Nicodemus, but we know that he left that evening’s encounter a changed man. He came away with a whole new understanding of both God and himself.

Nicodemus next appears as part of the Jewish Council. As it discusses ways to eliminate Jesus, Nicodemus raised the question of justice. Although his objection was overruled, he had spoken up. He had begun to change.

Our last picture of Nicodemus shows him joining Joseph of Arimathea in asking for Jesus’ body to bury. Realizing what he was risking, Nicodemus was making a bold move. He was continuing to grow.

God looks for steady growth, not instant perfection. How well does your present level of spiritual growth match up with how long you have known Jesus?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * One of the few religious leaders who believed in Jesus
- * A member of the powerful Council
- * A Pharisee who was attracted by Jesus’ character and miracles
- * Joined with Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus

Weakness and mistake:

- * Limited by his fear of being publicly exposed as Jesus’ follower

Lessons from his life:

- * Unless we are born again, we can never be part of the Kingdom of God
- * God is able to change those we might consider unreachable
- * God is patient, but persistent
- * If we are available, God can use us

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: Religious leader
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea

Key verse:

“Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (John 3:4).

Nicodemus’s story is told in John 3:1-21; 7:50-52; and 19:39, 40.

CAIAPHAS

Caiaphas was the leader of the religious group called the Sadducees. Educated and wealthy, they were the political rulers of the nation. As the elite group, they were on fairly good terms with Rome. They hated Jesus because he endangered their secure life-styles and taught a message they could not accept. A kingdom in which leaders humbly served had no appeal to them.

Caiaphas's usual policy was to remove any threats to his power by whatever means necessary. For Caiaphas, whether Jesus should die was not in question; the only point to be settled was when his death should take place. Not only did Jesus have to be captured and tried, the Jewish Council also needed Roman approval before they could carry out the death sentence. Caiaphas's plans were unexpectedly helped by Judas's offer to betray Christ.

Caiaphas did not realize that his schemes were actually part of a wonderful plan God was carrying out. Caiaphas's willingness to sacrifice another man to preserve his own security was clearly selfish. By contrast, Jesus' willingness to die for us was a clear example of loving self-sacrifice. Caiaphas thought he had won the battle as Jesus hung on the cross, but he did not count on the resurrection!

Caiaphas's mind was closed. He couldn't accept the resurrection even when the evidence was overwhelming, and he attempted to silence those whose lives had been forever changed by the risen Christ (Matthew 28:12, 13). Caiaphas represents those people who will not believe because they think it will cost them too much to accept Jesus as Lord. They choose the fleeting power, prestige, and pleasures of this life instead of the eternal life God offers those who receive his Son. What is your choice?

Strength and accomplishment:

- * High priest for 18 years

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * One of those most directly responsible for Jesus death
- * Used his office as a means to power and personal security
- * Planned Jesus' capture, carried out his illegal trial, pressured Pilate to approve the crucifixion, attempted to prevent the resurrection, and later tried to cover up the fact of the resurrection
- * Kept up religious appearances while compromising with Rome
- * Involved in the later persecution of Christians

Lesson from his life:

- * God uses even the twisted motives and actions of his enemies to bring about his will
- * When we cover selfish motives with spiritual objectives and words, God still sees our intentions

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: High Priest
- * Relatives: Father-in-law: Annas
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, Pilate, Herod Antipas

Key verses:

“And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not” (John 11:49, 50).

Caiaphas is also mentioned in Matthew 26:3, 4, 57-67; Luke 3:2; John 11:49-53; John 18:13-28; and Acts 4:6.

JOHN

Being loved is the most powerful motivation in the world! Our ability to love is often shaped by our experience of love. We usually love others as we have been loved.

Some of the greatest statements about God's loving nature were written by a man who experienced God's love in a unique way. John, Jesus' disciple, expressed his relationship to the Son of God by calling himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20). Although Jesus' love is clearly communicated in all the Gospels, in John's Gospel it is a central theme. Because his own experience of Jesus' love was so strong and personal, John was sensitive to those words and actions of Jesus that illustrated how the one who is love loved others.

Jesus knew John fully and loved him fully. He gave John and his brother James the nickname "Sons of Thunder," perhaps from an occasion when the brothers asked Jesus for permission to "command fire to come down from heaven" (Luke 9:54) on a village that had refused to welcome Jesus and the disciples. In John's Gospel and letters, we see the great God of love, while God's justice thunders from the pages of Revelation.

Jesus confronts each of us as he confronted John. We cannot know the depth of his love unless we are willing to face the fact that he knows us completely. Otherwise we are fooled into believing he must love the people we pretend to be, not the sinners we actually are. John and all the disciples convince us that God will accept us as we are. Being aware of God's love is a great motivator for change. His love is not given in exchange for our efforts; his love frees us to really live. Have you accepted that love?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Before following Jesus, one of John the Baptist's disciples
- * One of the 12 disciples and, with Peter and James, one of the inner three, closest to Jesus
- * Wrote five New Testament books: the Gospel of John; 1,2, and 3 John; and Revelation

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Along with James, shared a tendency to outbursts of selfishness and anger
- * Asked for a special position in Jesus' Kingdom

Lessons from his life:

- * Those who realize how much they are loved are able to love much
- * When God changes a life, he does not take away personality characteristics, but puts them to effective use in his service

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Fisherman, Disciple
- * Relatives: Father: Zebedee. Mother: Salome. Brother: James
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, Pilate, Herod

Key verses:

“Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth” (1 John 2:7, 8).

John’s story is told throughout the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation.

MARY MAGDALENE

The absence of women among the 12 disciples has bothered a few people. But it is clear that there were many women among Jesus' followers. It is also clear that Jesus did not treat women as others in his culture did; he treated them with dignity, as people with worth.

Mary of Magdala was an early follower of Jesus and certainly deserves to be called a disciple. An energetic, impulsive, caring woman, she not only traveled with Jesus, but also contributed to the needs of the group. She was present at the crucifixion and was on her way to embalm Jesus' body on Sunday morning when she discovered the empty tomb. Mary was the first to see Jesus after his resurrection.

Mary Magdalene is a heartwarming example of thankful living. Her life was miraculously freed by Jesus when he cast seven demons out of her. In every glimpse we have of her, she was acting out her appreciation for the freedom Christ had given her. That freedom allowed her to stand under Christ's cross when all the disciples except John were hiding in fear. After Jesus' death, she intended to give his body every respect. Like the rest of Jesus' followers, she never expected his bodily resurrection - but she was overjoyed to discover it.

Mary's faith was not complicated, but it was direct and genuine. She was more eager to believe and obey than to understand everything. Jesus honored her childlike faith by appearing to her first and by entrusting her with the first message of his resurrection.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Contributed to the needs of Jesus and his disciples
- * One of the few faithful followers present at Jesus' death on the cross
- * First to see the risen Christ

Weakness and mistake:

- * Jesus had to cast out seven demons out of her

Lessons from her life:

- * Those who are obedient grow in understanding
- * Women are vital to Jesus' ministry
- * Jesus relates to women as he created them - as equal reflectors of God's image

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Magdala
- * Occupation: We are not told, but she seems to have been wealthy
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, the 12 disciples, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Jesus' mother Mary

Key verse:

"Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils" (Mark 16:9).

Mary Magdalene's story is told in Matthew 27; 28; Mark 15; 16; Luke 23; 24; and John 19; 20. She is also mentioned in Luke 8:2.

THOMAS

Thomas, so often remembered as “Doubting Thomas,” deserves to be respected for his faith. He was a doubter, but his doubts had a purpose - he wanted to know the truth. Thomas did not idolize his doubts; he gladly believed when given reasons to do so. He expressed his doubts fully and had them answered completely. Doubting was only his way of responding, not the way of life.

Although our glimpses of Thomas are brief, his character comes through with consistency. He struggled to be faithful to what he knew, despite what he felt. At one point, when it was plain to everyone that Jesus’ life was in danger, only Thomas put into words what most were feeling, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). He didn’t hesitate to follow Jesus.

We don’t know why Thomas was absent the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, but he was reluctant to believe their witness to Christ’s resurrection. Not even ten friends could change his mind!

We can doubt without having to live a doubting way of life. Doubt encourages rethinking. It’s purpose is more to sharpen the mind than to change it. Doubt can be used to pose the question, get an answer, and push for a decision. But doubt was never meant to be a permanent condition. Doubt is one foot lifted, poised to step forward or back. There is no motion until the foot comes down.

When you experience doubt, take encouragement from Thomas. He didn’t stay in his doubt, but allowed Jesus to bring him to belief. Take encouragement also from the fact that countless other followers of Christ have struggled with doubts. The answers God gave them may help you too. Don’t settle into doubts, but move on from them to decision and belief. Find another believer with whom you can share your doubts. Silent doubts rarely find answers.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * One of Jesus’ 12 disciples
- * Intense both in doubt and belief
- * Was a loyal and honest man

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Along with the others, abandoned Jesus at his arrest
- * Refuses to believe the others’ claims to have seen Christ and demanded proof
- * Struggled with a pessimistic outlook

Lessons from his life:

- * Jesus does not reject doubts that are honest and directed toward belief
- * Better to doubt out loud than to disbelieve in silence

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Galilee, Judaea, Samaria
- * Occupation: Disciple of Jesus
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, other disciples, Herod, Pilate

Key verses:

“Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands;
and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.
And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God” (John 20:27, 28).

Thomas’s story is told in the Gospels. He is also mentioned in Acts 1:13.

STEPHEN

Around the world, the Gospel has most often taken root in places prepared by the blood of martyrs. Before a person can give his life for the Gospel, however, he must first live his life for the Gospel. One way God trains his servants is to place them in insignificant positions. Their desire to serve Christ is translated into the reality of serving others. Stephen was an effective administrator and messenger before becoming a martyr.

Stephen was named among the managers of food distribution in the early church. Long before violent persecution broke out against Christians, there was already social ostracism. Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah were usually cut off from their families. As a result, the believers depended on each other for support. The sharing of homes, food, and resources was both a practical and necessary mark of the early church. Eventually, the number of believers made it necessary to organize the sharing. People were being overlooked. There were complaints. Those chosen to help manage were chosen for their integrity and sensitivity to God.

Stephen, besides being a good administrator, was also a powerful speaker. When confronted in the Temple by various antagonistic groups, Stephen's logic in responding was convincing. This is clear from the defense he made before the Court. He presented a summary of the Jews' own history and made powerful applications that stung his listeners. During his defense Stephen must have known he was speaking his own death sentence. Members of the Court could not stand to have their evil motives exposed. They stoned him to death while he prayed for their forgiveness. His final words show how much like Jesus he had become in a short time. His death had a lasting impact on young Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, who would move from being a violent persecutor of Christians to being one of the great champions of the Gospel the church has known.

Stephen's life is a continual challenge to all Christians. Because he was the first to die for the faith, his sacrifice raises questions: How many risks do we take in being Jesus' followers? Would we be willing to die for him? Are we really willing to live for him?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * One of seven leaders chosen to supervise food distribution to the needy in the early church
- * Known for his spiritual qualities of faith, wisdom, grace, and power, and for the Spirit's presence in his life
- * Outstanding leader, teacher, and debater
- * First to give his life for the Gospel

Lessons from his life:

- * Striving for excellence in small assignments prepares one for greater responsibilities
- * Real understanding of God always leads to practical and compassionate actions toward people

Vital statistics:

- * Church responsibilities: Deacon - distributing food to the needy
- * Contemporaries: Paul, Caiaphas, Gamaliel, the apostles

Key verses:

“And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59, 60).

Stephen’s story is told in Acts 6:3-8:2. He is also mentioned in Acts 11:19; 22:20.

PHILIP

Jesus' last words to his followers were a command to take the Gospel everywhere, but they seemed reluctant to leave Jerusalem. It took intense persecution to scatter the believers from Jerusalem and into Judaea and Samaria, where Jesus had instructed them to go. Philip, one of the deacons in charge of food distribution, left Jerusalem and, like most Jewish Christians, spread the Gospel wherever he went; but unlike most of them, he did not limit his audience to other Jews. He went directly to Samaria, the last place many Jews would go, due to age-old prejudice.

The Samaritans responded in large numbers. When word got back to Jerusalem, Peter and John were sent to evaluate Philip's ministry. They quickly became involved themselves, seeing firsthand God's acceptance of those who previously were considered unacceptable.

In the middle of all this success and excitement, God directed Philip out to the desert for an appointment with an Ethiopian eunuch, another foreigner who had been in Jerusalem. Philip went immediately. His effectiveness in sharing the Gospel with this man placed a Christian in a significant position in a distant country and may well have had an effect on an entire nation.

Philip ended up in Caesarea, where events allowed him to be Paul's host many years later. Paul, who as the leading persecutor of the Christians had been instrumental in pushing Philip and others out of Jerusalem, had himself become an effective believer. The conversion of the Gentiles begun by Philip was continued across the entire Roman Empire by Paul.

Whether or not you are a follower of Christ, Philip's life presents a challenge. To those still outside the Gospel, he is a reminder that the Good News is for you also. To those who have accepted Christ, he is a reminder that we are not free to disqualify anyone from hearing about Jesus. How much like Philip would your neighbors say you are?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * One of the seven organizers of food distribution in the early church
- * An evangelist, one of the first traveling missionaries
- * One of the first to obey Jesus' command to take the Gospel to all people
- * A careful student of the Holy Bible who could explain it's meaning clearly

Lessons from his life:

- * God finds great and various uses for those willing to obey wholeheartedly
- * The Gospel is universal Good News
- * The whole Holy Bible, not just the New Testament, helps us understand more about Jesus
- * Both mass response (the Samaritans) and individual response (the man from Ethiopia) to the Gospel are valuable

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Deacon, evangelist
- * Relatives: Four daughters
- * Contemporaries: Paul, Stephen, the apostles

Key verse:

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

Philip’s story is told in Acts 6:1-7; 8:5-40; 21:8-10.

PAUL

No person, apart from Jesus himself, shaped the history of Christianity like the apostle Paul. Even before he was a believer, his actions were significant. His frenzied persecution of Christians following Stephen's death got the church started in obeying Christ's final command to take the Gospel worldwide. Paul's personal encounter with Jesus changed his life. He never lost his fierce intensity, but from then on it was channeled for spreading the Good News.

Paul was very religious. His training under Gamaliel was the finest available. His intentions and efforts were sincere. He was a good Pharisee, knew the Holy Bible, and sincerely believed that this Christian movement was dangerous to Judaism. Thus Paul hated the Christian faith and persecuted Christians without mercy.

Paul got permission to travel to Damascus to capture Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem. But God had other plans for Paul and stopped him in his hurried tracks on the Damascus road. Paul personally met Jesus Christ, and his life was never the same.

Until Paul's conversion, little had been done about carrying the Gospel to non-Jews. Philip had preached in Samaria and to an Ethiopian man; Cornelius, a Gentile, was converted under Peter; and in Antioch in Syria, some Greeks had joined the believers. When Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to check on this situation, he went to Tarsus to find Paul and bring him to Antioch, and together they worked among the believers there. They were then sent on a missionary journey, the first of three Paul would take that would carry the Gospel across the Roman Empire.

The thorny issue of whether Gentile believers had to obey Jewish laws before they could become Christians caused many problems in the early church. Paul worked hard to convince the Jews that Gentiles were acceptable to God, but he spent even more time convincing the Gentiles that they were acceptable to God. The lives Paul touched were changed and challenged by meeting Christ through him.

When Paul met Jesus, he found the One with the reason for living and dying, and he became totally sold out for Christ. God did not waste any part of Paul - his background, his training, his citizenship, his mind, or even his weaknesses. Are you willing to let God do the same for you? You will never know all he can do with you until you allow him to have all that you are!

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Transformed by God from a persecutor of Christians to a preacher for Christ
- * Preached for Christ throughout the Roman Empire on three missionary journeys
- * Wrote letters to various churches, which became part of the New Testament
- * Was never afraid to face an issue head-on and deal with it
- * Was sensitive to God's leading and, despite his strong personality, always did as God directed
- * Is often called the apostle to the Gentiles

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Witnessed and approved of Stephen's stoning
- * Set out to destroy Christianity by persecuting Christians

Lessons from his life:

- * The Good News is that forgiveness and eternal life are a gift of God's grace received by faith in Christ and available to all people
- * Obedience flows from a relationship with God, but obedience will never create or earn that relationship
- * Real freedom doesn't come until we no longer have to prove our freedom
- * God does not waste our time - he will use our past and present so we may serve him with our future

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Born in Tarsus, but became a world traveler for Christ
- * Occupation: Trained as a Pharisee, learned the tent making trade, served as a missionary
- * Contemporaries: Gamaliel, Stephen, the apostles, Luke, Barnabas, Mark, Timothy, James

Key verse:

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

Paul's story is told in Acts 7:58-28:31 and throughout his New Testament letters.

CORNELIUS

The early days of Christianity were exciting as God's Spirit moved and people's lives were changed. Converts were pouring in from surprising backgrounds. Even the dreaded Saul (Paul) became a Christian, and non-Jews were responding to the Good News about Jesus. Among the first of these was the Roman centurion, Cornelius.

Because of frequent outbreaks of violence, Roman soldiers had to be stationed throughout Israel to keep peace. But most Romans, hated as conquerors, did not get along well in the nation. As an army officer, Cornelius was in a difficult position. He represented Rome, but his home was in Caesarea. During his years in Israel, he had himself been conquered by the God of Israel. He had a reputation as a godly man who put his faith into action, and he was respected by the Jews.

Four significant aspects of Cornelius's character are noted in Acts. He actively sought after God, he revered God, he was generous in meeting other people's needs, and he prayed. God told him to send for Peter, because Peter would give him more knowledge about the God he was already seeking to please. And Cornelius obeyed.

When Peter entered Cornelius's home, he broke a whole list of Jewish rules. Peter confessed he wasn't all that comfortable, but here was an eager audience and he couldn't hold back his message. No sooner had he started sharing the Gospel and God demonstrated his overwhelming approval by filling that Roman family with the Holy Spirit. Peter saw he had no choice but to baptize them and welcome them as equals in the growing Christian Church. Another step had been taken in carrying the Gospel to the whole world.

Cornelius is a welcome example of God's willingness to use extraordinary means to reach those who truly desire to know him. He does not play favorites, and he does not hide from those who want to find him. God sent his Son because he loves the whole world - and that includes Peter, Cornelius, and you.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was a godly and generous Roman
- * Although an officer in the occupying army, he seems to have been well respected by the Jews
- * He responded to God and encouraged his family to do the same
- * His conversion helped the young church realize that the Good News was for all people, both Jews and Gentiles

Lessons from his life:

- * God reaches those who want to know him
- * The Gospel is open to all people
- * There are those eager to believe all over the world
- * When we are willing to seek the truth and be obedient to the light God gives us, God will reward us richly

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Caesarea
- * Occupation: Roman centurion
- * Contemporaries: Philip, Peter, the other apostles

Key verse:

“A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always” (Acts 10:2).

Cornelius's story is told in Acts 10:1-11:18.

HEROD AGRIPPA I

For good or evil, families have lasting and powerful influence on their children. Traits and qualities are passed on to the next generation, and often the mistakes and sins of the parents are repeated by the children. Four generations of the Herod family are mentioned in the Holy Bible. Each leader left his evil mark: Herod the Great murdered Bethlehem's children; Herod Antipas was involved in Jesus' trial and had John the Baptist executed; Herod Agrippa I murdered the apostle James; and Herod Agrippa II was one of Paul's judges.

Herod Agrippa I related fairly well to his Jewish subjects. Because he had a Jewish grandmother of royal blood (Mariamne), he was grudgingly accepted by the people. Although as a youth he had been temporarily imprisoned by the Emperor Tiberias, he was now trusted by Rome and got along well with the Emperors Caligula and Claudius.

An unexpected opportunity for Herod to gain new favor with the Jews was created by the Christian movement. Gentiles began to be accepted into the Church in large numbers. Many Jews had been tolerating this new movement as a sect with Judaism, but its rapid growth alarmed them. Persecution of Christians was revived, and even the apostles were not spared. James was killed, and Peter was thrown into prison.

But soon, Herod made a fatal error. During a visit to Caesarea, the people called him a god, and he accepted their praise. Immediately Herod was struck with a painful disease, and he died within a week.

Like his grandfather, uncle, and son after him, Herod Agrippa I came close to the truth but missed it. Because religion was important only as an aspect of politics, he had no reverence and no qualms about taking praise that only God should receive. His mistake is a common one. Whenever we are proud of our own abilities and accomplishments, not recognizing them as gifts from God, we repeat Herod's sin.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was a capable administrator and negotiator
- * Managed to maintain good relations with the Jews in his region and with Rome

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Arranged the murder of the apostle James
- * Imprisoned Peter with plans to execute him
- * Allowed the people to praise him as a god

Lessons from his life:

- * Those who set themselves against God are doomed to ultimate failure
- * There is great danger in accepting praise that only God deserves
- * Family traits can influence children toward great good or great evil

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: Roman-appointed king of the Jews
- * Relatives: Grandfather: Herod the Great. Father: Aristobulus. Uncle: Herod Antipas.
- * Sister: Herodias. Wife: Cypros. Son: Herod Agrippa II. Daughters: Bernice, Mariamne, Drusilla
- * Contemporaries: Emperors Tiberias, Caligula, and Claudius. James, Peter

Key verse:

“And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost” (Acts 12:23).

Herod Agrippa I's story is told in Acts 12:1-23

JOHN MARK

Mistakes are effective teachers. Their consequences have a way of making lessons painfully clear. But those who learn from their mistakes are likely to develop wisdom. John Mark was a good learner who just needed some time and encouragement.

Mark was eager to do the right thing, but he had trouble staying with a task. In his Gospel, Mark mentions a young man (probably referring to himself) who fled in such fear during Jesus' arrest that he left his clothes behind. This tendency to run was to reappear later when Paul and Barnabas took him as their assistant on their first missionary journey. At the second stop, Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem.

It was a decision Paul did not easily accept. In preparing for their second journey two years later, Barnabas again suggested Mark as a traveling companion, but Paul flatly refused. As a result, the team was divided. Barnabas took Mark with him, and Paul chose Silas. Barnabas was patient with Mark, and the young man repaid his investment. Paul and Mark were later reunited, and the older apostle became a close friend of the young disciple.

Mark was a valuable companion to three early Christian leaders - Barnabas, Paul, and Peter. The material in Mark's Gospel seems to have come mostly from Peter. Mark's role as a serving assistant allowed him to be an observer. He heard Peter's accounts of the years with Jesus over and over, and he was one of the first to put Jesus' life in writing.

Barnabas played a key role in Mark's life. He stood beside the young man despite his failure, giving him patient encouragement. Mark challenges us to learn from our mistakes and appreciate the patience of others. Is there a Barnabas in your life you need to thank for his or her encouragement to you?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Wrote the Gospel of Mark
- * He and his mother provided their home as one of the main meeting places for the Christians in Jerusalem
- * Persisted beyond his youthful mistakes
- * Was an assistant and traveling companion to three of the greatest early missionaries

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Was probably the nameless young man described in the Gospel of Mark who fled in panic when Jesus was arrested
- * Left Paul and Barnabas for unknown reasons during the first missionary journey

Lessons from his life:

- * Personal maturity usually comes from a combination of time and mistakes
- * Mistakes are not usually as important as what can be learned from them
- * Effective living is not measured as much by what we accomplish as by what we overcome in order to accomplish it
- * Encouragement can change a person's life

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: Missionary-in-training, Gospel-writer, traveling companion
- * Relatives: Mother: Mary. Uncle: Barnabas
- * Contemporaries: Paul, Peter, Timothy, Luke, Silas

Key verse:

“Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry” (Paul writing in 2 Timothy 4:11).

John Mark’s story is told in Acts 12:12-13:13 and 15:36-39. He is also mentioned (sometimes as “Marcus”) in Colossians 4:10, 11; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1:24; 1 Peter 5:13.

BARNABAS

Every group needs an “encourager,” because everyone needs encouragement at one time or another. However, the value of encouragement is often missed because it tends to be private rather than public. In fact, people most need encouragement when they feel most alone. A man named Joseph was such an encourager that he earned the nickname “son of encouragement,” or Barnabas, from the Jerusalem Christians.

Barnabas was drawn to people he could encourage, and he was a great help to those around him. It is delightful that wherever Barnabas encouraged Christians, non-Christians flocked to become believers!

Barnabas’s actions were crucial to the early church. In a way, we thank him for most of the New Testament. God used his relationship with Paul at one point and with Mark at another to keep these two men going when either might have failed. Barnabas did wonders with encouragement.

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem for the first time following his conversion, the local Christians were understandably reluctant to welcome him. They thought his story was a trick to capture more Christians. Only Barnabas was willing to risk his life to meet with Paul and then convince the others that their former enemy was now a vibrant believer in Jesus. We can only wonder what might have happened to Paul without Barnabas.

It was Barnabas who encouraged Mark to go with him and Paul to Antioch. Mark joined them on their first missionary journey, but decided during the trip to return home. Later, Barnabas wanted to invite Mark to join them for another journey, but Paul would not agree. As a result, the partners went separate ways, Barnabas with Mark and Paul with Silas. This actually doubled the missionary effort. Barnabas’s patient encouragement was confirmed by Mark’s eventual effective ministry. Paul and Mark were later reunited in missionary efforts.

As Barnabas’s life shows, we are rarely in situations where there isn’t someone we can encourage. Our tendency, however, is to criticize instead of help. It may be important at times to point out someone’s shortcomings, but before we have the right to do this, we must build that person’s trust through encouragement. Are you prepared to encourage those with whom you come in contact today?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was one of the first to sell possessions to help the Christians in Jerusalem
- * Was the first to travel with Paul as a missionary team
- * Was an encourager, as his nickname shows, and thus one of the most quietly influential people in the early days of Christianity
- * Called an apostle, although not one of the original 12

Weakness and mistake:

- * With Peter, temporarily stayed aloof from Gentile believers until Paul corrected him

Lessons from his life:

- * Encouragement is one of the most effective ways to help
- * Sooner or later, true obedience to God will involve risk
- * There is always someone who needs encouragement

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Cyprus, Jerusalem, Antioch
- * Occupation: Missionary, teacher
- * Relatives: Sister: Mary. Nephew: John Mark
- * Contemporaries: Peter, Silas, Paul, Herod Agrippa I

Key verses:

“Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord” (Acts 11:23, 24).

Barnabas's story is told in Acts 9:27-15:39. He is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9, 13; Colossians 4:10.

SILAS

The lives of the first Christian missionaries can be described with many words, but “boring” is not one of them. There were days of great excitement as men and women who had never heard of Jesus responded to the Gospel. There were dangerous journeys over land and sea. Health risks and hunger were part of the daily routine. And there was open and hostile resistance to Christianity in many cities. Silas was one of the first missionaries, and he found out that serving Jesus Christ was certainly not boring!

Silas’s name appears in Acts at the end of the first church conference on the Jewish/Gentile problem. The majority of early Christians were Jews who realized Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament promises to his people; however, the universal application of those promises had been overlooked. Thus, many felt that becoming Jewish was a prerequisite to becoming a Christian. The idea that God could accept a Gentile pagan was too incredible. But Gentiles began to accept Christ as Savior, and the transformation of their lives and the presence of God’s Spirit confirmed their conversions. Some Jews were still reluctant, though, and insisted that these new Christians take on various Jewish customs. The issue came to a boiling point at the Jerusalem meeting but was peacefully resolved. Silas was one of the representatives from Jerusalem sent with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with an official letter of welcome and acceptance to the Gentile Christians. Having fulfilled this mission, Silas returned to Jerusalem. Within a short time, however, he was back in Antioch at Paul’s request to join him on his second missionary journey.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy began a far-ranging ministry that included some exciting adventures. Paul and Silas spent a night singing in a Philippian prison after being severely beaten. An earthquake, the loosing of their chains, and the resulting panic led to the conversion of their jailer. Later, they narrowly missed another beating in Thessalonica, prevented by an evening escape. In Berea there was more trouble, but Silas and Timothy stayed to teach the young believers while Paul traveled on to Athens. The team was finally reunited in Corinth. In each place they visited, they left behind a small group of Christians.

Silas leaves the story as suddenly as he entered it. Peter mentions him as the co-author of 1 Peter, but we do not know when he joined Peter. He was an effective believer before leaving Jerusalem, and he doubtless continued to minister after his work with Paul was completed. He took advantage of opportunities to serve God and was not discouraged by the setbacks and opposition he met along the way. Silas, though not the most famous of the earthly missionaries, was certainly a hero worth imitating.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was a leader in the Jerusalem church
- * Represented the church in carrying the “acceptance letter” prepared by the Jerusalem council to the Gentile believers in Antioch
- * Was closely associated with Paul from the second missionary journey on
- * When imprisoned with Paul in Philippi, sang songs of praise to God
- * Worked as a writing secretary for both Paul and Peter, using “Silvanus” as his pen name

Lessons from his life:

- * Partnership is a significant part of effective ministry
- * God never guarantees that his servants will not suffer
- * Obedience to God will often mean giving up what makes us feel secure

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Roman citizen living in Jerusalem
- * Occupation: One of the first career missionaries
- * Contemporaries: Paul, Timothy, Peter, Mark, Barnabas

Key verses:

“It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth” (Acts 15:25-27).

Silas’s story is told in Acts 15:22-19:10. He is also mentioned in 2 Corinthians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:12.

LUKE

One of the essential qualities of a good doctor is compassion. People need to know that their doctor cares. Even if he or she doesn't know what is wrong or isn't sure what to do, real concern is always a doctor's good medicine. Doctor Luke was a person of compassion.

Although we know few facts of his life, Luke has left us a strong impression of himself by what he wrote. In his Gospel, he emphasizes Jesus Christ's compassion. He vividly recorded both the power demonstrated by Christ's life and the care with which he treated people. Luke highlighted the relationships Jesus had with women. His writing in Acts is full of sharp verbal pictures of real people caught up in the greatest events of history. As a writer, Luke made a contribution whose value cannot be measured.

Luke was also a doctor. He had a traveling medical practice as Paul's companion. Since the Gospel was often welcomed with whips and stones, the doctor was seldom without patients. It is even possible that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was some kind of physical ailment that needed Luke's regular attention. Paul deeply appreciated Luke's skills and faithfulness.

God also made special use of Luke as the historian of the early church. Repeatedly, the details of Luke's descriptions have been proven accurate. The first words in his Gospel indicate his interest in the truth.

Luke's compassion reflected his Lord's. His skill as a doctor helped Paul. His passion for the facts as he recorded the life of Christ, the spread of the early church, and the lives of Christianity's missionaries gives us dependable sources for the basis of our faith. He accomplished all this while staying out of the spotlight. Perhaps his greatest example is the challenge to greatness even when we are not the center of attention.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was a humble, faithful, and useful companion of Paul
- * A well-educated and trained physician
- * A careful and exact historian
- * Writer of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles

Lessons from his life:

- * The words we leave behind will be a lasting picture of who we are
- * Even the most successful person needs the personal care of others
- * Excellence is shown by how we work when no one is noticing

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Probably met Paul in Troas
- * Occupation: Doctor, historian, traveling companion
- * Contemporaries: Paul, Timothy, Silas, Peter

Key verses:

“Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed” (Luke 1:1-4).

Luke includes himself in the we sections of Acts 16-28. He is also mentioned in Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1; Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; and as “Lucas” in Philemon 1:24.

AQUILA, PRISCILLA

Some couples know how to make the most of life. They complement each other, utilize each other's strengths, and form an effective team. Their united efforts affect those around them. Aquila and Priscilla were such a couple. They are never mentioned separately in the Holy Bible. In marriage and ministry, they were always together.

Priscilla and Aquila met Paul in Corinth while Paul was on his second missionary journey. They had just been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius's decree against the Jews. Their home was as moveable as the tents they made to support themselves. They opened their home to Paul, and he joined them in tent making. He shared with them his wealth of spiritual wisdom.

Priscilla and Aquila made the most of their spiritual education. They listened carefully to sermons and evaluated what they heard. When they heard Apollos speak, they were impressed by his ability, but realized that the content of his message was not complete. Instead of open confrontation, the couple quietly took Apollos home and shared with him what he needed to know. Until then, Apollos had only known John the Baptist's message about Christ. Priscilla and Aquila told him about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the reality of God's indwelling Spirit. He continued to preach powerfully - but now with the full story.

As for Priscilla and Aquila, they went on using their home as a warm place for training and worship. Back in Rome years later, they hosted one of the house churches that developed. The early Christians did not meet in church buildings but in the homes of members. This informal atmosphere provided opportunity for intimate fellowship.

In an age when the focus is mostly on what happens between husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla are an example of what can happen through husband and wife. Their effectiveness together speaks about their relationship with each other. Their hospitality opened the doorway of salvation to many. The Christian home is still one of the best tools for spreading the Gospel. Do guests find Christ in your home?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Were an outstanding husband/wife team who ministered in the early church
- * Supported themselves by tent making while serving Christ
- * Were close friends of Paul
- * Explained to Apollos the full message of Christ

Lessons from their lives:

- * Couples can have an effective ministry together
- * The home is a valuable tool for evangelism
- * Every believer needs to be well educated in the faith, whatever his or her role in the church

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Originally from Rome, moved to Corinth, then Ephesus
- * Occupation: Tentmakers

* Contemporaries: Emperor Claudius, Paul, Timothy, Apollos

Key verses:

“Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles” (Romans 16:3, 4).

Their story is told in Acts 18. They are also mentioned in Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19.

APOLLOS

Some people have an amazing natural talent for public speaking. A few even have a great message to go along with it. When Apollos arrived in Ephesus shortly after Paul's departure, he made an immediate impact. He spoke boldly in public, interpreting and applying the Old Testament effectively. He debated opponents forcefully and effectively. It didn't take long for him to be noticed by Priscilla and Aquila.

The couple quickly realized that Apollos did not have the whole story. His preaching was based on the Old Testament and John the Baptist's message. He was probably urging people to repent and prepare for the coming Messiah. Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos home with them and brought him up to date on all that had happened. As they told him of the life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, Apollos must have seen Scripture after Scripture become clear. He was filled with new energy and boldness, now that he had the complete Gospel.

Apollos next decided to travel to Achaia. His friends in Ephesus were able to send along a glowing letter of introduction. He quickly became the verbal champion of the Christians in Corinth, debating the opponents of the Gospel in public. As often happens, Apollos's abilities eventually created a problem. Some of the Corinthians began to follow Apollos rather than his message. Paul had to confront the Corinthians about their divisiveness. They had been forming little groups named after their favorite preacher. Apollos left Corinth and hesitated to return. Paul wrote warmly of Apollos as a fellow minister who had "watered" the seeds of the Gospel that Paul had planted in Corinth. Paul last mentions Apollos briefly to Titus. He was still a traveling representative of the Gospel who deserved Titus's help.

Although his natural abilities could have made him proud, Apollos proved himself willing to learn. God used Priscilla and Aquila, fresh from months of learning from Paul, to give Apollos the complete Gospel. Because Apollos did not hesitate to be a student, he became an even better teacher. How much does your willingness to learn affect God's efforts to help you become all he wants you to be?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * A gifted and persuasive preacher and apologist in the early church
- * Willing to be taught
- * Mentioned as the possible author of Hebrews

Lessons from his life:

- * Effective communication of the Gospel includes an accurate message delivered with God's power
- * A clear verbal defense of the Gospel can be a real encouragement to believers, while convincing non-believers of its truth

Vital statistics:

- * Where: From Alexandria in Egypt
- * Occupation: Traveling preacher, apologist
- * Contemporaries: Priscilla, Aquila, Paul

Key verses:

“This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (Acts 18:25, 26).

Apollos’s story is told in Acts 18:24-19:1. He is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:4-6, 22; 4:1, 6; 16:12; Titus 3:13.

HEROD AGRIPPA II

Like great-grandfather, like grandfather, like father, like son - this tells the story of Herod Agrippa II. He inherited the effects of generations of powerful men with flawed personalities. Each son followed his father in weaknesses, mistakes, and missed opportunities. Each generation had a confrontation with God, but each failed to realize the importance of the decision. Herod Agrippa's great-uncle, Herod Antipas, actually met Jesus during his trial, but failed to see Jesus for who he was. Agrippa II heard the Gospel from Paul, but considered the message mild entertainment. He found it humorous that Paul actually tried to convince him to become a Christian.

Like so many before and after, Agrippa II stopped within hearing distance of the Kingdom of God. He left himself without excuse. He heard the Gospel but decided it wasn't worth responding to personally. Unfortunately, his mistake isn't uncommon. Many who read his story also will not believe. Their problem, like his, is not really that the Gospel isn't convincing or that they don't need to know God personally; it is that they choose not to respond.

What has been your response to the Gospel? Has it turned your life around and given you the hope of eternal life, or has it been a message to resist or reject? Perhaps it has just been entertainment. It may seem like too great a price to give God control of your life, but it is an even greater price by far to live eternally apart from him because you chose not to be his child.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was the last of the Herod dynasty that ruled parts of Palestine from 40 B.C. to A.D. 100
- * Continued his father's success in mediating between Rome and Palestine
- * Continued the family tradition of building and improving cities

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Was not convinced by the Gospel and consciously rejected it
- * Carried on an incestuous relationship with his sister Bernice

Lessons from his life:

- * Families pass on both positive and negative influences to children
- * There are no guarantees of multiple opportunities to respond to God

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Ruler of northern and eastern Palestine
- * Relatives: Great-grandfather: Herod the Great. Father: Herod Agrippa I. Great-Uncle: Herod Antipas. Sisters: Bernice, Drusilla
- * Contemporaries: Paul, Felix, Festus, Peter, Luke

Key verse:

"Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuaded me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

Herod Agrippa II's story is told in Acts 25:3-26:32.

TIMOTHY

Painful lessons are usually doorways to new opportunities. Even the apostle Paul had much to learn. Shortly after his disappointing experience with John Mark, Paul recruited another eager young man, Timothy, to be his assistant. Paul's intense personality may have been too much for John Mark to handle. It could easily have been the same for Timothy. But Paul seems to have learned a lesson in patience from his old friend Barnabas. As a result, Timothy became a "son" to Paul.

Timothy probably became a Christian after Paul's first missionary visit to Lystra (Acts 16:1-5). He already had solid Jewish training in the Scriptures from his mother and grandmother. By Paul's second visit, Timothy had grown into a respected disciple of Jesus in his hometown. He did not hesitate to join Paul and Silas on their journey. His willingness to be circumcised as an adult is clearly a mark of his commitment (Timothy's mixed Greek/Jewish background could have created problems on their missionary journeys, because many of their audiences would be made up of Jews who were concerned with the strict keeping of this tradition). The circumcision helped to avoid that potential problem.

Beyond the tensions of his mixed racial background, Timothy seemed to struggle with a naturally timid character and an over awareness of his youthfulness. Unfortunately, many who share Timothy's character are quickly written off as too great a risk to deserve much responsibility. By God's grace, Paul saw great potential in Timothy. Paul demonstrated his confidence in Timothy by entrusting him with important responsibilities. Paul sent Timothy as his personal representative to Corinth during a particularly tense time (1 Corinthians 4:14-17). Although Timothy was apparently ineffective in that difficult mission, Paul did not give up on him. He continued to travel with Paul.

Our last pictures of Timothy come from the most personal letters in the New Testament: 1 and 2 Timothy. In them, the aging apostle Paul was near the end of his life, but his burning desire to continue his mission had not dimmed. Paul was writing to one of his closest friends - they had traveled, suffered, cried, and laughed together. They shared the intense joy of people responding to the Good News and the agonies of seeing the Gospel rejected and distorted. Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to oversee the young church there (1 Timothy 1:3, 4). He wrote to encourage Timothy and give him needed direction. These letters have provided comfort and help to countless other "Timothys" through the years. When you face a challenge that is beyond your abilities, read 1 and 2 Timothy, and remember that others have shared your experience.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Became a believer after Paul's first missionary journey and joined him for his other two journeys
- * Was a respected Christian in his hometown
- * Was Paul's special representative on several occasions
- * Received two personal letters from Paul
- * Probably knew Paul better than any other person, becoming like a son to him

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Struggled with a timid and reserved nature
- * He allowed others to look down upon his youthfulness
- * He was apparently unable to correct some of the problems in the church at Corinth when Paul sent him there

Lessons from his life:

- * Youthfulness should not be an excuse for ineffectiveness
- * Our inadequacies and inabilities should not keep us from being available to God

Key verses:

“For I have no man [Timothy] likeminded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s. But ye know the proof of him, that, as a son with the father, he hath served with me in this gospel”
(Philippians 2:20-22).

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Lystra
- * Occupation: Missionary, pastor
- * Relatives: Mother: Eunice. Grandmother: Lois. Greek father
- * Contemporaries: Paul, Silas, Luke, Mark, Peter, Barnabas

Timothy’s story (he is also called Timotheus) is told in Acts, starting in chapter 16.

He is also mentioned in Romans 16:21; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10, 11;
2 Corinthians 1:1, 19; Philippians 1:1; 2:19-23; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10;
2:3, 4; 3:2-6; 1 and 2 Timothy; Philemon 1:1; Hebrews 13:23.