

CHAPTER 6

BECOMING A "HASID"

With our faces unveiled, we see the Lord's glory like a reflection in a mirror, and we are being transformed into the same image, from glory to glory. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Why do you exist? Ruminating on that for a minute. There are many opinions swirling around out there in the marketplace of ideas. We could take an entire book reviewing the wildly differing views. Some say we are simply the result of random chance, so we have to create our own meaning. (What a depressing thought.) Others say we exist for pleasure, like the Epicurean who says, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." (Try this and you'll hit bottom pretty quickly.) Religious people may answer the question by quoting their favorite confession or creed, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."¹ This gets us closer to the bullseye, but can't we get a little more specific? What's the answer? Why do we exist? What's the meaning and purpose of life?

Here is a clear and simple answer for you, straight from the pages of Scripture—You were created to be a *hasid* (the plural is *hasidim*). In the broadest terms, a *hasid* is someone whose life has been completely reoriented by the reality of God's lovingkindness, which in Hebrew is, of course, His *hesed*. (All you do is change the vowels around—from *hesed* to *hasid*.) Moses asked to see God's glory in Exodus 33:18, and in response God explained in detail what His *hesed* is all about (Exodus 34:6). God created us to reflect that same glory by living lives of lovingkindness (*hesed*).

The *hasid* has seen the God of *The Derakim* and their life is being revolutionized by the vision. To get more specific, everything that has been said up to this point about *The Derakim*—"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness"—can also be said of the *hasid*. God's modus operandi has become their modus operandi. God's ways (*derakim*) have become the *hasid*'s ways (*derakim*). This is how the God of *The Derakim* accomplishes His kingdom purposes on earth—through His *hasidim*. And here is how it works out in real time ...

6.2 SIERRA AND THE MONSTERS

Years ago, a young lady named Sierra walked into our church sanctuary and immediately ran out trembling and breathless. A wave of fear and confusion had completely overwhelmed her. She paced anxiously in the church foyer and tried to recoup. She took some deep breaths, clenched her teeth, and pushed the sanctuary door open again. But the exact same thing happened. She later told me that this tug-of-war in her soul went on for weeks. God was gently

wooing her, but whenever she tried to move it was like all hell would scream, "Run for your life!" (Thankfully, she kept pushing in.)

Over time, some people in our church gained her trust, and Sierra began to open up about her tragic past. One theme that came up again and again was "bad men" ... not people in general, but very specifically *men*. Some were relatives, some were family friends, some were complete strangers. She suffered virtually every category of abuse at the hands of bad men, and she watched others suffer at the hands of bad men, too. One story I recall vividly had to do with Sierra seeing her sister covered in blood after being stabbed by her husband. Another story had to do with Sierra cowering inside a trailer with her aunt as her crazed uncle prowled around outside like a wild animal, shouting and banging, trying to get at them. A lifetime full of such memories led Sierra to the conclusion that there is only one kind of man in this world—monsters. In her mind, men were like predators who existed to torture, torment, and oppress those who are weaker. So at a very young age, Sierra decided she would only pursue relationships with women, and she would never, ever attempt to have a relationship with a man. Needless to say, marriage to one of these "monsters" was completely out of the question.

At our church God started chipping away at Sierra's world-view, and in particular her belief that every single man on earth was a monster. How did God do this? By surrounding her with men who really cared deeply for their wives, their children, and (incredibly) even complete strangers like her. These men weren't predators, or abusers, or criminals. They didn't rage, shout, and force women and children to do

things they didn't want to do. These men were patient and kind, and didn't want anything at all from Sierra except for her to find healing and peace of mind. And eventually she did.

About two years after she began attending our church, Sierra was invited to tell her story of healing in front of the congregation. My favorite part was when she said, "I began to see that there were actually men out there who were kind." (Even now, over a decade later, this can still bring tears to my eyes.) What Sierra came to see is that there are people in this cruel world (even men) who are reflecting the glory of God. How? By striving to live out that central attribute of God—His lovingkindness, or in Hebrew His *hesed*. In Old Testament terms, this sort of person is called a *hasid*, and an encounter with one or more of them can utterly, totally change a person's life. (We also had a lot of amazing women *hasidim* in our congregation who loved Sierra, but that's a story for another day.)

Believe it or not, Sierra not only got over her aversion to men, she eventually married one of the young *hasidim*-in-training (a.k.a., disciples) in our church. Today they live just down the road and have three beautiful kids. Every day I get to watch their story of redemption unfold. That's the power of God's lovingkindness, His *hesed*. It's what absolutely every single broken and abused girl in this world is yearning for. Correction, it's what every single one of us—man, woman, and child—is yearning for. But this is not the end of the story.

We aren't just longing to be on the receiving end of God's lovingkindness, we are also yearning to live this out in our

own lives, to give it away. This is why God made us—to bear His image. We could sum it all up this way—*seeing God's lovingkindness and then being God's lovingkindness (becoming a hasid) is what life is all about*. This is why we were created, and this is how God transforms this world ... one Sierra at a time.

6.3 EASY TO SPOT ... NOT SO EASY TO DO

It is actually part of our human operating system to admire and appreciate a *hasid*, a life characterized by God-like lovingkindness. Let's go back to the parable of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), because this gives us a paradigm of this sort of person. The main point of this well-known story is to explain what a life that is pleasing to God looks like. Jesus says, "**Do this, and you will live**" (Luke 10:28). According to Jesus, if you look like the man in the story, you've got life pretty well figured out. The discussion leading up to the parable focuses on "the two greatest commandments," which basically summarize everything that God desires and requires from us as human beings.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27)

The little phrase above is extremely important, and is a combination of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Evidently, it was a common religious sentiment, like an axiom, in

the first century (Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27; see also Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). Elsewhere Jesus says that everything written in the entire Old Testament can be boiled down to these two basic ideas. **"On these two commandments hang (or depend) the whole Law and the Prophets"** (Matthew 22:40).

Jesus gave us the parable of The Good Samaritan to show how the two greatest commandments play out in real time. Conceptually speaking, this isn't rocket science. It looks easy enough—just love God, and love people. Actually doing it, however, is where we all hit a wall.

The parable is about a guy from one ethnic group (a Samaritan), who stumbles across a guy from another ethnic group (a Jew). The Jew is having a really bad day. Historically speaking, these two ethnic groups hated each other. (Think of groups today like Palestinians and Israelis, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, or the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda.²) The Jew in Jesus's story had just been jumped and robbed by some thugs, and he was bleeding out on the highway. **"They stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead"** (Luke 10:30).

When the Samaritan comes along and sees this guy from "that other group," he doesn't just walk on by. His heart suddenly bursts into flames. Jesus very specifically lets us know that the Samaritan is overwhelmed with "compassion" (remember that special Greek word *splanchnizomai*). The Samaritan then falls all over himself trying to help the pathetic guy out. When you break all the details down, the point being made (again) is that God's modus operandi

di—"compassionate ... great in lovingkindness"—is supposed to be our *modus operandi*.

When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, and went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine; and he put him on his own donkey, and took him to an inn and cared for him. On the next day he took out two day's wages and gave them to the keeper of the inn and said, "Care for this man, and if you spend any more, I'll repay you when I come back." (Luke 10:33-35)

If you know a little Hebrew and Greek, it's easy to make the connection between the Samaritan and the Old Testament idea of the *hasid*. As was noted above, the *hasid* is someone whose life is characterized by God-like *hesed*. In the Greek the word we are looking for, of course, is *eleos*. This is Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Greek stand-in for the Hebrew word *hesed*. The key is found in verses 36 and 37, the climactic moment of the parable. Jesus asks,

"Who proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed *eleos* toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

Very particularly, what did the Good Samaritan do? He allowed the human suffering around him to utterly break his heart, and then set aside his own comfort, self-interest, personal desires, etc., for another's well-being. Do you get it? This is why we were created. **"Do this, and you will live"** (Luke 10:28).

Of course, the ultimate *hasid* in the history of humanity is none other than Jesus Christ. From the moment He woke up in the morning until He laid His head down at night, He functioned like the Good Samaritan. Very specifically, the Bible lets us know what was going on in Jesus's heart just prior to some act of lovingkindness (*eleos*). It's the same motive we see in the Good Samaritan. He is moved with compassion, that special Greek word *splanchnizomai* (e.g., Matthew 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mark 1:41, 6:34; etc.). This is what compelled Him to do all those outrageous, mind-bending, self-sacrificing things we read about in the Gospels. Keeping it simple, He is the incarnation of *The Derakim*, **"Compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness."** This is the engine driving the ministry of Jesus forward, including His greatest act of lovingkindness—the cross. Jesus is the ultimate *hasid*. One who perfectly bears God's image and shines forth His glory. We were all created to be like Him.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

6.4 DEAD MEN WALKING

A lot of folks are under the delusion that if they were dropped into the story of The Good Samaritan, they would be the hero. They too would set aside their busy schedule (meetings, classes, work), max out their credit cards, buy a hotel room, and cover the extensive medical bills for a complete stranger. *Yeah, right!* Here's the truth. If a person doesn't already have a string of real-life personal "Good Samaritan" stories racked up, there isn't a snowball's chance in the Sahara Desert they are suddenly going to swing into Good Samaritan mode for no good reason. What they have been, they will remain. Unless a miracle happens in their soul.

We all know that we should be living lives of selfless compassion, but the truth is that we are incorrigibly and chronically self-obsessed, self-preserving, and full of excuses. We need to invite God to do a miracle in our souls—to change us, transform us, and renew us. Because prior to God upending and redoing everything inside us, our ways (*derakim*) and God's ways (*derakim*) are as different as night and day. In fact, this is exactly what God says,

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways (*derakim*) My ways (*derakim*)," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways (*derakim*) are higher than your ways (*derakim*) and My thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:8-9)³

To prove how self-obsessed most people are, just review their bank accounts and their day-timers. How much money and time actually go towards Good Samaritan endeavors—taking care of widows and orphans, evangelism, helping the homeless, etc.? (Note: good intentions—"I was planning to"—don't count.) Sure, some folks occasionally squeak out a "good deed" here and there, like giving a homeless guy some change, or helping out at the mission on Thanksgiving, or giving a Christmas box to some poor kid in Zimbabwe. But do these isolated events really offset the other 90% of our otherwise self-oriented and self-absorbed lives?

To tighten the screws a little more, Jesus sets the bar even higher by telling us elsewhere that "good deeds" don't even qualify as "good deeds" if our motives aren't pure. If we helped out down at the hospital, or the soup kitchen, or served on that charity board hoping to be noticed or to pad our resume, the "good deed" is worthless in God's eyes (Matthew 6:1-4). And one more thing: Doing good deeds to manipulate God into blessing us is nothing more than a manifestation of our sick, selfish hearts.

By the way, did you know that virtually every religion in the world (except what Jesus offers) is selfish at its core? Devotees do the "stuff"—pray, give, sacrifice, go on pilgrimage, etc.—primarily for personal blessings. They are trying to work the system to get peace, joy, prosperity, or some other sort of personal benefit, temporal or eternal. Ancient peoples went through their religious rigamarole for rain, good crops, fertility, or victory in battle. It's the same reason that today Islamic terrorists fly planes into buildings and blow themselves up—to obtain a (supposed) place in celestial paradise. Even people who call themselves Christians are often in it

primarily for "me, myself, and I." This is largely what fuels the crazy train known as "the prosperity gospel." Followers of this distorted version of Christianity are giving in order to get. They are told, "Give your ten, God will give you a hundred. Give your hundred, God will give you a thousand." What is wrong with us? Again, in our natural state we are incorrigibly and chronically selfish, selfish, selfish, the very opposite of *The Derakim*, and Jesus.

**The *human* heart is deceitful above all things
and desperately wicked. Who can under-
stand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)**

6.5 YOU MUST BE PLUGGED BACK IN

When God created the very first human beings, the Bible says that He made them in His image. "**Let us make humanity in Our image, according to Our likeness**" (Genesis 1:26). A lot of ink has flowed attempting to explain just what being "made in God's image" means.⁴ The answer is multifaceted, but among other things it has to do with certain abilities (mind, emotion, will) that enable us to function in some real (but limited) way like God does, to share His glorious *modus operandi*. Think of it this way, we are supposed to learn how to use our very limited power like God uses His unlimited power. His desire is that we function more and more like Jesus—"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness." This has always been God's end game. "**Those whom He foreknew, He pre-**

destined to become conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29).

But right out of the gate, God's plan for us went horribly off track. What we are talking about, of course, is what theologians refer to as "the fall of humanity." Our first parents chose sin and so they died, which means they unplugged themselves from God's light and life (Genesis 3:1-24; Romans 5:12-14).

(Note: While going over these facts, try to keep your mind out of the abyss. Don't ask questions about what infinite God was doing at this point; you will bungle up the logic of it all. If you really must know the answer to such things, Calvin has a biting [pretty funny] answer—"God was creating hell for people who ask such questions."⁵)

Adam and Eve were banished from God's presence, and as a result all their progeny (us) are born spiritually dead and disconnected from our Creator. We all come into this world stumbling around in darkness, using our God-given abilities (mind, emotion, will) in ways God never intended. Instead of being conformed to the glorious image of our Creator, we take on the twisted image of the Great Deceiver.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the way of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we also used to live in our fleshly lust, indulging the desires of the flesh

**and of the mind, and were by nature children
of wrath, even as the rest. (Ephesians 2:1-3)**

God's will is that we get back on track with His original intention for us—to bear His image, to become Good Samaritans, to look and act like Jesus. How does this happen? One thing is for sure. We don't just wake up one day, grit our teeth, and make it happen. Anyone who thinks they can be a Good Samaritan by sheer force of will is in for a rude shock. The effort will break you. (I know this from personal experience.) Those who don't believe this have never really tried. Humanly speaking, it's utterly, totally impossible. Our problem? We are unplugged from the Source of goodness.

We all know what goodness looks like, but we just can't pull it off. The key to becoming a *hasid* is to first acknowledge that we need God Himself to do a transformative miracle in our souls. Getting right to the point, we need to be forgiven and then plugged back into the One who is **"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness."**

Prior to this, we cannot bear good fruit because we don't have the goodness in us. Our tank is empty. In Jesus's words, we need to be born again (John 3:3). The apostle Paul calls this being regenerated (Titus 3:5-6). Before this happens, we wish we were good and we try to convince others that we are good ... but we know better. Evil is what keeps coming out of us. It's as natural as breathing. If we were completely honest, as a rule we don't give a rip about the millions of people bleeding out on the highway all around us. Getting back to Jesus's parable of The Good Samaritan, far from being the

hero, we are often more like the thugs who beat the poor guy up and robbed him.

Only when we are born again are we in a position to function like Good Samaritans. Because whether we know it or not, it's on the day we embrace the gospel that God's goodness moves in. The One who is Himself the source of lovingkindness takes up residence in our souls. He first satisfies our spiritual thirst with living water, but that's not the end of the story. He is also rumbling around deep inside us like a subterranean river, and wants to burst out into this world like a geyser. Our top priority should be to first learn about this God who has invaded our souls, and then let His living water gush out of us.

Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture says, from the deepest part of Him rivers of living water will flow." And this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him would receive. (John 7:37-39)

6.6 OPEN OUR EYES, LORD!

So many born-again folks are still completely missing the point of it all. They think that God saved them primarily to keep them out of hell and get them through the pearly gates. As true as this may be, this is a paper-thin vision of what being a Christian (or saved, or born again) is all about.

Jesus shed His blood on the cross so that you and I could again bear God's image, function like He does, be a *hasid*. Accepting the gospel and being born again is what gets us in the door. The door to what? *Hasid* training, or what the New Testament calls "discipleship." This takes years of learning, blood, sweat, and tears, but the thing that really jump starts the process is this—receiving a clear revelation of who God is. Sadly, this is something millions of God's heaven-bound, born-again kids have still not experienced. Why? Because they think their present understanding of God is good enough.

There is a fascinating pattern found throughout Scripture. A seasoned servant of God is put in the cooker, and this forces them to go deeper into who God is. Prior to this deeper revelation, these individuals were in good standing with God. They weren't atheists. They had an otherwise orthodox theology. They loved God, and were trying to serve Him according to the understanding they had. But they needed something more. This happened to Job. "**Now my eye sees You**" (Job 42:1-4). It happened to Isaiah. "**My eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts**" (Isaiah 6:5). It happened to Moses. "**Let me see Your glory**" (Exodus 34:6). They needed more, and so do you and I.

Being a *hasid* does not automatically happen because you were baptized, or catechized, or because you prayed a sinner's prayer and asked Jesus Christ into your life. You may truly be saved, born again, and heaven bound because you have embraced the simple gospel, and yet utterly failing at living the life of a *hasid*. To become a *hasid* you need that glorious revelation of God's heart. This is exactly what the apostle Paul is talking about when he prays that Chris-

tians "would know the breadth and length and height and depth, and know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" Paul then explains what the practical effects of this vision will be—God's power and glory will be let loose.

... So that you would be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or imagine according to His power that works within us. (Ephesians 3:18-19)

The *hasidim* have discovered the secret of who God is, they know His ways (*derakim*), and because of this they can reflect His glory to the world. You can recognize those who have had this revelation because they are others-obsessed, like the Good Samaritan. They live to manifest that central attribute of God—His lovingkindness. Prior to this, a Christian may be deeply committed, but if they're honest they would admit that their religion isn't working very well, and it's not much fun either. They aren't experiencing the joy, peace, and power the Bible talks about. These are the "**weary and heavy laden**" ones Jesus mentions in Matthew 11:25-30. They need that glorious vision of the Father that Jesus promises. This is what leads to the "**light and easy yoke.**"

6.7 GOOD NEWS—IT'S ALREADY IN YOU

If you are truly born again, the God of *The Derakim* is not sitting up in heaven a million miles away. He has already invaded your soul and is just waiting there with absolutely

everything you need. But you gotta want it! There is a lot of mystery involved in all this, but on the day you embraced the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-4), you became God's dwelling place, His temple, His house. In fact, the situation is even more mind-blowing than this. The Holy Spirit of God actually (somehow, mysteriously) became one with your spirit. **"He who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him"** (1 Corinthians 6:17). You and God are forever and permanently fused together. Your deepest desires now come directly from Him, and so does all the power you will ever need to do anything God asks of you. The God of *The Derakim* lives inside of you, and He is ready to erupt. But you have to open the gates.

The Holy Spirit has moved into your soul so that He can help you look, feel, act, and react like God does. He is determined to form you into His image—**"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness and faithfulness."** He wants you to function like the Good Samaritan. No, even better, He wants you to shine forth His glory like Jesus. He is pushing you to do it, He has made you hungry for it, and if you surrender to it, His power will supercharge the whole process.

The Bible has many ways of describing this process. In the Gospel of John it's referred to as letting the living water flow (John 7:37-39), or abiding in the vine (John 15:1-11). The apostle Paul appeals to the idea of "bearing good fruit" and "walking in the Spirit." **"Walk in the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh"** (Galatians 5:16). What this means in practical terms is denying your old modus operandi (selfishness), and choosing to surrender to God's self-giving lovingkindness.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-24)

Before the Holy Spirit moved in, we could all recognize the glory of a Good Samaritan, but we just couldn't pull it off. Now we can. The One who raised Jesus from the dead lives inside us. What we need to do is get in the habit of saying, "Your will be done." What this means (to be blunt) is, "My comfort, money, schedule, reputation, etc., be damned in the name of self-giving, self-sacrificing lovingkindness." When we do this, it invites the Holy Spirit to take over and for the life of Jesus to shine through us.

For we who are alive are constantly being delivered over to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal bodies. (1 Corinthians 4:11)

This all sounds outrageous, impossible, even foolish to those who have not yet clearly seen God, but there is no doubt that this is His will for us. This is what "taking up our cross" and dying everyday is all about. This gets the "old me" out of the way, so the "new me"—the one supercharged by the Holy Spirit—can erupt like a geyser of God's lovingkindness. But don't be naive. It often involves a difficult inner struggle.

6.8 "YOUR WILL BE DONE"

Submitting to the Father's will, dying to self, and giving ourselves up for others is often a hard choice. As Jesus shows us, it can be downright excruciating. In His ultimate act of lovingkindness—the cross—even He ran into a little bit of inner resistance. Why? Because in His humanness, He had the same sort of struggles and temptations we do. Jesus explains the inner battle this way, **"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"** (Matthew 26:41). In the Garden of Gethsemane we find Jesus wrestling with the choice to fully surrender to God's self-sacrificing lovingkindness. The Father was asking Him to give more than any human being had ever given before. How brutal was it? The Bible says Jesus was sweating drops of blood (Luke 22:44).

This serves as a paradigm for the daily battle every *hasid* will face, between self-preservation or self-sacrificing lovingkindness. Jesus, the ultimate *hasid*, shows us how to push through to the other side. He knew He would be rejected by enemies and friends, slandered, mocked, beaten, tortured, and ultimately cry out, **"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"** (Matthew 27:46). He was aware of the cost. He would have to give absolutely everything for the Father's purpose to be fulfilled—our salvation! He struggled through it, and ultimately found the strength to say, **"Not My will but Yours be done"** (Matthew 26:36; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42).

We often forget that in His humanity, Jesus felt the same sort of human fear, doubt, and loneliness we do. As He wrestles through the choice before Him, Jesus even pleads with the Father, asking Him if there is any way to get around

the cross. **"If it's possible, let this cup pass from Me"** (Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). At one point, things get so intense that the Father had to send an angel to strengthen Jesus so He could get through it (Luke 22:43). But thankfully, the ultimate *hasid* refused to take the route of self-preservation. **"He was tempted in everything as we are, yet without sin"** (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus broke through and fully surrendered to what the Father was asking of Him. This is precisely what **"not My will but Yours be done"** means. This is the choice God asks every one of us to make every day, as we are confronted with walking in the Spirit or walking in the flesh, living a life of lovingkindness or turning away in fear and selfishness.

God is the One who gives us the passion to do it, and He also gives us the power to do it. What He wants from us are the words, "Your will be done." Anyone who figures this out has "cracked the code," and knows the answer to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" When we too, like Jesus (like the Good Samaritan), surrender fully to self-giving, self-sacrificing lovingkindness, we are a *hasid*. And one more thing. When you learn to do this, you tap into an otherworldly joy and peace that nothing else on this side of heaven can deliver. I like to call it "the existential sweet spot."

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has now sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

6.9 THE EXISTENTIAL SWEET SPOT

The Bible says, “**You are to be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect**” (Matthew 5:48). If this were impossible, I don’t think that Jesus would have said it. Over the years I have come to believe that being “perfect” absolutely all the time is not attainable on this side of heaven, but hitting the mark pretty regularly is certainly possible. I don't think we need to get too hung up on the phrase. All that it means is doing what Jesus, the ultimate *hasid*, would do in a given situation. Very specifically, this means allowing God-like compassion to drive us to outrageous acts of lovingkindness. There is compelling evidence that this is the "perfection" Jesus was talking about,⁶ and the more we aim at it, the more we will hit it. The more we hit it, the more our lives will be filled with joy, peace, and purpose.

I'm going to wind down this chapter by recounting an experience I had decades ago, when a lot of these pieces started to come together for me. It happened in 2003 on my first trip to one of the most miserable, oppressed places on earth. (Note: What took place in the following story did not even begin to solve the complex issues in this country. It simply got our foot in the door and led us into 20-plus years of ministry in Sub-Saharan Africa.)

As we drove down the crumbling roads, with potholes large enough to eat a LandCruiser, reminders of the war were still everywhere. Ramshackle buildings were pocked with holes from bullets and mortar shells, some ruined beyond repair. The latest genocide was just the most recent chapter of the feud between the Hutus and Tutsis. Palpable fear and hatred

still seemed to be seething just below the surface like molten lava.

We stepped out of the taxi at the orphanage, and the first thing that happened was a small child saw us and ran away screaming. He had never been so close to a “Mzungu” (white person) before. He had seen them in newspapers and magazines, but evidently didn’t know these strange creatures actually existed. We then entered a scene that I have seen replayed again and again in countries all over Africa—a small handful of overworked and underpaid nationals struggling to clothe, feed, and care for an impossible number of orphans. As we waded through the sea of brown faces, the thought hit me, *Some of the older ones would have been alive during the genocide*. Do they remember seeing their mothers and sisters raped, or their dads and brothers butchered like goats before cheering crowds?

We walked around, greeting the nervous children. There was so much to take in. The filth, the poverty, the beauty of the kids' faces. One of the older children was so handsome he could have been a model ... except for that pink scar running the entire length of his forehead. *Was that from a machete blow*, I wondered. There was something else that caught my attention, too. Not to be gross, but it was the thick flow of whitish-green snot that sat on the top lip of many of the smallest children. I wondered, *Why don't the workers just wipe that nasty stuff off?* In places where there is no medication at all, keeping dozens of little noses wiped is as futile as trying to stop the ocean tide.

I also noticed that most of the little ones were dressed in old cast-off clothes from America (which I later learned we,

the U.S., send by the barge load). The kids had no clue as to the meaning of the mysterious words on their dirty, tattered t-shirts—"Motley Crue, Dr. Feelgood World Tour '89," "Pittsburg Steelers, 1995 Conference Champions."⁷ They were just happy to have something covering their naked bodies.

Our first order of business at the orphanage was to have a meeting with the native staff. We chatted a little bit, then the adults disappeared for some sort of very long meeting. This left us, three Americans, standing alone and staring at all the wide-eyed children. There we were, massive Mzungus (twice as big as most men there) in a sea of shattered little children. None of them spoke English, and we didn't speak Rwandese or French. I thought, *What do we do? What do we do?* The only thing we knew for certain was that every single one of them had endured more pain and suffering than a human being should have to. Above all else, they needed God's lovingkindness.

Our initial strategy was not very extraordinary. We started off by trying to make them smile. It began with the simplest things, like thumb wrestling and juggling. One smiled, and another, and another, then the dam broke. Soon we were all doing whatever we could to keep the joy flowing. We sang them our English songs, and they responded by singing songs back to us in Rwandese and French. We taught them American basketball by strapping an old bicycle rim to a tree. They especially liked it and squealed with delight when the white giants walked upside down on their hands. Then one of the little boys courageously stepped forward and showed the giants up. He could walk on his hands ... pretty much all day long! Everyone laughed uproariously.

Then came the *coup de gras*—we began launching them into the air. Every single little boy or girl who dared was given a trip towards earth's stratosphere. Believe it or not, this was a thrill they had never experienced before. Imagine that, children who had never been thrown in the air by a big old strapping dad, uncle, or family friend. They lined up in front of us two dozen deep. As we were all laughing and working up a sweat, I experienced something amazing. The harder I tried to pour myself out, the more full I became. After what seemed like hours, we returned to our hotel exhausted, sweaty, and sun-burnt, but full to the brim. Lying back on our beds, meditating on the day, I tried to express what was going on in my heart.

I had just entered into some sort of cosmic sweet spot. I said, "I feel ..., I feel" I couldn't quite figure out how to put it into words. "Perfect," the voice of one of my companions interrupted. I responded, "Yes! Perfect!"

Just as birds are made to fly and fish are made to swim, so we human beings were also created for something very specific, a particular way of functioning—a God-ordained *modus operandi*. When we finally discover this, we feel about as close to perfect as a person can on this side of heaven. On that day in Rwanda, I had found that sweet spot again. (Note: Playing wasn't all we did, and we later talked with the leadership about trying to solve long-term problems they were facing. This eventually led to the development of an international ministry focusing on Christian discipleship and economic development.)

Unfortunately, most people (including Christians) are looking for "the sweet spot" in all the wrong places. They are

like fish out of water—perpetually, continually, frustratingly discontent. As the poet Thoreau once said, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” We are trying to satisfy our deepest God-given longings with all the wrong things, scratching and clawing after possessions, pleasure, romance, accomplishments, etc. But down through history there have been a small remnant of those who have discovered the great secret. They are the *hasidim*, the fortunate few who know that place called perfect.

God quite enjoys being God. He exists in a perpetual state of being filled to the brim. And because God finds being God so wonderful and satisfying, He decided to “share the wealth,” so to speak—to create little copies of Himself. Again, this was God’s plan from all eternity—to make little image-bearers who experience the extreme pleasure of thinking, acting, and feeling like He does. “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image and in Our likeness’” (Genesis 1:26).

6.10 MISSING THE BROAD SIDE OF THE BARN

There is no question that Exodus 34:6, *The Derakim*, has impacted my life as a Christian more than any other passage of Scripture. But coming in a close second would have to be Isaiah 58. This passage also hit me like a train right around the time I discovered Exodus 34:6. The two passages go together like a hand and a glove. *The Derakim* explains to us how God wants us to see Him. Isaiah 58 lays out in meticulous detail what our lives should look like once we experience that vision.

The passage begins on a pretty bleak note. God's people are being rebuked by the prophet because they are completely missing the point of God's program on earth. They are doing all sorts of religious ditties and duties—feasts, fasts, festivals—but they have completely missed the heart of God. They are desperately crying out for God to move (reminds me of all the talk today among Christians about "revival"), but God seems to be ignoring them. Why? The answer is simple. They are not behaving like *hasidim*. In New Testament terms, they aren't behaving like Good Samaritans. They don't look like the God of *The Derakim*, "**compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and faithfulness.**"⁸ Isaiah's rebuke is loud and clear.

Cry out loud! Don't hold back! Raise your voice like a ram's horn and declare to My people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sins. (Isaiah 58:1)

The solution to their problem is pretty straightforward. Start living like *hasidim*, like Good Samaritans, and the heavens above will burst open with blessings from God.

Break the bonds of wickedness, undo the bands of the yoke, and let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke ... divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see

the naked, cover him; and stop hiding yourself from your own flesh. (Isaiah 58:6-7)

Then Isaiah breaks out in one of the most beautiful descriptions of spiritual revival in the entire Bible. For anyone with ears to hear, the message is clear. Act like God does, and God will draw near. (This passage completely reoriented my life.)

Do this and your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will spring up quickly; and your righteousness will go before you. The Lord's glory will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from your midst, pointing the finger and speaking wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the beaten down. Then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday. Then the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in dry places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters don't fail. Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; and you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell. (Isaiah 58:8-12)

6.11 THE *HASID* IN SCRIPTURE

Israel's hymn book tells us a lot about the *hasidim*. They are special objects of God's favor: **"He has set apart the *hasid* for Himself"** (Psalm 4:3). The *hasid* has God's attention and can expect His deliverance. **"Let every one who is a *hasid* pray to You in a time when You may be found; surely in floods of great waters they shall not come near to him"** (Psalm 32:6). God's eyes are on the *hasidim* to bless, protect, and guide them. **"I will hear what God the LORD will speak: for He will speak peace unto His people, and to His *hasidim*"** (Psalm 85:8).

When there are no *hasidim* around, the heavens become brass and the world devolves into chaos. **"Help, LORD, for the *hasid* is gone, the faithful have disappeared from among the children of men"** (Psalm 12:1). God fulfills His plan on earth through the *hasidim*, and listens to their prayers. **"Incline Your ear, LORD, and answer me ... Preserve my soul, for I am a *hasid*"** (Psalm 86:1,2). When the *hasid* dies, it's a big deal in heaven. **"Precious in the eyes of the LORD is the death of His *hasid*"** (Psalm 116:15). But God's blessings do not stop for the *hasid* at death; they can be confident even in the afterlife. **"For You will not abandon my soul to the netherworld; neither will You allow Your *hasid* to see corruption** (Psalm 16:10).

With all of this in mind, consider the resounding message of the Old Testament prophets. God's people are constantly being admonished, corrected, and rebuked because they are not fulfilling His created purpose for them. In short, they

have lost sight of God's lovingkindness, His *hesed*, and so they are failing to behave like *hasidim*.

What shall I do with you ... For your *hesed* is like a fleeting morning cloud, and like the dew which disappears in the early morning? This is why I have hewn them in pieces by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth ... For I delight in *hesed* rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:4-6)

When we get to the New Testament, the message is the same. The primary question is this: Is your life characterized by lovingkindness? Again, the Greek word *eleos* was what Greek-speaking Jews often used for the Hebrew *hesed*.

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why is your teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?" But when Jesus heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire *eleos*, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:11-13)

When Jesus speaks about the final judgment, it's the people who manifest lovingkindness who enter into eternal bliss.

Those who were just pew warmers, or rule keepers, or mere professors of religion, are cast into outer darkness.

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

But there are also the people who figure things out—the *hasidim*. Jesus can identify them easily because they look a lot like Him.

"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Because I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you came to Me; I was in prison, and you visited Me. ... Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'" (Matthew 25:34-40)

This is what we were all created for. God told us who He is on Sinai, then Jesus lived it out before our eyes. Now God calls us to fulfill our created purpose and become like Him. He gives us the desire, and also gives us all the power to do it. Those who embrace this with all their heart have discovered the reason God created them, the reason they were put on this earth. They can now live in the sweet spot.

We need to make sure that we are seeing God rightly, as He revealed Himself in *The Derakim* and in “The Word made flesh.” Then and only then can we move on to the glorious process of becoming like Him, and fulfilling our created purpose. Once again, those old hymns just seem to say things so well:

Oh, to be like Thee. Oh, to be like Thee,
Blessed Redeemer, pure as Thou art. Come in
Thy sweetness, come in Thy fullness. Stamp
Thine own image deep on my heart.⁹

In the following chapter we will touch on one of the most amazing aspects of being a *hasid*. Once we get on track with God's program, we have access to the most powerful tool God has given to humanity on this side of heaven. According to Scripture, when a person is a *hasid* they can now tap into the secret of powerful prayer. When we learn how to do this, mountains start to move.



POSTSCRIPT: *YOU CAN'T IMITATE THAT*

Throughout the book, we have talked quite a bit about God in two modes—His infinite mode and His finite (human) mode. This has massive implications for the subject we are discussing here, as well. For the "wise and intelligent" who believe that God invites us to focus on His infinite mode, how exactly does a finite being imitate God in His infinite mode? Answer: It can't be done. A creature trapped in time and space (like you and me) has absolutely nothing in common with an infinite God.¹⁰ Does any theologian have a way around this? This is a serious question, because the Bible tells us again and again that we are supposed to imitate God, and this is how we bear His image. If the finite is not compatible with the infinite, as the old theological maxim goes, what in the world are we to make of this idea? We don't need to get too far off the main trail here, but once again it seems like traditional theology is taking people way off trajectory. If we just K.I.S.S., and take the words of *The Derakim* in a straightforward way, imitating God makes perfect sense.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

1. This is the answer to the first question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647), "What is the chief end of man?" This statement is used by several Protestant denominations for the instruction of church members.
2. Several places in the New Testament emphasize this ongoing animosity, e.g., "Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, 'How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman? Because Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.'" (John 4:9)
3. This portion of Scripture is often abused by philosophical theologians who use it when speaking of abstruse philosophical attributes. This completely misses Isaiah's point, which is that God's compassion and forgiveness are infinitely greater than humanity's. **"Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. And let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will pardon abundantly."** (Isaiah 55:7)

4. There are three major views for understanding what "the image of God" (*imago dei*) entails: 1. Relational, 2. Functional, and 3. Substantive. The first has to do with the fact that, like God, we experience relationships. The second has to do with roles that God gives humanity (like having dominion). The third has to do with capacities in humanity that mirror God in some way. These views are not mutually exclusive, and good arguments are made for all three. I am obviously putting emphasis on the third view here. See, Daniel Simango, "The Imago Dei (Gen 1:26-27): a history of interpretation from Philo to the present," in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, vol. 42 no.1 (2016).
5. See, e.g., *Institutes* 1.14.1.
6. Here is a little factoid in favor of my interpretation (for all you Greek language nerds). Matthew's Sermon on the Mount tells us to be "perfect" (*teleios* in Greek) as God is "perfect" (Matthew 5:48), but a very similar statement in Luke's Sermon on the Plain tells us to be "compassionate" (*oiktermon* in Greek) as God is "compassionate" (Luke 6:36).
7. Those who pay attention to detail may note that the Steelers didn't win the conference championship in 1995. Here is the explanation. At big championship games, they make victory shirts for both sides before the game is over. Guess where the "victory" shirts for the losing team go? To the docks.

8. Centuries later, another prophet clearly seems to be referring back to this passage of Isaiah: "This is what the LORD of Hosts said, 'Practice true justice and perform lovingkindness (*hesed*) and compassion each to his brother; and do not mistreat the widow, the fatherless, the foreigner, or the poor; and do not make evil plans in your hearts against each other.' But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears from hearing." (Zechariah 7:9-11)
9. "O To Be Like Thee," written by Thomas O. Chisholm (1897).
10. Not to get too far afield, but this parallels one of the most difficult theological questions of all time—how Jesus could assume a divine nature and a human nature. Why is this such a big deal? Because the two natures seem to have absolutely nothing in common, no points of contact. (See Chapter 2, note 11.)