

ADRIAN PLASS

BLIND SPOTS IN THE BIBLE

Puzzles and paradoxes that we tend to avoid



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INTRODUCTION

This book is filled with what I have called 'blind spots' from the Bible. This does not necessarily mean that the quoted sections are obscure. Some passages will be very familiar to those with a reasonable working knowledge of scripture. The thing they have in common, as far as I am concerned, is at least one intriguing or disturbing aspect that I have previously missed, or noted out of the corner of my eye, but never got round to investigating or facing honestly. The Bible is fascinatingly full of such elements, and I could easily fill another couple of books. My guess is that they tend to accumulate because of laziness, because of my own fear, because of a blinkering overfamiliarity, and because of poorly informed, shallow teaching from the past.

It can be an extremely interesting and constructive exercise to root out some of these half-perceived truths and examine them in the light of our full attention. The list will be different for each one of us, but I suspect that we are all likely to be amazed when we discover the extent to which we have been playing a game of theological Chinese whispers with our own understanding of many concepts, some of which occupy quite a central position in the Christian faith. Having said that, I certainly do not make that claim for all of the passages presented here. One or two, such as the mention of angels taking human wives in Genesis, were just too bizarre to miss, but even in that case I found myself driven, as ever, to the crucial conclusion that we can safely explore the strangest of avenues as long as we are safe in Jesus. That in itself is always a valuable lesson to relearn.

There are, of course, many biblical stories and ideas that we will never fully understand until the day when God himself provides the clarity that eludes us here. In the meantime, however, we are certainly allowed to think and analyse and question anything that

strikes us as strange or inexplicable. Our love and respect for the word of God can only be enhanced by genuinely grappling with such challenges to our comprehension. Think how long the church had to wait for Martin Luther. Perhaps the time has come for some other temporarily puzzled Christian to help the church take another quantum leap in its perception of the truth. It could be you.

These shooting stars of scripture flew at me, in no particular order, from every corner of the biblical cosmos. For those who cannot live without organization, however, I have divided the book into sections, the contents of which do sometimes overlap. That's inevitable, I suppose, given the nature of God, the universe and everything. I do hope you enjoy and benefit from my 'blind spots', and I wish you a continuation of God's cheerful blessing as you investigate your own.



THE REAL NATURE
OF JESUS



SERVICE WASH?

So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?'

Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.'

'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.'

Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.'

'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!'

Jesus answered, 'Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.' For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me "Teacher" and "Lord", and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'

JOHN 13:4-17 (TNIV)

This passage is about a phenomenon that more and more tennis players are relying on nowadays, namely, the power of service. In case you missed it, that was a joke.

The Church as a whole (myself included, and this is my blind spot) has always had a rather affectionate relationship with this famous story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. It has perhaps been regarded in the same way that we might regard a role play. Jesus stepped aside from his normal leadership role in order to provide the disciples with a little picture or illustration of the value of service. No one is so elevated or important, he was saying, that they could expect to escape the duty of service to others.

This is a very pale and subtly diluted version of the truth.

Jesus had no need to role-play humility and a desire to serve others. The king of heaven became a man in order that he could serve and save those whom he loved to the point of death—those who were and are heading full tilt towards a tragedy that we cannot begin to understand, disaster on a scale that will cause even the worst earthly calamity to pale into insignificance. The servant king put his heart as well as his back into the task that confronted him, and he certainly could not have accomplished it if the very tissues of his body had not been suffused with a wholly genuine desire to tie the shoelaces of the world, and even be nailed to a cross if it would help.

Be warned: Jesus in us will not be acting out service to others. He will be living it, and there will be no question of making exceptions to that duty of service for reasons that would never be allowed houseroom in the kingdom of God. I have done it myself so many times.

'I have tried to go on forgiving him, but quite honestly it wears me out and I see no point in letting it affect everything else, so I'm just leaving it for a while...'

'I'm all for service to others, but I've never been very good at that sort of thing, so I think I'll give it a miss...'

'I feel as if everyone wants a part of me. I think it's about time I carved out some space for myself and let the others get on with it...'

The trouble with all comments of this kind is that they sound very reasonable, and invariably contain a kernel of truth. If, for instance, the necessity to forgive the same person repeatedly is

wearing us out, then we do need to look clearly at what is happening and perhaps make some changes. But, as we learn from the teaching of Jesus, we are not going to be released from our obligation to extend forgiveness continually to those who are truly sorry for hurting or offending us, even if they do exactly the same thing the next day.

Similarly, it is always tempting to stay within our comfort zones, and on one level it does make sense to stick to doing the things we are good at. There is no intrinsic value in doing things badly. But the life of service that Jesus is talking about cannot be run on those lines. There will be times when we have to plunge in and do the thing that is required, however unfamiliar and threatening it may be. Perhaps we will need to ask for advice and guidance from people who have previously been in the habit of seeking help and advice from us. Not always easy, is it?

Of course everyone wants a part of us. If we are serious about following Jesus in the way that this passage suggests, then there will be lots of parts of us available to everyone. We have to be careful to allow time for healthy relaxation and the needs of those close to us, as Jesus always did, but yes, we will be parcelled out for the benefit of others. No one ever said it would be easy. No one ever said it wouldn't be hard work.

A minister I know told me about a man who, in this respect, went through the same cycle again and again. He would gradually increase his input into one or more useful activities initiated by his church, and then abruptly announce that he was withdrawing because 'my family are just as important as anyone else, and they are the ones who are beginning to lose out'. This sounds so reasonable and responsible and carefully considered, doesn't it? Well, perhaps it was the first time—possibly even the second. But as time went by, this chap's family began to look more and more like a 'foxhole', the sort of refuge you leap into to avoid the heat of battle.

These things are not easy, are they? We all fall short. We all kid ourselves at times, and we all go through stages of laziness and

resentment. But we want to be good, don't we? We want to be followers of the servant king, and make him proud of us. We must look after each other, and pray for each other, and encourage each other, and give each other a kick up the backside if necessary, and keep a sense of humour and perspective about it all. God will help us to be more like his Son.

A question

Let's look at our hands. I mean it. Go on, you look at your hands, and I will abandon the keyboard for a moment and look at mine. Here is the question we need to ask. Is he allowed full use of them?

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'There are, of course, many biblical stories and ideas that we will never fully understand until the day when God himself bestows the clarity that eludes us here. In the meantime, we are certainly allowed to think and analyse and question anything that strikes us as strange or inexplicable. I do hope you enjoy and benefit from my "blind spots" and I wish you a continuation of God's cheerful blessing as you investigate your own.'

Adrian Plass is an internationally acclaimed writer and speaker. He has written many bestselling books, including 'When You Walk' and 'The Unlocking' for BRF, and contributes to 'New Daylight' Bible reading notes, where some of the material in this book originally appeared. He also features as presenter on the DVD for Foundations21, BRF's multi-media discipleship resource.



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