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HOPE IN THE DESERT

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She only had a screwdriver. And the one she had was the wrong size and shape. But even then it wouldn't have done any good.

She looked at the motorbike. A patch of thick oil was seeping into the red dust—like clotted blood she thought, and shivered. She couldn't believe she wasn't injured. The speedo was nudging close on 200 km as the road snaked into the distance, careless and inviting.

The open road had given her a sense of freedom and purpose, as if each kilometre was a kilometre further from her past. Cornering smoothly she'd felt invincible.

How could this happen? What had she done wrong?

She inspected the bike. The jagged wound in the engine casing didn't look good. Turning back she could still see the cloud of smoke hanging in the hot, still air.

"Oh God" she prayed, "Help me! I'm stuck. I've really blown it this time". Literally! The piston rod poked through the casing like a broken bone.

She sat on the side of the road and waited.

Half way between Katherine and Alice Springs there weren't many passers-by. She doubted she'd get help any time soon. Minutes turned into hours and the last of her water was gone. She bargained with God. Made promises to God. There was nothing else to do. It was blatantly obvious that any hope lay outside of herself. In the past she had bargained with God but all her good intentions had evaporated as soon as circumstances had changed in her favour. It dawned on her that she was now utterly dependent on God's mercy. On his forgiveness. On his very real and active intervention to save her—a sinner. A runaway sinner.

She'd always taken God for granted. She knew the Bible stories but could never keep her end of the bargain. She'd been taught the Old Testament and sat under endless sermons about how to live a life pleasing to God. She'd tried and failed and tried again. And failed...again.

There was no joy in her Christian life. Only pride and self-righteousness if she managed to "do well"; or despair and self-loathing for the many more times she failed.

Wiping the sweat from her face her mind wandered to her childhood. Her aunt had been a strict believer and a pious women but with a big heart. Her favourite verse was from Isaiah "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." (Isaiah 64:6)

A small dust storm stirred a few dried up leaves to her right. "That's me!" she lamented. "I can't fool God. I'm a hopeless sinner and I deserve to die." It was one of her more honest moments and something in the truth of the admission settled her.

She felt a strange relief. She could let go of all the trying and pretending, get off the treadmill of trying to be good and please God. She could give up, because she couldn't do anything to make herself more righteous. Dead leaves are dead leaves.

Minutes—or maybe hours—passed and another verse came to her mind. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that all who believe in him would not perish but have everlasting life”.

A spark of hope from outside of herself! “Jesus came to save sinners,” she marvelled.

A warmth filled her and she forgot about her thirst as she wondered at the thought. Jesus was God’s Son He embodied the love of God, and he brought that love to the world. To her! He had come for the very purpose of rescuing people like her, to ensure she wouldn’t be like a dead leaf scattered in the desert wind. In this seemingly godforsaken place she had been found. God had found her.

A horn jolted her from her musings and slowing to a stop was a council vehicle with, of all things, an empty motorbike trailer on the back! “Need a lift luv?” called the driver, a wrinkled old man missing his front teeth. Hiding her apprehension she looked around. She didn’t trust this man. She didn’t trust herself. But she did trust God and knew that she was in his hands whatever the future held. Inside her now was a reality that would take many years to put into words; it was the presence of a new and living hope. A hope based on someone outside of herself...a man who had come to secure her future...who had come to her...a sinner.

She learned that hope was not dependent on herself performing well or on manipulating circumstances in this life to meet our needs. Hope comes from outside. It causes us to exchange our own weakness and failure for God’s strength. It gives rise to patience and joy in the times of waiting. But it’s not something we can create. It’s from above, from God himself.

But, like my friend, we only find that hope when we’re at the end of our tether.

I doubt there’d be many council trucks with empty bike trailers cruising around the outback at any given time. For all she knew, it might have been an angel who came that day, cleverly disguised as a council worker! But, whatever the case, she knew that she couldn’t have arranged that meeting. God had done something. But he did something in her ever before he sent the truck and trailer. He let her find the end of her tether, and there she found that she wasn’t alone.

Today, every day, Jesus is still giving desolate and lost people a future. He is there as our brother and is the living and human guarantee that we too will be with our God and Father, even as he is now. And even as he is with God, he is also with us. God with us, that what his name means...Immanuel. God with us. With us! Even when we’re sitting beside the broken dreams of our own freedom. Perhaps especially there. That’s when true hope begins.

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