

A Fruit in Season
Devotionals to Encourage you through the Year
by
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Dedication

To my grandson, Raphael – you heal my heart.

Contents

Winter – Sowing

[Week 1 - Good to Go](#)

[Week 2 - A Noble and Good Heart](#)

[Week 3 - Bud or Branch?](#)

[Week 4 - Sonship, Grace and Destiny](#)

[Week 5 - Tassels](#)

[Week 6 - Triple Vision](#)

[Week 7 - Tell Me Your Dreams](#)

[Week 8 - Big Heart, Broad Shoulders](#)

[Week 9 - Wounds](#)

[Week 10 - From 'Go' to 'Come'](#)

[Week 11 - To Be, or Not to Be? Are you a Christian?](#)

[Week 12 - Greater than Solomon](#)

[Week 13 - Bitter or Better?](#)

Spring – Growing

[Week 14 - A Declaration of Resurrection](#)

[Week 15 - Sin Energy or Synergy?](#)

[Week 16 - At Jesus' Feet](#)

[Week 17 - Ineffective and Unproductive](#)

[Week 18 - The Synergy of Generations](#)

[Week 19 - Silence and Alliance](#)

[Week 20 - Who will you Worship?](#)

[Week 21 - What do you Want?](#)

[Week 22 - What is That?](#)

[Week 23 - The Four Cs](#)

[Week 24 - The 3D Christian](#)

[Week 25 - One Thing](#)

[Week 26 - New Lamps for Old](#)

Summer – Reaping

[Week 27 - Awake](#)

[Week 28 - Fat and Perfumed](#)

[Week 29 - He said I said, Perfect Love](#)

[Week 30 - The Goal of Intimacy](#)

[Week 31 - Doer](#)

[Week 32 - If Only You Knew](#)

[Week 33 - No-one has Hired Us](#)

[Week 34 - Praying for the Harvest](#)

[Week 35 - Inside, Breaking Out](#)

[Week 36 - Eating with Pharisees](#)

[Week 37 - Go now and Leave your Life of Sin](#)

[Week 38 - The Three Faces of Faith](#)

[Week 39 - Words](#)

Autumn – Maturing

[Week 40 - Life After Fifty](#)

[Week 41 - From Rejection to Intercession](#)

[Week 42 - New Oil for a New Season](#)

[Week 43 - Sacrificing the Old Goat](#)

[Week 44 - Godly Character](#)

[Week 45 - Finding Ruth](#)

[Week 46 - Jedidiah](#)

[Week 47 - Innocence and Perspective](#)

[Week 48 - Holiness is Happiness](#)

[Week 49 - Losing my Religion](#)

[Week 50 - Glorify and Finish](#)

[Week 51 - Surpassing Greatness](#)

[Week 52 - Stand Up, Lift Up](#)

A Season of Grace - Gleaning

“And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

[Leaf 1 - Prophetic Praying](#)

[Leaf 2 - Prophetic Preaching](#)

[Leaf 3 - Crushed or Transformed?](#)

[Leaf 4 - Swiss Cheese with Love](#)

[Leaf 5 - Little Gidding](#)

[Leaf 6 - From the Womb of the Dawn](#)

[Leaf 7 - The World Exists](#)

[Leaf 8 - I've Seen Delight](#)

[Leaf 9 - Friendship Blessed my House](#)

[Leaf 10 - From Apathy to Sympathy](#)

[Leaf 11 - Planet of the Apes](#)

[Leaf 12 - More](#)

[Leaf 13 - Empty Pockets](#)

[Leaf 14 - Temporal Kenosis](#)

[Leaf 15 - Belonging, Purpose, Sparks and Milk](#)

Introduction

This book comes with a prayer that you will be not just encouraged, but empowered by these ‘fruits’ to enter into all that God has purposed for the various seasons of your life.

These writings were forged in a day-to-day dialogue with heaven, while engaging with the challenges of earth. The fifty two weekly devotionals are split into four seasons – Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn to follow a general rhythm of sowing, growing, reaping and maturing. There is a final ‘season of grace’ in memory of the poor and marginalised who, according to ancient Jewish law, were allowed to glean around the edges of each field. Sometimes, simply surviving on grace is enough.

You might use it as a personal devotion throughout the year, but it could also serve as a basis for weekly messages in a church or house group. You don’t have to start on 1st January, but can begin on the week in which you start to read as the seasons follow each other and come back round again.

Following each devotional there is a very short and simple **To Do** section which helps you to apply the teaching via meditation and prayer throughout the week.

The ‘To Do’ begins with a very short reading, **To Read**, or activity. These are a few lines to stimulate Biblical meditation. Do this very slowly, weighing each word in your heart and mind, enjoying the spiritual ‘taste’ like a child enjoys a longed-for sweet.

This is followed by an **Ask** section, which enables you to search your heart. Don’t rush this. Find a private place, and don’t be afraid to own the truth you discover. Take time over the week to ‘think differently’ and resolve to change where necessary.

Then comes the **Receive** section which gives three edifying statements to beautify your life. If you want, you can meditate on it with your palms upwards in an attitude of receiving. Be open through the week to embracing more of the presence of Jesus.

An **Envision** section is next. It aims to stimulate your inner eyes and develop a ‘prophetic imagination’ so that you might fashion your future with the Lord.

The final section is an opportunity to **Pray**. It includes a written prayer which you can say out loud. Don’t be limited by this set prayer, but use it as a springboard to launch yourself into more prayers for the week ahead.

A Video Mentoring for Each Week

Click the [Fruit in Season playlist](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4HiejnWPxIJfUwsoP8GGvXAnMGnlmpo) to find a video commentary for each weekly session. Here is the link to share with others:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4HiejnWPxIJfUwsoP8GGvXAnMGnlmpo>

Winter – Sowing



Good to Go

Week 1

How do you handle space?

Absence poses a challenge to us and we try to avoid it, or fill it up with any rubbish to hand. Every year, the promise of fifty two more weeks of 'spaces' rings out over the world. Resolutions are made, agendas filled, but do we really know how to deal correctly with such opportunity? The following 'seasons' and 'gleanings' aim to help you make the most of your time. Carpe Diem – seize the day.

Jesus' final words to His disciples, in John 16, are all about preparing his people to accept absence and space in the right way.

"But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away." v.7

Parting is indeed *"such sweet sorrow,"* but where is the sweetness in absence? With what do I fill the gaps?

"Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." v.7

Like the disciples, we must learn the art of waiting on the Counsellor, our friend of truth, the Holy Spirit.

When He comes, He will fill up two major spaces - one in me and the other in the environment around me. He brings both personal illumination and general conviction.

Jesus explained the external work by talking about how the Holy Spirit of truth would work as an ally to our endeavours, convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgement. We never have to fill all the 'ministry space' ourselves. We simply need to recognise the opportunities He has prepared. Do you have faith that He has gone ahead into your own situation and environment? Do you expect Him to work? Why not choose to wait in the Holy Spirit's creative space, 'hovering' with Him as it were over creation, anticipating new beginnings and transformed situations?

Theologians have rightly debated and studied the conviction statements and come to a vast array of insightful conclusions. However, the key is not just in the correctness of interpretation but in the revelation of the fact that we have a Holy Counsellor who goes ahead of us into the world to prepare the scenario for our lives. We need orthopraxy coupled with orthodoxy; a right belief in the Holy Spirit needs to be developed with the practical experience of His providence.

Holy Spirit conviction of sin, righteousness and judgement is much more than religious doctrine. It is a mission statement. God goes ahead on His mission, *"missio dei,"* to prepare a way, build the scenery and guarantee provision. His vibrant life is pulsating through history, infusing the future and preparing the answer to our divine dreams, both in the humble stables and glittering palaces of this world. Holiness wins!

The Holy Spirit illuminates the world but He also fills my inner space.

There are at least three consequences of such filling.

1) *"He will guide you into all truth."* v.13

Without question, this truth is primarily revealed through the Scriptures, but *"all"* seems to promise a journey into the fullest realm of veracity. Honest relationships, encountering the Creator in the truth and beauty of His works, discerning the creative cries of truth in art, literature and the world's cultures.

Jesus, the way, the life and the truth, is waiting to be discovered.

2) *"I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."* v.23

The very best thing we can do with space is to fill it with prayer. Space is the womb of prayer.

Prayer is the gift of the Counsellor to us. His indwelling presence expresses Himself in the glorious groaning that words cannot always encompass. Prayer is unlimited influence with God. It is the confidence of provision, a key to heaven which unlocks the door to a smiling Father ever willing to give good gifts to His children.

A group of people engaging the possibilities of their corporate space together in prayer may be another way of seeing the beauty of the bride as she makes herself ready.

And last but not least.

3) *"Until now you have not asked for anything in my name."* v.24

God wants to enlarge the space of our inner tent. He desires to give us 'heart enlargement' so that we can capture a big enough vision of what He is willing and able to do in the world.

His law of faithful provision already covers most of our tiny prayers, and He is almost daring us to come up with a prayer that is worthy of an all-powerful, all-loving God. Can we expand our vision and expectancy to encompass the generous immensity of our King? Or will we act like Israel, in Isaiah 49:6, frustrating Him with our petty petitions, our *"too small a thing"*?

"Ask of me," declares God, *"and I will give you nations!"* Psalm 2:8

In my early days of working in mission, our young team learnt to pray 'wild prayers!' Big, crazy, God-sized prayers, inspired from Paul's words in Ephesians 3:20, which encouraged us to move beyond all we could hope or imagine.

Years may have cast some shadows of reason over that chaste simplicity, but I am confident that the Counsellor will woo me back to a walk on the wild side.

Wildness brings joy!

"Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." v.24

A.B. Bruce, writing in his classic book, *"The Training of the Twelve"*, encourages us to inner enlargement so that we can step into the immensity of God's space:

"We are straitened in our own hearts, not in God."

So, expect an illumination of truth, prevailing prayer and an enlarged vision for this week's space, and your joy will be complete.

To Do:

Read John 14:15-18 and Ephesians 3:14-21

Ask – How much space do I allow the Holy Spirit in my life? Where are you, Holy Spirit?

Receive –

1. The Holy Spirit, encountering the Creator in the truth and beauty of His works.
2. A fresh fecundity in your womb of prayer.
3. Joy.

Envision – The greatest thing that God could do for you over these next 52 weeks.

Pray – Personalise the above verses from Ephesians into your prayer.

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all I can ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within me, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen”

A Noble and Good Heart

Week 2

“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” Luke 8:15

Let's join Jesus on His kingdom expedition as He passes through the towns and villages with his team. Jesus included women in His group which was a radical statement to the society and culture of his day.

“Mary (called Magdalene)... Joanna, the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others” were all part of this missionary band.

They were not there just to do the cooking or wash Peter's socks! They were on the discipleship journey with Jesus. Like most of those whom Jesus chose and loved, they had come to him broken, but were transformed by his presence. They, like many of us, had been *“cured of evil spirits and diseases”* at the hands of the ultimate healer. They also, probably through their business acumen, had a vital role in the financial support of the ministry.

“These women were helping to support them out of their own means.” v.3

I can imagine each one having her own testimony to share at the bustling village gatherings. They had known the turmoil of a heart which slowly softens to receive the message of love, empathising with the struggles of the simple folk, helping them to understand God's word.

Jesus draws the crowds with His charismatic power and down-to-earth, authoritative teaching. He sets the scene in an agricultural community by speaking of a farmer going out to sow his seed. For the simple who have ears to hear, they soon understand the link that Jesus is making between the seed and the life-giving word, and the ability of the different soils, the various states of human hearts, to receive this word. Although we only have Jesus' words in the authoritative text, I'm sure that Jesus didn't monopolise these gatherings but encouraged his team to join in.

Having spoken of the seed on the path being trampled, I picture him looking over to Mary and calling her forward.

“Well if you want a testimony of a life that has been trampled on, here it is,” I imagine her saying.

“I was literally ‘on the path,’ hoping to find love but meeting only rejection from an early age. Hope after hope was dashed to the ground as everyone I trusted betrayed me and walked over me. I became an object to be sold. The rejection was so deeply rooted in me that I could not reach out and touch anyone in a true relation. My heart was as hard and trampled as that path. No words of hope or love could survive in my environment. The smallest seed of encouragement was quickly gobbled up by the blows, cruelty and shame which became my lot in life.

Then one day, Jesus crossed my trampled path. He was different from the brutal men I had known all my life. He listened to me: the outcast. I was so used to giving myself away to others that it was a shock to find someone willing to give himself for me. He brought ‘shalom’

to me and drove away the suffocating sense of my low self-worth. Like our old prophet Zephaniah says, it seemed that he "was mighty to save. He took great delight in me; he quieted me with his love and rejoiced over me with singing." He set me free to receive the word of life."

The people are moved as they hear Mary. Many who had come to mock and jeer are deeply challenged by the sincerity and transformation that they can see in her.

Then Jesus, having moved on to talk about the stony ground, looks over to a timid, wiry woman and I imagine Him saying:

"Come on Susanna, go for it, now's your chance."

"You do not know what a miracle it is that I can stand before you today," says the woman, gradually rising to her feet.

"My name means 'lily', something frail and delicate. And believe me, I was so weak and timid. I've battled with fear and feeling intimidated all my life, never daring to live my own life for fear of what others might say. Like many of you here, I was brought up to know the Torah and religion. I knew God as a hard taskmaster, always ready to punish and condemn. I would go to our festivals but they were always so dry. I would resolve to be a better follower of God but somehow it seemed so superficial and never lasted. Then one day, at the festival of Tabernacles, I heard Jesus speaking in a loud voice.

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink!"

He spoke about 'living waters' flowing from within. And yet, I was blocked up with a big hard rock of inner fear. However, He challenged us to simply believe in Him and by some miracle I went from fear to faith as His word raked out the rocks from my heart."

Susanna sits down sensing Jesus' approving smile, a warm glow on her face, as she has once again overcome the fear barrier in giving her testimony.

Jesus has moved on to a thorn bush, miming the throwing of seed amongst the vicious barbs.

"Could anything grow out of these choking thorns?" he asks.

Prompted by these words, Joanna, a self-assured woman of standing, begins to speak.

"Many of you here know my husband, Chuza. We had a privileged place in Herod's household. I could tell you stories of our amazing banquets, our gold, silver and prestige. We lacked nothing. And yet life was so unfulfilling. In the midst of the wealth and the hedonistic pleasures, our very dreams were dying. The love which we had known in our innocence of youth was quickly choked by the ever-increasing worries of work. We were on the verge of breakdown when one of my servants reported to me words that he had heard the Rabbi Jesus speaking on the mountain.

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness."

I went myself to listen to Him. His words cut away the thorns that bound me up. I found the strength to focus on a relationship with God and people rather than on material things. I'm still learning, but the idols are now being broken in my life."

"*These are the good soil*" says Jesus, turning His compassionate gaze upon the women.

Continuing with the 'poetic licence' of this devotional and inspired by the words left to us in Luke 8:1-15, I imagine Jesus saying of these lady disciples:

"They have pulled out the roots of rejection, cast away the stones of fear and cut down the selfish thorns of materialism and hedonism. Their good and noble hearts are now ready, through more prayers and service, to produce a harvest of good fruit for the world."

Can this same word dwell richly in our own hearts too?

To Do:

Read Luke 8: 1-15

Ask – Am I like Mary, Susanna, Joanna, or do I have bits of all three in my heart?

Receive –

1. Healing from feeling unloved.
2. Courage in the face of fear.
3. Freedom from worry, stuff and excess.

Envision – The future fruits – relationships, talents and initiatives, you can grow in your life.

Pray – "Lord, I want to develop a good and noble heart. Make me fruitful in my family, work and call to serve you. Amen."

Bud or Branch?

Week 3

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” John 15:1-2

We all get the chop sometime!

This well-known passage begins with very good news, and then adds some less encouraging truth.

The good news is that every unfruitful piece of your life, your unbelief, pride, fear, rejection, and sinfulness will be “*cut off*” in Christ’s vicarious death on the cross.

The less than exciting news is that your good, fruitful works will also be cut back to prepare a new season of fruitfulness.

Many people never get beyond the first phase. Christian life for them revolves around a never-ending, sin-centred ritual of personal survival, where they are constantly committing and confessing sin. Both inner and outer fruitfulness is sadly lacking in such a life which hangs on to a minimum level of grace, but never actually produces Christ-honouring fruit. It is a dangerous place to be as the longevity of such a faith is always in doubt and, as John the Baptist said in Luke 3:9:

“The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

We are all called to bear fruit

The normal Christian experience must be to cultivate the inner, Christlike fruit of the Spirit as well as to impact the world around us with fruitful ministry.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.” John 15:16

How is this working out in your own life? Perhaps you are at the beginning of your Christian life, the sap is rising and there is great promise for future fruit. Or you may be in the midst of a fruitful time of gathering and growing. Whatever your age, you must have a testimony of fruit. If you’ve read this far and feel convicted by a lack of fruit in your life, don’t despair! The very conviction you feel is a sign that the sap is still in you. Make a decision to turn away from every barren thing in your life and get back into the word of God and worship. Nurture the soil of your heart and fill it afresh with the living seed of Christ. Fruit will follow.

Seasons of pruning

For many, you will have produced fruit in the past but may now be feeling the hard cut of the blade as years of fruitful ministry seem to be swept away, leaving you with nothing to show. Perhaps, after a dynamic start, you have encountered a ‘*dark night of the soul*,’ and find it hard to get close to God. Trials and tragedy may have eaten away at the fabric of faith, while relational breakdowns may have stunted the fruit of forgiveness.

The accomplishments of many years may need to be passed over to others. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 2:21, found this a grievous thing:

“For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it.”

Persecution and trouble may also have ended the fruitful work of years in an instant.

As I said at the beginning, pruning will come to us all.

How do you survive a season of pruning?

The main thing is getting your perspective right. Let me explain.

I lived for many years in the South of France, so had the first-hand experience of living amongst vineyards. When the vine is pruned, its ubiquitous branches, which have borne the grapes, are cut right back to the vulnerable infant bud which is so near the original gnarled vine.

So, what is your perspective? Are you a branch or a bud? In our success-orientated world we are so used to comparing our branches and grapes. No-one seems interested in a little bud.

Do you see your personal identity in the branch or the bud?

The branches are our works but the bud is our intimacy with Christ. Cultivate intimacy and you will come through the pruning with a renewed energy to grow again. Stay close to the True Vine and find your value and identity in the simple love relation with Jesus.

Someone once said:

“I am successful because I am loved by Christ and can love Him in return.”

He must have been a ‘bud’ to have been able to say that!

Tears and dryness

When a vine is cut back it ‘bleeds’ profusely. Sugary sap leaks out from the broken branches for days. When the ‘tears’ stop, a desert time begins when the branch will ‘dry back’ to the bud.

In the same way, leave time for the bereavement, the seasons of tears followed by the times of dryness. This natural process is preparing the way for a new season.

Indeed, may we all end up *“even more fruitful”*, bringing glory to our Father.

“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” John 15:8

To Do:

Read Galatians 5:22-23

Ask – Do I need pruning?

Receive –

1. Healing from the cuts and loss.
2. Fresh sap.
3. New intimacy.

Envision – The future flowering of the fledgling buds you carry into your new season.

Pray – “Lord, give me patience in your presence to await my new season. Amen.”

Sonship, Grace and Destiny

Week 4

Mission does not begin with a verb!

It begins with a relationship.

The Father, in the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:28, uses the verb 'go'. However, he precedes the verb with a relationship.

“Son, go and work today in the vineyard.”

Before the ultimate 'go' in Jesus' last words to His disciples, we find the all important missionary verb of intimacy:

*“When they saw him, they **worshiped him**...”* Matthew 28:17

It is no use going and getting on with it if we haven't had a clear revelation of our preciousness as sons and daughters of a loving Father. This principle was manifested in Jesus' own life. He went into the waters of baptism:

*“And, as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: **“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”**”* Luke 3:22

This 'Spirit baptism' brings a revelation of sonship. In the same way, we need to be renewed in the revelation of God's Fatherhood in order to fully accomplish the works which he has prepared in advance for us to do. Perhaps, the first sign of being truly filled with the Holy Spirit is to do with 'hearing' rather than speaking.

Do you hear the Father affirming you as a loved son or daughter?

Without this revelation, our service can be full of fear and duty. The famous verse, from Romans 8:15, proves an effective remedy to such slavish toil.

“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry “Abba, Father.”

The apostle Paul encourages Timothy not to be ashamed or fearful, but to boldly suffer for the Gospel.

*“But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own **purpose and grace.**”* 2 Timothy 1:8-9

Destiny and grace, two pillars of strength for our Christian walk.

What is my destiny?

It is to be like Jesus.

*“For those God foreknew he also predestined to **be conformed to the likeness of his Son.**”*
Romans 8:29

It is to be loved and to live as an object of praiseworthy grace.

*“In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ...**to the praise of his glorious grace.**”* Ephesians 1:6

If air in action is ‘pneumatic’, grace in action is ‘charismatic’. Such active grace empowers us to become like Jesus.

Paul's missionary endeavours hung on his capacity to understand and receive grace. For him, grace was much more than just a ‘mess up, clean up’ principle. It was his motivation and strength.

*“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - **yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.**”*
1 Corinthians 15:10

Have you learned the secret of the ‘yet not I, but the grace’?

Where were you before you were born?

God says to the prophet Jeremiah:

*“Before I formed you in the womb **I knew you**, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”* Jeremiah 1:5

Are you secure in God's **passionate prognosis**? Learn to rest in His **fantastic foreknowing**.

I have forever existed in God's intention which is now manifest in space and time. Faith in Christ and obedience to the Holy Spirit brings a fruitful collaboration with the divine intention.

Don't get too focused on the problem of sin. We are not called to be under the yoke of continual condemnation, begging a few dry crusts of absolution through dutiful acts of contrition. On the contrary, we “*who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness*” are called to “***reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ***”. Romans 5:17

Remember that “*where sin increased, grace increased all the more*”. Romans 5:20

My prayer is that through these few lines God will renew you in the fundamentals of adoption, grace and destiny.

Receive a fresh baptism in the Spirit and hear that you are His precious son or daughter. You are not a failure; the Father is well pleased with you.

I'll finish by encouraging you to meditate on Paul's personal missionary testimony to the Galatians, which is soaked in the security of destiny, inspired by grace and caressed with the revelation of sonship.

“But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles...I went immediately...”

Galatians 1:15-17

To Do:

Read Luke 3:21-22. Remember and write down the times when you felt especially close to God.

Ask – Am I living as a beloved daughter or son?

Receive –

1. The spirit of sonship.
2. Amazing grace.
3. Divine love

Envision – Yourself becoming more like Jesus

Pray – “Father, thank you for grace and purpose in my life. Amen”

Tassels – You'll look Good in Blue!

Week 5

“The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD your God.’” Numbers 15:37-41

A major battle is fought each day for the allegiance of hearts and eyes. Visual overkill inundates the soul with negative images. Well before the age of social media, the philosopher Marshall McLuhan saw the television as a kind of extension of our nervous system, desensitizing the heart to the plight of human suffering. The greater ‘screen’ access which smart phones and internet bring can only make us guess at the immense numbness that is assailing the soul of modern man.

“They followed worthless idols and they themselves became worthless.” 2 Kings 17:15

Idolatry has a powerful devaluing effect on our lives. We are worth less when we invest our lives in lusts. Our passions and desires are a gift from God and make us truly alive. In contrast to the Buddhist doctrine of ‘*no desire*’, we should live in the passion of ‘*pure desire*’. When our desire becomes polluted we lose our strength, dignity and vitality. I heard a song on the radio recently which said:

“Turn the flipping television off. It only drains your strength.”

Will our desire be quenched, filthy or pure this week? Will it be repression, perversion or holy passion?

An inner ‘Holy War’ is fought on this battleground of desire. So, what are the “*lusts of your own heart and eyes*”?

God’s protection against visual pollution was to provide the people of Israel with blue tassels.

Do tassels work for you as well? Well, in case you're feeling rather less than inspired, I'd better lead you to the fulfilment of the ‘tassels’ in the New Alliance.

*“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...**” Hebrews 12:1-2*

Victory in the Christian life is all about faith. We cultivate an attitude of overcoming faith by constantly turning our eyes to the Lord. The American theologian, A.W. Tozer, called faith:

“The gaze of a soul upon a saving God.”

We must learn to look unto the ‘*blue cord*’ of the heavenly man.

“Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.” Psalm 34:5

“I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven. As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he shows us his mercy.” Psalm 123:1-2

“I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you...” Ephesians 1:18

The ultimate ‘look’ is to the one who was raised up on a cross to save us from sin, Satan and death. In the Old Testament account of the moaning Israelites, who found themselves bitten by poisonous snakes, we find a reference point for all who have the fangs of lust locked into them. This bite led to death, and the same jaws of destruction lurk behind every seductive bait of the enemy today. The answer was to look to the bronze serpent raised up on a pole.

“Look and live!” Numbers 21:8

Jesus recounts this episode to Nicodemus.

*“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who **believes** in him may have eternal life.” John 3:14-15*

‘Looking’ at the Old Testament serpent is identical with ‘believing’ in the New Testament Christ. That is, the looking and the believing are the same thing. Israel looked with their external eyes, believing is done with the heart.

Jesus Christ is our ultimate tassel!

Allow him to set you free into holy passion. I'll finish with a bit more from Tozer's book, *“The Pursuit of God”*.

“From all this we learn that faith is not a once-done act, but a continuous gaze of the heart at the Triune God. When we lift our inward eyes to gaze upon God we are sure to meet friendly eyes gazing back at us, for it is written that the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout all the earth. The sweet language of experience is, 'Thou God seest me.' When the eyes of the soul looking out meet the eyes of God looking in, heaven has begun right here on this earth...”

When the habit of inwardly gazing Godward becomes fixed within us, we shall be ushered onto a new level of spiritual life more in keeping with the promises of God and the mood of the New Testament. The Triune God will be our dwelling place even while our feet walk the low road of simple duty here among men.”

To Do:

Read Numbers 21:4-9

Ask – Have I been bitten?

Receive –

1. Deliverance from worthless gazing.
2. Healing from the bite of sin.
3. Faith to see the beauty of redemption in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Envision – Your life with less “screen” and more sight.

Pray – “O Lord, I have heard a good word inviting me to look away to Thee and be satisfied. My heart longs to respond, but sin has clouded my vision till I see Thee but dimly. Be pleased to cleanse me in Thine own precious blood, and make me inwardly pure, so that I may with unveiled eyes gaze upon Thee all the days of my earthly pilgrimage. Then shall I be prepared to behold Thee in full splendour in the day when Thou shalt appear to be glorified in Thy saints and admired in all them that believe. Amen.”

A prayer from ‘The Pursuit of God’ – Tozer

Triple Vision

Week 6

“They were all fixed faces, full not of possibilities but of impossibilities”
C S Lewis – The Great Divorce

Vision fills a face with the glow of possibility. Such a face is a welcoming hearth, inspiring the warmth of hope in the barren chill of this hard-faced world. I imagine that Jesus' earthly face carried this divine sheen as an unfettered Holy Spirit focussed His eyes onto the realm of possibility.

But what was Jesus' vision?

No doubt, like His ancestor Jacob who was in love with Rachel, His eyes were fixed on the bride as she made herself ready for the consummation of history. For such joy set before Him, He was ready to endure the cruel cross, scorning its shame.

Alongside this overarching purpose, I would dare to propose three other ‘visions’ that empowered Jesus as He walked the dusty roads of Galilee. May we be encouraged and strengthened to walk in the same ‘triple’ vision for our own lives and ministry.

1. The Vision of the Father

*“I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what **he sees his Father** doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”* John 5:19

Jesus worked by revelation rather than perspiration! No redundant, ambitious energy here. He took the time to ‘see’, and worked out of divine relationship with the Father. There was no forced tension or difficulty in this. Divine flowed into Divine. Love leads to revelation. The more you know that you are loved by God, the more revelation you will have of His will.

*“For the Father loves the Son and **shows him all he does**. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these.”* John 5:20

Indulge your ‘amazement’ at such a self-disclosing God who shares His heart with His children, making the ordinary ‘extraordinary’ by the power of His presence. Indeed, the old adage is true which says that if we want to be successful in life, we need to see what God is doing in our generation and humbly do it with Him.

However, will all this ‘individual’ revelation result in a lot of inspired loners, splintering off to pursue their own God given vision?

Deuteronomy 19:15 and Matthew 18:20 can help us here.

“One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offence he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”

“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

At least *'two or three'* need to 'see' with you. Real progress in Christian work comes when a team of people are bonded together in common vision. It is not an 'imposed vision' but something that has been seen, and thus owned, by all. Such visionary team building is strongly contested by the enemy as he knows how powerful such a group can be in bringing a lasting incarnation of Christ to places and peoples. So, our first conclusion is:

Vision is born from the Father's love and is validated in community.

2. The Vision of the Total Defeat of Satan

*"He replied, **I saw Satan fall** like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you."* Luke 10:18-19

Jesus walked in the vision of the total demise of the enemy. It flooded His every pore, provoking unflinching courage and unbending authority. We need to arm ourselves afresh with the revelation of the ultimate overthrow of evil. Fear cripples vision. May the church not be like Job's friends who received the stinging rebuke:

"Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid." Job 6:21

So, our second conclusion is:

Vision is cultivated in the absence of fear.

3. The Vision of the Harvest

*"Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, **open your eyes and look at the fields!** They are ripe for harvest."* John 4:35

*"When **he saw the crowds**, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* Matthew 9:36

We began with Jesus' vision of the bride. We see her again here in the *'fields'* and *'crowds'* of everyday existence. Jesus never lost His passion for people. He had the quiet faith that could handle the small beginnings, persevering through the dry times because it sees the *'ripe harvest.'* He had the scope to see a whole field and yet meet the need of the harassed individual. He wasn't waiting for some distant revival or personal sanctification before acting, but was able to channel all His energies into the eternal 'now' of opportunity.

Don't give up on your own personal 'today' of ripe opportunities!

So our third conclusion is:

Vision always produces action – prayer and mission.

May your face shine with possibilities!

Some people watch television. Others suffer with double vision, but I wish you all 'Triple Vision' to see the Father, overcome the enemy and have hope for today's kingdom work.

To Do:

Read Isaiah 42:18-20 and 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Ask – Am I blinded in any way?

Receive –

1. Glimpses of the Heavenly Father's work.
2. Freedom from fear.
3. Compassion for the crowds.

Envision – Your life and community with such 'Triple Vision'.

Pray – “Glorious Father, give me the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. Open the eyes of my heart so that I might know my hope, calling, provision and power in you. Amen.”

Tell me your Dreams

Week 7

“We both had dreams,” they answered, “but there is no one to interpret them.” Then Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.” Genesis 40:8

God endowed humanity with a capacity to accomplish dreams. His creative love placed vision, holy ambition and passionate goals within our hearts.

To add a bit to St Irenaeus:

“God’s glory is man fully alive...in achieving his dream”

One of the saddest things about life is that most people have no context in which to fulfil their dreams.

“There is no one to interpret them.”

This ‘lack of meaning’ can lead to a simmering frustration which expresses itself in the various evils and addictions that offer a measure of miserable relief from the inner pain of unfulfilled dream.

We are sold bogus dreams. Here are three categories of counterfeit dreams:

The Pleasure Dream - Life is just one hedonistic video clip. If it feels good, do it!

The Money Dream - You can buy anything! Or as the singer Madonna might say: *“I am a material girl, living in a material world.”*

The Twisted Dream - This is religious zeal without love. Tyrants, cults, inquisitions and violent fundamentalism would all come under this category. False messiahs exploit the frustration of the untapped dream, perverting the legitimate desire to sacrifice for a cause.

We must learn to say no to such false interpretations of our meaning in life.

God longs to reveal a ‘Kingdom dream’ to our hearts – a vision of His authority to heal and make a better world. The key to fulfilling such a dream is the ability to translate our personal experience of Christ into a creative context of help for the people around us.

The story of Joseph in Genesis gives us some insight into how a ‘Kingdom Dream’ is worked out. We’ll read it through, from chapter 37 to 41, in the ‘To Do’ section later.

Let’s look at 4 principles.

1. A Dream is Born in an Environment of Fatherly Love

“Now Israel loved Joseph...” Genesis 37:3

2. A Dream Needs Anointing

This anointing is symbolised by “*the richly ornamented robe*”, which was given him. The Septuagint Bible translation uses the Greek word ‘poikulus’ for the ‘multi-coloured, ‘richly ornamented’ garment. In the New Testament, the same word means ‘manifold’ or ‘diverse’. We find “*grace in its various forms*” in 1 Peter 4:10, “*the manifold wisdom*” in Ephesians 3:10 and the “*trials of many kinds*” in James 1:2.

True anointing develops within a context of grace, wisdom and testing.

3. The Death of a Dream

Joseph's dream was severely tested to the point of destruction by his jealous brothers.

“Here comes that dreamer...Come now, let's kill him...Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.” Genesis 37:19- 20

Joseph's robe was dipped in blood and our ‘dreams’ will also go through a cross to prove their authenticity. Christ's very robe, worn in victorious combat, is “*dipped in blood*”. Revelation 19:13

4. The Disciplining of a Dream.

There was a huge distance between Joseph's dream and Joseph's character. To fulfil his dream Joseph had to go through a long, four step process of ‘on the job’ training. This included:

a) Learning to Succeed in Egypt under a Pagan Master

Joseph worked in the world. He learnt the basic disciplines of life. Genesis 39:3

b) Learning to Resist Temptation

In the end, it was his genuine desire for God which protected him from falling into sin and losing his dream. He overcame the seduction of Mrs Potiphar. Who might be your Mr or Mrs Potiphar? Intimacy and holiness protect our dreams. Genesis 39:10

c) Learning to Succeed in a Narrow Place

Don't crave a wide platform. Learn to succeed in the ordinary, narrow duties of everyday life, even if it sometimes feels like you are forgotten in a prison. Genesis 39:23

d) Learning to Make Space for Others in Interpreting their Dreams

This was Joseph's finest hour. He had come of age. Instead of having his eyes fixed on his own personal vision, he began to listen to others, using his gifts to create a context for their dreams. Genesis 40:8

He became a disciple maker.

In giving time to interpret the dreams of others he ended up fulfilling his own greater dream.

If we want to fulfil our dreams we must create an environment which disciplines others and releases them into their Kingdom dreams. As soon as Joseph learnt to listen to others, God released him from the prison and he found himself in front of Pharaoh, interpreting the dream of a whole nation.

“Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I had a dream, and no one can interpret it.” Genesis 41:15.

So, what are your dreams and visions? Have you found your meaning in life?

Don't give up on the dream, but learn to create the environment which enables others to fulfil their dreams around yours. The church should be a loving space, interpreting dreams and making a better world.

It can be a wounding experience going for our dreams as Joseph himself knew. God prophetically gave him two sons of healing and hope to see him on his way.

Let's end by making these sons our own promise in the one and only Son, Jesus.

Manasseh – *“God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household.”* Genesis 41:51

Ephraim – *“God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”* Genesis 41:52

May you be whole and fruitful as you fulfil your dreams.

To Do:

Read Genesis 37- 41

Ask – Am I in rejection? Am I being defeated by the world's ways and temptations? Do I feel in a narrow, trapped place? Is my dream still alive?

Receive –

1. A redeemed dream
2. Manasseh – Healing
3. Ephraim – Fruitfulness

Envision – Moving from the narrow place to fulfilment as you ‘interpret the dream’ – create the context, for others.

Pray – “Lord, make me a Joseph. Redeem my dream, the dreams of those around me and the dreams of nations. Amen”

Big heart, Broad Shoulders

Week 8

*"Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The LORD said to Satan, **"The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"** Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes."*

*Then he said to Joshua, **"See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you."** Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.*

*The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: **"If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here."*** Zechariah 3: 1-7

Many times, we find ourselves too worn out to pray or engage in victorious spiritual warfare. We feel accused and sinful. Useless parents, bad spouses and failed Christians! The last thing we want to hear is someone telling us to try harder, or offering the latest quick fix gimmick to be free from the oppression. We feel guilty about our lack of zeal.

After more than 36 years of walking with the Lord, I can well identify with Joshua. He represents every person who has tried to pray and minister before the Lord. He is also a sign of a church or mission attempting to be 'prayer based'. Every prayer endeavour will find itself thrust into warfare. We know the ultimate victory of Christ in every battle, but we still need to cope with the evil angel at our elbow. Joshua's clothes are stained with his own personal sin but they may also have become soiled through warfare and work. A visit to a smoky room will leave even a non-smoker smelling like an ash tray.

I recently stood before the Lord under a cloud of accusation and discouragement, feeling a burnt out failure. Hanging on in there, I seemed to hear the Lord say.

"I really love the Joshuas."

He loves us because we have owned our priesthood, even under the pressure of accusation and warfare.

His love expresses itself in His sovereign choice of our lives to belong to Him and bear fruit.

This 'divine choice' is the key to spiritual victory. God will honour His choice and rebuke even the most intense opposition in order for His purpose to be achieved. I'm beginning to come to grips with the amazing fact that my spiritual victory doesn't depend on my own efforts, but more on my ability to believe and relax into His sovereign choice and love.

Relax into your election!

Here are three prayers to renew your vocation as a 'praying Joshua.'

Your first 'prayer' is to simply overhear the echo of the Lord rebuking the enemy on your behalf.

“The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has **chosen** Jerusalem, rebuke you!”

The Lord’s rebuke dislodges resistance. It opens up new fields and fresh initiatives, paving the way for the pioneer, chasing away the devouring birds and preparing the ground for fresh seed.

Here’s the second prayer.

“Thanks for forgiveness and new clothes.”

Ever since the fall of man in Eden, God has been in the tailoring business, clothing His children with redemption and power. From the animal skins which covered Adam’s nakedness in Genesis 3:21, to the heavenly bride making herself ready in Revelation 19:7, God has been atoning for our sin and promising a future ‘clothing of Christ’ through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

*“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been **clothed with power** from on high.”* Luke 24:49

This leads us to the beautiful garments of the high priest. I’d encourage you to read Exodus 28:6-15, 29, 31-36, which describe his holy apparel. Although we don’t need to dress up in the same way today, close meditation of this attire can give us some inspiring insight.

‘The turban’ crowns our Christian identity and speaks of a renewed and holy mind, set on serving God’s purpose in our lives.

‘The gold bells’ – noise, and *‘the pomegranates’* – fruit, arranged alternately around the hem, speak of the delicate balance between gift and character so essential for Christian ministry.

However, I feel that two particular articles are very much on the Lord’s heart to give to us for this season.

The Ephod and the Breast Piece

“What are you carrying?”

“What is on your heart?”

The people, places and projects that we own are like the precious stones on these garments. Perhaps, some have lost their sparkle through disuse or disappointment, while others lay hidden, still waiting for their moment to shine. Perhaps our shoulders have grown weak from the constant burden of responsibility, or our hearts have grown strangely cold over the years. Emotionally empty, our eyes become tearless, overwhelmed by the incessant encounter with the tragedy of life. Find a renewed passion and hope. Take up your burdens afresh, remembering Nathan’s advice to David which encouraged him to do what was on his heart. Christ, like Aaron, is our example as we own anew the prayer life of a priest.

“Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the Lord.” Exodus 28:12

“Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart.” Exodus 28:29

Just as God gave new clothes to His priest, in the same way He wants to give you fresh strength and encouragement. Your shoulders, which have carried so much and can take no

more, will be given a fresh 'ephod'. This miracle will enable you to joyfully embrace future responsibility and 'carry' on.

Your heart, which is emotionally drained and dry from giving out to others, can also be made new. Receive a new 'breast piece' and be emotionally empowered to love again.

Here is the final prayer.

"Give me a place of authority."

Extending the Kingdom of God in the world is all about authority.

Can you believe that God wants to open a new season of authority over your life? It may be time to speak to certain mountains rather than continue to journey around, or moan about, them. Action without authority is just more empty work. I believe that our lives can know greater authority and breakthrough as we take up our 'Joshua mantle'.

"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.'" Zechariah 3:7

Receive a promise to govern. We are called to be the head and not the tail. This costly vocation lives in the sacrificial place of prayer and faith, incarnating itself in a life laid down for the nations.

Govern your family, relationships and regions in prayer and worship, creating a favourable environment for all to discover the beauty of Christ.

Govern the discipling and team building activities of church, allowing folks to come free into courage and ministry.

Govern the whole realm of calling into existence new works and initiatives, releasing the workers for the strategic harvests.

Govern the finances needed to glorify Christ in His ministry through us.

Like Joshua the high priest, our very failure and weakness can lead us to this place of healing and renewed authority.

Remember:

God loves the 'Joshuas.'

To Do:

Read Zechariah 3:1-10

Ask – Am I emotionally worn out? Am I at breaking point with increased responsibility?

Receive –

1. A call to grace and election.
2. A new capacity for responsibility – the ephod.
3. A fresh capital of emotional strength – the breast piece.

Envision – A fresh authority and vigour in your life and ministry.

Pray - “Thank you Lord for calling me to be a ‘Joshua’. I receive your promise for greater authority and I choose to walk by grace in your ways. Give me a bigger heart and broader shoulders so that I can carry the responsibilities of my life and be renewed in love. May I, and those who travel with me, and the whole body of the church know a renewed mandate to govern in your Name and for your glory. Amen.”

Wounds

Week 9

“The wounds from a lover are worth it; kisses from an enemy do you in.”
Proverbs 27:6

A famous Christian lady, contemplating the beauty of Christ, once asked the Lord to grant her the grace of three wounds

The wounds of:

1. True Contrition
2. Natural Compassion
3. Unshakeable Longing for God.

When we are looking for a prayer, we often say:

“Come Holy Spirit.”

Do we know what we are asking for?

What are you expecting to happen when you pray that prayer?

Are you looking for an instant power or a submissive relationship?

Have you ever considered that one aspect of this prayer may be leading you towards a greater wounding?

Contrition

An encounter with God's holiness will lead us to repentance. In the Catholic mass, in memory of the story concerning the Pharisee and the tax collector, they have an act of contrition when they will symbolically ‘beat their breast’ in memory of the justified one who cried out:

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Luke 18:13

Amazingly, the holy apostle Paul carried this wound throughout his life, saying to his disciple Timothy.

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst.” 1 Timothy 1:15

Far from paralysing him in unhealthy condemnation, this wound released him into a growing revelation of grace.

“But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” v.16

Compassion

Christ bore the wounds of compassion well before they took physical form on the cross. The Holy dove, who revealed the loving Father, was the same that put deep within Him an inner wrenching of His being as He stood before the lost and loveless of this world. He wept at Lazarus' tomb, tenderly grasped the hand of Jairus' dead daughter and felt His heart crushed by the crowds of the unreached.

"When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!" Matthew 9:36-38

Sometimes, because of the fear of this wound, we detach ourselves from the reality of suffering. We are tempted to embrace a comfort zone of non commitment, dwelling in our own personal 'safe space' of kindred Christian friends and family. The prevailing spirit of materialism leads us to seek gain before pain. This detachment, like the sugary kisses from an enemy, does us in!

One way to 'satisfy' the wound of compassion is to get on your knees in prayer for the world. Another is to go and get your hands dirty by crossing over into real interaction with the 'huge harvest.'

The following is a testimony from a friend of mine who, several years ago, had the courage to cross over into one of the most difficult parts of Central Africa.

"As Benjamin prayed I felt the power of God and was reminded of the many words spoken to me over the last few weeks. Immediately my fever left me and I was strengthened with the knowledge of my purpose in Central Africa. I went on to deliver my workshop on that day and my speech the following day with an 'anointing' that I have never experienced in all my time as a Christian. I was encouraged, unafraid, wrecked, blessed and humbled. For the first time ever, I had a feeling of being used by God. I hope that never fades."

'Wrecked' may well be another word for wounded.

Longing

All brides should be lovesick. If we lose our love, we make Christ sick. Imagine the disappointment which leads Him say to His passionless church in Laodicea:

"You make me want to vomit." Revelation 3:16

And you thought you were the only one who got nauseous on Sunday!

Morning sickness can also be one of the first signs of a new beginning.

I was once involved in a meeting of missionary leaders. I felt something was wrong with the time and one night I woke up with a picture of an immense pair of long woolly knickers. No, it wasn't one of those dreams! I then felt the Lord, in a humorous way, give me the following words.

“These are passion killers! They are like your meetings!”

The bride, described in Revelation 21:2, is making herself ready. She is:

“Prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”

God is looking for the beauty of holiness, the sacrificial seeking of him in the dawn of each day, the desire to obey and the pure faithfulness of love.

“Kiss me - full on the mouth! Yes! For your love is better than wine, headier than your aromatic oils. The syllables of your name murmur like a meadow brook. No wonder everyone loves to say your name! Take me away with you! Let's run off together! An elopement with my King-Lover! We'll celebrate, we'll sing, we'll make great music. Yes! For your love is better than vintage wine. Everyone loves you - of course! And why not?” Song of Solomon 1:2-4

And why not love the Lord with holy abandonment?

The Spirit and the bride say:

“Come!”

Come Holy Spirit!

Bible quotations are taken from ‘*The Message*’ translation.

To Do:

Read Matthew 9:36-38, Ezekiel 11:19

Ask – Am I soft or hard on the inside? Does light come in through my vulnerable ‘cracks’?

Receive –

1. Renewed love for holiness.
2. New space for people.
3. The delightful, ‘lovesick’ wound.

Envision – The church as a wounded, passionate bride.

Pray – “Lord, grant me contrition for sin, compassion for people and unshakable longing for you. Amen”

From 'Go' to 'Come'

Week 10

"The times, they are a changing." Bob Dylan

The times are also accelerating faster than ever. Soon, the old currency of doing church and mission may no longer be legal tender. The ethic and thrust of mission strategy is undergoing a major shift.

We need a new paradigm of mission.

The missionary theologian, David Bosch, wrote the following prophetic words in his classic book, *"Transforming Mission"*:

"We live in a period of transition, on the borderline between a paradigm that no longer satisfies and one that is, to a large extent, still amorphous and opaque...in the field of religion a paradigm shift always means both continuity and change, both faithfulness to the past and boldness to engage the future, both constancy and contingency, both tradition and transformation...Neither extreme reactionary nor excessively revolutionary approaches will help."

So, trying not to be *"excessively revolutionary"*, let's take a tentative peek into *"the opaque"*.

Revelation of the new is slowly built through the cut and thrust of in-field involvement, rather than via the passive theories of the classroom. On a visit to Indonesia, caught up in the vibrant life of a young and growing church, I felt I heard an echo of the future. This church had been gifted with wonderful worship and a beautiful heart of prayer which sought after its beloved Bridegroom. As young people wept, sang and came forward to give their lives for mission, it seemed that they were *following*, rather than *going*.

The traditional 'Go' of mission seems to be giving way to the wooing of 'Come'.

Intimacy and Mission are being glued together as never before. I exist in this bonding - I AM. I'M in Christ, Intimacy and Mission woven together into the adventure of a divine life.

We saw previously that mission never really began with a verb. The command of a Father to his two sons, in Matthew 21:28, gave us a hint of this when we saw how the *"Son"* relationship preceded the going.

"Son, go and work today in the vineyard."

The initial relation calls for obedient action - *"work"*, to be accomplished in a measured and contextualised way - *"today"*, amidst the thousands of unreached peoples in the world - *"the vineyard"*.

Mission – or 'purpose' if you want a more accessible word, always begins with a revelation of intimacy. In this case, it is the wonderful thrust of being loved by a heavenly Father. Even before the Son Jesus began his ministry, He needed to hear the intimate words of the Father.

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Luke 3:22

This revelation of the intimacy with the Father has been a mainstay of my own mission endeavour over these last 37 years. Good stuff, and yet?

I'd dare to say that I think there is more. The last season of mission has been rightly nourished by the revelation of the *Father's heart*. The next season of mission will be motivated by the revelation of the *Bridegroom's love* for His church.

It seems to me that the young people of the majority world, global south nations are entering into this new paradigm as they discover their own missionary destiny.

In Mark 14:1-9, Jesus spoke of the importance of having the right spirit at the heart of mission when He linked the vast enterprise of *“preaching the gospel throughout the world”* to the extravagant action of a lone woman – *“what she has done”*.

What did she do?

“She broke the jar.” v.3

The Lord is seeking a deeper level of brokenness in our life for Him.

Mission is not humanism. It is not just about fundraising and money. Mission finds its heart in the worship, prayer and sacrifice that rises from cross-smitten hearts.

Perhaps, the double refrain from the love poem, *Song of Songs*, might add to the more classic texts on mission.

“My lover spoke and said to me, “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me.”
Song of Songs 2:10

Missio Dei theology sees a God already at work in the world waiting for us to join him. He is already in the hardest places. Perhaps, the ‘*work ethic*’ of the son will not withstand the final onslaughts of the evil one as this world groans in the beginnings of labour pains. Perhaps, the love of most will indeed grow cold. Perhaps, the lamp of worship and Jesus-centred prayer will dim in the glare of humanistic solutions.

But parallel possibilities may well be emerging. Perhaps, a bride is also making herself ready, a bride ‘*faint with love*’, long prepared in the clefts of the rock, a bride who, even in the harshest persecution, will overcome in joyful singing.

“Draw me unto you and let us run together” is the wonderful refrain which paraphrases the King James translation of Song of Songs 1:4:

“Draw me, we will run after thee.”

Is the Lord drawing you afresh into a greater intimacy with Him? Not a passive intimacy that empties your mind, but an intimacy which ignites your talents and launches you into joyful action. Run into communion with His brokenness, run into His indestructible, resurrection life.

The oppressed, hidden ones are showing their beautiful faces, new songs are resounding from the African and Asian hillsides.

May we find a new voice in this global love song, humbly joining the dance. Those who have felt deserted and desolate are hearing a new name spoken over them.

“But you will be called Hephzibah...for the Lord will take delight in you.” Isaiah 62:4

“The Spirit and the bride say “Come.” Revelation 22:17

To Do:

Read Mark 14:1-9

Ask – Am I driven or ‘seduced’ by God? Am I a grudging giver or an extravagant ‘jar breaker’?

Receive –

1. Jesus’ words - “You have done a beautiful thing for me.”
2. Global significance in local action.
3. An overwhelming wave of Holy embrace, getting caught up afresh into the ‘Come’ paradigm.

Envision – Pouring out your life once again at Jesus’ feet.

Pray – “Beloved Jesus, draw me unto you and let us run together. Amen”

To Be, or Not to Be: Are You a Christian?

Week 11

One of the greatest divides that categorises men and women is found in the question:

“Are you a Christian?”

If you answer ‘no’ you are classed as a ‘non-Christian’. The Christians are in, and the non-Christians are lost outside somewhere.

We are so used to the phrase that we often forget to really think about what we are saying. By Christian, do we mean someone who goes to church on Sunday? Someone who has been baptised as a baby - or ‘full immersion’ as an adult? Someone who was born in a Christian country? Someone who assents mentally to a set of teachings about the death and resurrection of Christ? Someone brought up in a Christian home or culture? Someone who is nice? Someone who is nasty but repentant? Someone who is born again? Someone who speaks in tongues? Someone who is definitely not a Hindu or a Muslim...or a Jew?

I was once in Northern India, and I asked a local man what he thought a Christian was like.

“Britney Spears” was his answer!

Was Jesus a Christian?

Let me share with you a simple insight which has helped me find a more satisfying answer to this delicate issue.

Are you a *heaven bringer*?

Does the atmosphere change when you walk into a room? Does receiving the grace and joy of Christ bring light to the darkness of your sinful heart? Do your thoughts and words carry life? Are you carrying and encouraging others? Do you meditate heaven's words, breathe heaven's air and converse with God?

Jesus was the ultimate *heaven bringer*. Heaven became flesh in His human form. It oozed out of His every pore and permeated a wicked world with love, healing and forgiveness. Jesus, the ‘heavenly man’, stooped humbly into everyman's hell and rescued all those willing to take hold of His hand and be drawn upwards. His heaven invaded earth as a new regime, overthrowing the painful rule of death and sin. It declared war on evil and destroyed the works of the devil.

“He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.” 1 John 3:8

If there is the possibility of being a heaven bringer, there may also be the opposite potential of being a hell bringer. Jean Paul Sartre, in his play, *“No Exit”*, had one of his characters declare.

“Hell is other people.”

We humans have been born with an amazing potential to make other people's lives hell!
We need rescuing from the sin-induced ability to scar innocence which resides in our hearts.
Jesus warned, in Matthew 18:6, about the terrible consequences of '*causing little ones to sin*'.

"But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

Causing sin makes life hell.

One of the most awesome things in the universe is the *Black Hole* - a heavy mass of concentrated gravity that simply draws everything into itself. People have the potential to become like that! They suck out the life from around them and bring darkness and centripetal heaviness.

On the other hand, there is also the phenomenon of the *Supernova* - an exploding sun, a big bang, giving sacrificial birth to a new universe. We also share this potential of being creative and life giving - a centrifugal force of living energy!

Are you a black hole or a supernova? Lost in space or exploding in grace?

Choose to live as a heaven bringer, carrying the "*good news of the kingdom*" to those trapped in a hellish existence?

Jesus' body on earth, the church, should share His vocation as a heaven bringer. We are called to push back the gates of hell.

*"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. **I will give you the keys** of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* Matthew 16:18-19

God has given "*keys*" to His church. What do you do with a key? You open a door. God has given us the key to open the door of heaven and see His will and rule breaking forth on earth. These are also keys to open the door of heaven within our own hearts that are all too often locked up and bound in sadness.

Unlock the joy and peace that is yours in Christ!

"Has anyone seen my keys?"

We have the keys to unlock the gates of blessing over families, cities and nations. Receive the revelation of your authority, and a fresh vocation to be a Christian - oops, heaven bringer.

This week, may you taste afresh the power of heaven.

"For those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age..." Hebrews 6:4-5

To Do:

Read John 1:12-13, 1 John 3:1-3 – Write down the moment – or moments, when you felt so close to your Heavenly Father as a divine child.

Ask – What are my ‘heavenly’ characteristics? What are my ‘hellish’ elements? Am I more like a supernova or a black hole in my relationships? Do I bring heaven’s presence to people?

Receive –

1. A fresh ‘lavishing’ of the Father’s love.
2. Purification from all ‘hellish’ attributes.
3. A renewed taste of heaven.

Envision – The church unlocking heaven.

Pray – “Heavenly Father, give me the keys to open the door of heaven onto my earth – family, friends, neighbourhood and nation. Amen.”

Greater than Solomon!

Week 12

Success in life is proportionate to our ability to cultivate a living knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every season of the soul gives us the opportunity to move forward in this area. We love to know Christ in our victories – souls won in powerful ministry, miracles of healing, triumphant holiness and answered prayers. We must also learn to know Him in our failure and sufferings.

A challenge for many of us is to strike the balance between ‘triumphalism’ and ‘pessimism’. Hopefully, a genuine experience of Christ will lead us to greater ‘realism’.

Jesus defines Himself through the Old Testament Scriptures and in Matthew 12:38-42, when the people were looking for an instant Messiah, He spoke the following:

*“Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.” He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, **and now one greater than Jonah is here.** The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, **and now one greater than Solomon is here.**”*

People wanted a miracle. The proof of the Messiah was indeed in His ability to confirm the Old Testament demand for signs and wonders, but Jesus wanted far more than man's allegiance to the spectacular.

There is a theological term called ‘*epistemological distance*’ which signifies God's restraint in making a too direct revelation of Himself in order to safeguard our freedom, allowing us to gently cultivate a ‘*knowledge*’ of Him. We are called to make a choice to love based on vulnerable faith rather than the ‘no choice’ of an imposed revelation which would enslave us to His power. This ‘*distance*’ enables human hearts to progressively grasp the unfailing goodness of God – even when He seems absent, cultivating the miraculous grace of genuine love for Him in our hearts. He will not conform to our consumerist need for a vending machine God, who meets our needs at the push of a button.

Other people wanted wisdom. They pushed Jesus to fit in with the ideology of the time – to be a great teacher and master. Even today, people seek to promote a chameleon Christ who blends in with the acceptable pluralistic culture of the day.

*“Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but **we preach Christ crucified**: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.** For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.”*
1 Corinthians 1:22-25

In a world demanding signs and political correctness, true knowledge of Christ begins at that historic hill in Jerusalem known as 'Golgotha'. It begins at the cross.

Christ is the "*one greater than Jonah*" and the "*one greater than Solomon*". In Jonah we see the crucified Christ and in Solomon we see the reigning, risen Christ; power and wisdom incarnate.

There is no substitute for knowing Christ other than through the cross. The punishment our sins deserve needs to fall on Jesus. A hard reality grips us when we realise God's awesome justice:

"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." Romans 1:18

Even the apostle of love adds that:

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life for God's wrath remains on him." John 3:36

Christ is our propitiation. In Christ, through the cross, we are enabled to experience God's smile of grace rather than his righteous anger. Our response is humble repentance. A storm raged over Jonah until he was plunged into the depths.

Do you have storms raging over your life? Are you blaming circumstances and other people for those storms?

There is a place to resist the storms that are blown by the enemy, but many of our sin induced storms will only cease when we come in humble repentance to the cross.

The men of Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching. How much more should we find our hearts burning within us as we stand in the council of the "*one greater than Jonah*", receiving His living word of life.

How is Jesus greater than Solomon? I mean, that ancient Jewish King built a mega-temple/church - and did you see the size of his offerings!

What temple did Jesus leave?

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"
1 Corinthians 3:16

Jesus built a global temple, made up of living stones from all over the world. Through the missionary effort, this temple is coming into being in visible reality on the earth.

Jesus gives us greater victory and rest from our enemies, greater wisdom, greater glory and greater anointing. His eyes are constantly upon his living temples, hearing their worship and responding to their prayers. See 2 Chronicles 6:18-21 in the following **To Do** section.

I can get up in the morning and tap my chest saying:

“One greater than Solomon is now living in my heart!”

However, I can only do that because, like the tax collector in Luke 28: 13, I have beaten my breast in repentance as one greater than Jonah takes me to the purifying cross.

The apostle Paul also tapped his breast in repentance and wonder when, nearing the end of his ministry, he wrote:

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Philippians 3:10

As the old song says:

“The greatest thing in all my life is knowing you. I want to know you more!”

May this be your refrain throughout this week.

To Do:

Read 2 Chronicles 6:18-21, 41

Ask – What are the storms of sin and temptation battering my life? How much do I know of the power and wisdom of Christ in my life?

Receive –

1. A greater knowledge of forgiveness and freedom through Christ’s death.
2. The power of resurrection through the Holy Spirit.
3. The ability to live in the balanced reality of wisdom and power.

Envision – The global temple being built with living stones.

Pray – “Now arise, O Lord God, and come to your resting place. Amen”

Bitter or Better? - A Journey from Mara to Elim

Week 13

“Moses cried out to the Lord and the Lord showed him a piece of wood.” Exodus 15:25

Like the Israelites, we journey through life, encountering our own ‘lakes of bitterness.’ I was once in the region of the ‘Great Lakes’ on a ministry visit to Rwanda. This country has known its share of bitterness. One of the pastors I stayed with still bore the wounds of the conflict on his forehead. His wife showed me a neat semicircle of a scar that meandered all across her ankle and Achilles tendon.

“My foot was nearly severed in the massacre,” she said, taking down a faded black and white portrait of her father.

“I was only a young girl of eighteen when I lost him and all the rest of my family in the genocide.”

I stared at these ancient scars on black flesh and at the lost father, wondering how on earth love could survive.

Another friend shared how, after 25 years of loyal service, he had found himself out of a job and passed over for promotion. In this same land, anonymous heroes survive on a dollar a day. Noble African ladies till the fields with a baby on their back, hoping to nurture a precious crop to feed the family, while other nameless thousands in the West throw away almost as much food as they eat!

Two of the most basic human needs are material and psychological fulfilment. On their journey to the promise land - a *‘land of milk and honey’*, the people of God were thirsting after a satisfying, cool drink. After all their hopes and dreams, imagine the disappointment and anger they felt when their first draught in the sweet land turned out so bitter! They named the place after such bitterness – ‘Mara’.

“Have you also had to name bitterness in your life’s journey?”

“Have some of your own legitimate thirsts been thwarted?”

“What has left a bitter taste in your mouth?”

Such poison on our palate can impregnate our words with spite and negativity. Our public and private conversations are a good indicator of our level of spiritual toxicity.

The writer of Hebrews 12:14-15 saw the terrible potential of bitterness to eat away at the very structure of our lives together.

“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”

The cross is the only instrument sharp enough to cut out the roots of bitterness.

Only one man ever owned a bitterness-free heart. He hung that heart upon a cross, like a cosmic sponge, and soaked up the ‘Great Lake’ of mankind’s ‘Mara’.

Like Moses, we need to cry out in desperation until we gain a fresh revelation of that *“piece of wood”* - that old rugged cross, which, when applied to the bitter waters of aching hearts, can make them sweet again.

“He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.” Exodus 15:25

May our words and personalities find a renewed sweetness as we allow the work of the cross to function in the bittersweet bustle of our everyday lives.

Cry out to God. Don't camp at Mara! It is not your final destination.

“I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfils his purpose for me.” Psalm 57:2

With the cleansing of the bitter waters and the call to obedience comes a deep revelation of the covenant name:

‘Yahweh Rapha’.

“I am the Lord who heals you.” Exodus 15:26

Peter quoted the prophet Isaiah when writing to a persecuted church, reminding them that:

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” 1 Peter 2:24

Revelation and Ezekiel also encourage us with the promise of a *‘tree of life’* in heaven whose leaves are for:

“The healing of the nations.” Revelation 22:2

We serve a loving, reconciling, powerful God who makes us better rather than bitter!

Our destination is *‘Elim’*.

Have you ever longed for the picture-postcard palm trees? We have so much more in Christ - perfect provision and eternal life, welling up for us in abundance.

And so, let's go back to the scars of Rwanda.

Have you seen the film *‘Slumdog Millionaire’*?

In the last scene, the lover kisses the scars of his beloved and redeems the pain. It is a pale reflection of our ultimate destiny when Christ will heal our deepest scars. He will kiss away Rwanda's pain, healing His bride with love.

“Crown Him the Lord of love; see from His hands and side, those wounds still visible above in beauty glorified. No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight, but downward bears his burning eye, at mysteries so bright.”

To Do:

Read – Exodus 15:22-27. Remember moments of disappointment on your life's journey.

Ask – Am I bitter?

Receive –

1. A “piece of wood” thrown into your heart by the Holy Spirit.
2. Healing from all diseases.
3. The fruit and refreshment of Elim.

Envision – Kinder words being spoken.

Pray – “Lord, heal the nations. May leaves of love be shaken from the tree of life to soothe the bitter suffering of many. Amen.”

Spring - Growing



A Declaration of Resurrection

Week 14

Life is full of declarations. Some come in the form of political manifestos, others as works of art, but the best come as manifestations of love. In France, where I live, this is the time of year when we have to make our tax declarations!

However, as the spring season of Easter reminds us, we should focus our attention on that greatest of declarations:

The Declaration of Resurrection!

Paul sums it up well at the beginning of his letter to the Romans:

*“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God - the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness **was declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.**”* Romans 1:1-5

Paul was so impacted by the declaration of life that he had encountered on the Damascus road that he made it one of the major elements of his Gospel:

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.” 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Easter celebrates the scriptural and historical fact that Jesus “*died for our sins...was buried...was raised*”. Paul builds up to the glorious resurrection by emphasising his physical appearing to the apostles - remember the Emmaus road and the upper room, and to over five hundred people! Just think about that for a moment. Some people seem to have a very abstract, virtual idea of Christ's resurrection, but there was nothing virtual or metaphorical about five hundred eye witnesses.

Believing in the physical resurrection of Christ is so important. 1 Corinthians 15:14 states:

“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”

I do not want to have a ‘*useless*’ ministry. I want it to be utterly ‘*useful*’, totally filled with the faith dynamic of Christ's resurrection. More than just believing, I want to experience Christ in His risen life and make it my life's goal:

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Philippians 3:10-11

The powers of the age to come began to break into this world as Christ broke free from the grave. Vitality, health, peace and happiness can be ours as we allow His new life in us to overcome the sin and pain inherited from the clay of Adam.

“And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” 1 Corinthians 15:49

Who is your icon? I want to be an ‘*eikon*’ - a living ‘likeness’ of the heavenly man!

Embrace your own resurrection experience. It may bring you physical healing and well-being as the Holy Spirit infuses new life into old bones.

“And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.” Romans 8:11

The missionary message is based on a fivefold declaration of resurrection.

1. A New Dawn

In the famous passage of Matthew 28:1-20, we see the two Marys, “*after the Sabbath, at dawn*”, going to visit the tomb. This tomb represents our ultimate anxiety, that inexorable, final destination. A new hope is about to be born. In spite of the many disappointments in life, there is always a new ‘*dawn*’. Mission, sharing the Gospel message, brings this new dawn, this new beginning to people’s lives.

2. Heavenly Intervention

“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven...” v.2

Hard ground quakes open and heavy obstacles are removed. Light invades darkness and angels displace demons.

3. A New Perspective

“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.” v.5

Move from fear to faith. In much religious culture, Jesus is forever portrayed as stuck to a cross. He hangs, weak, pale and broken, while shining over Him is His radiant, all-powerful mum! In some churches, there are so many dying Christs, exalted in perpetual pain or hanging out in dark corners, that it becomes increasingly difficult to encounter the living Lord.

“He is not here!”

He is no longer in the tomb or on the cross. Stop lamenting and stop making your life an eternal Good Friday! There is obviously a place for the cross – a terrible place where Jesus shed His blood and paid the price for my sin and the sins of the world, but He has moved on into glorious resurrection life. He still bears the scars, but they are transfigured trophies of victory.

4. Find Him in your Future

“Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.” v.7

If the cross frees us from our past, the risen life of Christ awaits us in future opportunity. He has gone ahead of you, preparing a place of blessing, mission, anointing, and service. Move on to join Him.

Where is He waiting for you?

5. Get Sent, Tell and Teach

“Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me...Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28: 10, 19-20

A resurrection vision spurred on the Marys and the men to a missionary mandate. May this spring season empower you towards a renewed evangelistic endeavour as you contemplate the risen Christ.

The Lying Declaration

I would have loved to do without this last section. Unfortunately, in this world, a declaration of resurrection will always be challenged and opposed by the devil's declaration. The guards in the story could have had the marvellous privilege of being the first witnesses of the resurrection to the world. They could have become apostles, but they chose to be liars!

“While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.” Matthew 28:11-15

The desire for money and self-preservation, coupled with the power of manipulation, overcame the testimony of life. The same evil spirits are at work today, trying to ‘steal away’ the Gospel testimony from our personal lives and ultimately, from the world. This ‘anti resurrection’ lie is alive and well today, widely circulated as a morbid, anti-life mandate. Many ‘guards’ still sign up to proclaim it, obeying the ‘instructions’ of the prince of this world, in order to keep themselves out of the ‘trouble’ that a strong resurrection declaration brings.

Who will you be during this spring season; a guard, a Mary or a disciple?

Declare the truth, declare the resurrection. He is risen. Hallelujah! He is risen indeed!!

To Do –

Read the four gospel accounts of Christ's resurrection. Matthew 28:1-20, Mark 16:1-20, Luke 24:1-49 and John 20:1-30

Ask – How strong is my faith in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ? Am I more like a guard, a disciple or a Mary?

Receive –

1. A renewed intimacy with the risen Lord.
2. Life in your mortal body through the Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead.
3. An empowered declaration of resurrection.

Envision – A new dawn of the Gospel going to the nations of the world in resurrection power.

Pray – “Lord, I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection. Amen.”

Sin Energy or Synergy?

Week 15

When I first heard the word ‘synergy’ I wondered if it was talking about my special capacity to sin dynamically! The selfish life has unlimited reserves of energy to sin. However, having taken a closer look at a dictionary, I found a more suitable definition. Originating from two Greek words, *sunergiā* - cooperation, and *sunergos* - working together, we can say that synergy is:

“The interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects.”

Another definition says it is the:

“Cooperative interaction among groups, especially among the acquired subsidiaries or merged parts of a corporation, that creates an enhanced combined effect.”

Synergy occurs when the result is greater than the sum of the parts. Synergy is created when things work in concert together to create an outcome that is, in some way, of more value than the total of what the individual contributions might be.

There are many verses in the Bible that show how God's covenant with Israel was meant to create the blessing of ‘synergy’. Leviticus 26:8 is one of many examples.

“Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you.”

Simple mathematical multiplication tells us it needs 500 to chase 10000, rather than the 100 promised. God's synergy gives the promise of five times more power.

Do our projects seek simply to multiply the same, or are we discerning the opportunities of synergy with others? Are we only looking to ‘*survive as five*’, or are we looking to take the step of faith to become a ‘*hundred*’?

I believe that the Lord is asking us to lift up our eyes and seek out ‘synergetic’ partnerships. It is only the fear and unbelief of our ‘sin energy’ which hinders our synergy.

I'd like to give you three domains for synergy.

1. The Synergy of Nations

God's heart is for ‘*all nations to reach all nations.*’ In 1 Chronicles 12:22 and 38, we see the model of many tribes coming together at Hebron:

“Fully determined to make David king over all Israel.”

We need to recognise our own particular ‘Hebron’ – an international gathering point, in this world's global village.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with different nationalities and indigenous mission movements, we can endeavour to make Jesus the true *'King over all the earth'*. Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 gives us a glimpse of the redemptive beauty of many tribes and cultures worshiping in glorious diversity in a *'synergetic celebration of the nations'*.

2. The Synergy of Generations

The Apostle's Creed talks about the 'communion of saints'. What are we in communion with? Surely not a superstitious offering to the dead, but more a taking up of the living baton of a previous generation's love for Jesus, expressed through their prayers and dreams.

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." Acts 2:17

The dream of the 'old men' must find an interface with the vision of the 'young men' of a new generation.

An old man with a dream but without the next generation is doomed to frustration and sterility. The young man with vision but without the discipline of the 'dream' of the past will be 'rootless', wrongly ambitious, superficial and lacking direction.

"See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." Malachi 4:5-6

If you are a young man or woman - or a young mission or church movement, be rooted in the living 'dreams' of the fathers. If you are an 'old man', attempt to disciple a few young men into your dream.

3. The Synergy of Denominations.

We inherit our ecclesial history and there are no superficial solutions to Biblical fellowship. Every 'born-again' believer makes up the one beautiful Body of Christ and, despite different traditions that have grown up through culture and history, we are called to:

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Ephesians 4:3

It is the common *'effort'* of missionary endeavour which strengthens unity. True progress comes when we work together to witness to those outside the church. Each denomination and tradition carries its own emphasis and talent to reach the lost. Learn to appreciate the gifts inherent in the diversity of the Body of Christ.

We are called to share the joy of Jesus as we move forward in the humble love for one another which shows the world that we are His disciples.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35

Christ worked his first miracle for men's gladness. He made wine abundant at poor weddings.

Change our water into wine Lord. Add value to our ordinary through the extraordinary power of Holy Spirit synergy.

To Do -

Read 1 Chronicles 12:23-40 and Acts 2:40-47. Think of those contexts of fellowship which have blessed and empowered you over the years.

Ask – In what ways can I enlarge my collaboration with others? How can I initiate greater contact with people from other nationalities and cultures? Where is my ‘Hebron’?

Receive –

1. A desire to multiply.
2. An enlarged vision of the Body of Christ.
3. Fresh relationships, opportunities and partnerships for bearing fruit.

Envision – The church moving forward in truth, love and unity.

Pray – “Lord, may the dreams of the Fathers be embraced by the creative energy of a new generation. Amen.”

At Jesus' Feet

Week 16

"She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said."

"Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet."

These beautiful verses, from Luke 10:39 and Ruth 3:8 give us insight into the *'priority position'* we should strive for in order to be successful in life. Whether you are in the breach or on the beach - or both, you need to find *'what is better'* and what lasts forever. Our intimate relationship with Jesus, the ultimate kinsman-redeemer, fills us with the possibility of undying purpose. Let us learn more about this *'pursuit of Godly presence'* by looking at some principles which underpinned Ruth's encounter with Boaz.

"My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for?"
Ruth 3:1

We find identity and a home with Jesus. Relation with him is where all true provision begins.

"Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes." Ruth 3:3

Confess and repent of your sins, washing away all guilt in the cleansing blood of Jesus. Let the incense of prayer arise from a contrite heart, as you clothe yourself with power from on high, producing the loving fruit of the Holy Spirit. Colossians 3:12-14 presents a whole wardrobe of *'best clothes'* - compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and the *'overalls'* of love!

"Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." Ruth 3:9

We all need the garment of grace to approach the Lord. This is not a covering of our own making, but a garment given freely, like the animal skins God provided to cover the shame of primal man – Genesis 3:21. As Christ spread out His loving arms on the cross to embrace fallen humanity, so He extends His individual grace to each of us and clothes us in His righteousness.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Corinthians 5:21

"And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask." Ruth 3:11

This promise from Boaz is taken up on the very lips of Jesus when He makes His own promise on prayer to His disciples:

"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." John 14:14

Move from fear to faith in His presence – *'from Fear to Hear'*, as the promise of access to a generous Father God enters the inner chamber of your soul. Believe His uncompromising promise to answer those who pray. Let your request rise to the generous level of His giving. It

is not the time to be shut up in the cold silence of unbelief, but the time to find, welling up from the awed womb of your inner self, a desire to dialogue, a longing to ‘ask’. Allow the Holy Spirit to craft inspired words within you to a greater Redeemer than Boaz. Let prayer rise from love, soaring on the wind of your dreams, sharing your Beloved’s longing to save the world.

“David longed for water and said, “Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!” 1 Chronicles 11:17

Our Lord is still longing to drink from the occupied territories of this world. Who are the mighty men and women who will break through?

“Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her.” Ruth 3:15

Ruth went from gleaning to extravagant provision. She was used to working all day to gather one ‘ephah’ – about eight pounds of grain. However, after an intimate prayer encounter with her kinsman-redeemer, she received about six times that amount, more than she could comfortably carry.

Ruth’s shawl may be an image of our lives and ministries. Perhaps the Lord is asking you to hold out your work, prayers and dreams before Him once again. He will empower you to receive more than you could ever hope or imagine. Let Him pour out the long-awaited blessing. Ruth went from times of trial and famine to a place of wonderful provision because of her intimate prayer with her kinsman-redeemer.

“He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age.” Ruth 4:15

There is much talk of new paradigms for church and mission. Some of the more traditional bastions of our faith, doctrine and practice are being assailed by a genuine quest for the new. However, this is not the time to throw out the baby with the bathwater! We need the tension of the old and new treasures together.

The place of prayer transcends human methods.

A fresh encounter with the living Lord will bring renewal and keep us all on track. The new must always seek to honour and enhance the old. Ruth was able to give new hope to the ‘barren and bitter’ Naomi, making her ‘pleasant’ again in her old age. She brought Israel into its promised purpose by stepping into the genealogy of the Messiah. Prayer locks us back into our chosen destiny.

So, choose the place of prayer for every season of your life.

“May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem.” Ruth 4:11

Share the ‘fame’ of Him who took the ‘blame’.

The Redeemer King, who was born in Bethlehem, bore the penalty for sin upon His shoulders, defeated death, and ‘stands’ forever in all-surpassing glory.

To Do –

Read the Book of Ruth – It is a rare opportunity to see a woman honoured as being ‘better’ than men in this patriarchal culture.

“For your daughter in law, who loves you and who is better than seven sons, has given him birth.” Ruth 4:15

Ask – What am I asking God for? Is my prayer up to the level of his giving?

Receive –

1. A fresh encounter at the feet of your King and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.
2. A new wardrobe – meditate Colossians 3:12-14
3. Hold out your shawl and let it be filled.

Envision – See the joy on old Naomi’s face as she hugs Ruth’s new-born child. Envision new expressions of life coming forth in our historic churches and young ‘Gospel feet’, walking the paths of our ancient lands.

Pray – “Lord, I come to you as my beloved Kinsman-Redeemer. Renew my life and sustain me. I hold out my humble shawl before you. Fill it to overflowing with your provision and purpose, in Jesus’ name. Amen”

Ineffective and Unproductive?

Week 17

Are we making a difference? Are all the hours of prayer, evangelism and preaching, coupled with the billions of dollars faithfully given in tithes worldwide having any real impact on the world?

We can now take that risky journey from the ‘we’ to the singular. Are you making a difference? Does your *‘personal relationship with Jesus’* bear fruit?

I have to confess that one of my greatest fears is to become ineffective and unproductive in my Christian walk. Challenged by a rapidly changing world and global paradigm shifts in mission and ecclesiology, I am constantly asking myself the above questions.

Well, before dragging you into my void of introspection, I’d better say how thankful I was to get some encouraging answers to such self-interrogation from the first chapter of 2nd Peter.

“For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from becoming ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” v.8

In these verses we find the antidote to fruitlessness. We discover *“qualities”* which stimulate growth. These are not management strategies, containing a concise plan of action, but relational principles which deal less with our ‘doing’ and more with our ‘being’.

So, what are these qualities?

“Divine Power.” v.3

Are you hungry for a fresh encounter with the Holy Spirit? We get the words ‘*dynamo*’ and ‘*dynamite*’ from the Greek word for power, ‘*dunamis*’. A personal Pentecost ignites an internal flame of Holy Spirit light. The daily truth of being loved overcomes the dark layers of the lie of rejection, empowering us to live in strength. Human effort alone could never move the heavy stone which feigned to keep Christ in the grave. Walls of doubt and suffering try to keep our own hearts locked in fear and death. The Holy Spirit brings the kind of explosive breakthrough that brings new beginnings from our endings.

This ‘power personality’ of the Holy Spirit introduces us to a couple of His Greek friends – the dynamic duo of Zoe and Eusebio. He presents to us *“everything we need for life – zoe, and godliness – eusebeia”*. He makes the life of Jesus real, calling us to *“participate – koinonos, in the divine nature”*. Together, sharing in the life that is truly life, we escape the entropy of the world, learning to embrace a never-ending vitality.

We find a list of things to do to be effective in 2 Peter 1:5-7.

“Make every effort!” v.5

There is a tendency in the Protestant Christian culture to overload the ‘free grace’ equation. It comes as a shock to some to realise that, even though you may be saved by faith, you still

need to make an inspired effort – hopefully an obedient, anointed and joyous one, to be effective. We are presented with the opportunity of a sevenfold effort.

1. *“Add to your Faith – pistis, Goodness”- arête – valour, excellence.*

It is great to have faith, but it needs to be switched on by courageous acts of excellence.

2. *“And to Goodness, Knowledge – gnosis.”*

The classic song says: *“The greatest thing in all my life is knowing you”*, and true intimacy with God is an essential for growth. Knowing God will lead to a greater knowing – and loving, of those around us.

“If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” 1 John 4:20

3. *“And to Knowledge, Self-Control - egkrateia – a strong grip.”*

It is time to get a grip on your life! Is the screen stronger than you? Do tongues and tempers run wild or are they tamed?

4. *“And to Self-Control, Perseverance - hypomore – to stay under, remain.”*

Hang on in there! Beyond the miracles, Paul named perseverance as being one of his major apostolic qualities. In the parable of the sower, it is the perseverance that produces the fruit.

“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” Luke 8:15

5. *“And to Perseverance, Godliness - eusebeia – well reverent.”*

I’m old enough to remember Manchester United winning the European cup against Benfica. The star player for the Portuguese side was a guy called Eusebio. Let the ‘star quality’ of a God seeker emanate from your life.

6. *“And to Godliness, Brotherly Kindness.”*

You’ll have to work for the Greek. Think of an American state, a cheese spread and a song by Bruce Springsteen – *‘Philadelphia’*. Like the cheese, we need to spread this around! There is nothing more powerful than a group of people who love one another. Let us constantly arm ourselves against the enfeebling attacks of division.

7. *“And to Brotherly Kindness, Love - agape – sacrificial love.”*

Love is not just a feeling; it is an act of the will. As we grow in genuine love, we attain to the ‘divine nature’ and become more like Jesus.

“God is love. Whosoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.” 1 John 4:16

So, here we have seven steps to fruitfulness. Apply them in your life's walk in order to *"be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure"*. Show your Christian identity card with confidence.

A Final Promise

"For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." 2 Peter 1:10-11

Does that imply there might also be a *'poor welcome'* into the kingdom for those who have not done *"these things"*? Get that 'dynamic duo' to walk with you. Make friends with life and godliness, aim for the highest, aim for love.

To Do –

Read 2 Peter 1:3-13. Remember moments of 'divine power' in your life.

Ask – How effective and productive am I?

Receive –

1. Let the divine personality and power of the Holy Spirit engulf you.
2. A kick-start to renewed effort and obedience.
3. An empowered heart which embraces Agape and spreads Philadelphia.

Envision – An extravagant welcome into the Kingdom of Christ.

Pray – "Lord, make me effective and productive in my knowledge of you. Amen."

The Synergy of Generations

Week 18

“I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.” 2 Timothy 1:5

Humanity has roots. We are part of a continuing purpose. No-one appears out of nothing, living with neither history nor inheritance.

The apostle Paul encourages his young disciple, Timothy, to be fully aware of the divine plan that was being handed on to him. In the Jewish culture of the time, it was important to be able to prove authentic ancestry – traced through the mother’s line, in order to have a credible witness amongst fellow Israelites. Christ liberates us from such racial qualifications, but the principle of uncovering a more ‘spiritual lineage’ may still be valid. We might all be strengthened by discovering more of the ‘story’ that frames our own life? Tracing a personal purpose back to those who have preceded us can amplify a sense of meaning. Overhearing the longings of past generations in the quiet of the soul creates a synergy of prayer which imprints God’s eternal purpose into the space of current experience.

Honouring parents - recognising the ancient foundations, is a sound Biblical principle that has always promised success and sustainability.

“Honour your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise - “so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” Ephesians 6:2-3

The Prophet Joel’s words, echoed by Peter at Pentecost, seek to align the dream of the old man with the vision of the new generation.

“No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.” Acts 2:16-17

Bridging the Old and New Testaments with the promise of a coming Elijah, the prophet Malachi, whose name means messenger, cries out for reconciliation. He links the old Jewish root with the fresh sap of a budding promise to the Gentile nations, predicting a healing of generations, which is amplified centuries later by the words of John the Baptist.

“And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Luke 1:17 - Malachi 4:5-6

Timothy, the son of a Greek Father, incarnated the diversity of a new season of God’s work which called for fresh form, but necessitated the substance of faith from the past. He might well be a model for every new generation which has to struggle with the age-old equation of having to invent new forms while maintaining the foundational substance of the past.

Listen to what Dee Hock – the founder of Visa, has to say about this:

“Substance is enduring, form is ephemeral. Failure to distinguish clearly between the two is ruinous. Success follows those adept at preserving the substance of the past by clothing it in the forms of the future. Preserve substance; modify form; know the difference. The closest thing to a law of nature in business is that form has an affinity for expense, while substance has an affinity for income.”

Can you discern the essential difference between form and substance in your own context?

Church and mission movements today face the same question as they attempt to bring the Gospel to the world. Paul encourages Timothy to preserve the substance of faith. Do not throw the baby out with the bath water of the world’s ever-changing forms. He instructs him to do at least three things:

1) Guard the Good Deposit

“Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you - guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.” 2 Timothy 1:14

Partner with the conviction of that ‘intelligent fire’ within your soul to discern the essential substance of your life and mission. Defend it bravely, as a good soldier, against the devouring onslaught of the enemy.

2) Fan into Flame the Gift of such Substance

“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” 2 Timothy 1:6

The laying on of Paul’s hands was more than a charismatic transfer of power. It was an apostolic recognition of the synergy of generations that was coming to bear on the young man’s story. He wanted Timothy to be energised by the recognition of his specific place in the working out of God’s purpose – His story, history, in my story.

Let us “fan into flame” the inherited gifts, that substance of Christ, which we carry with humble hearts into our own faith journeys. Let such treasures be enhanced and beautified in young, multi-coloured flesh, marching on the mountains with good news to the poor.

3) Be Bold, Loving and Pure

“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” 2 Timothy 1:7

Boldness tells a story. People follow the courageous chroniclers who pioneer a new direction. In his book *‘Leading Minds’*, the psychologist Howard Gardener said:

“It is important for leaders to know their stories, to get them straight; to communicate them effectively and, above all, to embody in their lives the stories they tell.”

The incarnation of our story demands the beauty of love and the discipline of purity.

The writer of Hebrews spoke of a great crowd of witnesses looking on - Hebrews 12:1. Yes, they are looking, but also listening, straining to overhear their ancient story narrated in new accents by a fresh generation of faith.

I told my own story in a novel, going back three generations into my family history. I discovered an amazing deposit of faith handed down over the generations. The tale involved a lucky coin and much crying out to God in times of trial, so I named the book – ‘The Penny and the Prayer’.

Why not try and find out what you might discover in your own synergy of generations?

The same principle might also work for the history of churches and missions? My own mission is in its third generation; launching young Timothy’s out into an ever-changing world.

Not all of our inheritances are useful. Sadly, we sometimes get bequeathed pain and curse rather than love and faith. The parable of the garden, sown with both good and bad seed in Matthew 13:24-30, shows how we so often struggle between the positive and negative of our pasts. What do you do with a wounded story? We need to bring such “*empty ways of life*” into the eternal redemption of Christ.

“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.” 1 Peter 1:18-20

We are still telling the end-time tale, following Him who began the story into the final chapters of world history. Like Timothy, may we ‘preach the Word’, ‘endure hardship’ and ‘fight the good fight’.

To Do –

Research your own history.

Ask – What are the good and bad seeds sown into my past?

Receive –

1. The gift of discernment to know form from substance.
2. A fresh flame in your heart and more power on your talent.
3. Boldness, love and purity.

Envision – Your story, in words, in pictures, in meals or in any other form close to your personality.

Pray – “Thank you Father for inviting me into the story of your Son Jesus Christ. Write more of His purpose into my life through the eternal ink of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Silence and Alliance

Week 19

“In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.”
Psalm 4:4

Have you learnt to search for silence in the hour of anger?

Hearts harbour wounded memories which surge up at night with feelings of frustration. Dreams of revenge haunt the vaults of the subconscious, sowing seeds of sin. Each grain of revolt carries a terrible potential to inflict hurt on another. Words betray the inner scars of past battles when innocence was trampled and the man of valour became a vanquished victim. Out of the overflow of the broken heart the mouth speaks. Strong emotions bubble up like stew in a pressure cooker and, waking up in the dark with a head full of anxious thoughts, we find ourselves vulnerable to sin.

The journey to addiction begins when we fail to find the silence. Don't let the false comfort of alcohol, drugs, pornography and the social media replace your quest for wholeness. Flee the screen and search your heart with your heavenly comforter, the Holy Spirit. Persevere in silent communion with Jesus rather than grasping for the cheap release offered by the many words of the world.

Learn to meditate deeply on the healing word of the Lord.

Many problems find their source in the abandonment of the warm relation with God's holy, living word – the Bible. On a cold day in the north of France, I love to come home and sit in front of our warm fire. It brings me peace and relaxation. In the same way, the word of God is a fire to our cold hearts. Learn to bask daily in its warmth. Practice silence and listening to God's word, rather than multiplying the whining echoes of your self-justification.

God calms us down with His love.

*“The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, **he will quiet you with his love**, he will rejoice over you with singing.”* Zephaniah 3:17

His healing word brings us to a place of security and satisfaction.

*“My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. **But I have stilled and quieted my soul**; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore.”* Psalm 131

God quiets us to speak His promises into our lives.

His promise is more than just words. It is a covenant, an alliance based on an indestructible love relation. Jesus took the Jewish Passover cup and proclaimed:

“Drink from it all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Matthew 26:27-28

Drink deep from the covenant promises. God gives himself to us in so many promises throughout the Bible, but let me leave you with three covenant promises from Isaiah 54:10 which are supremely encouraging.

*“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my **unfailing love** for you will not be shaken nor **my covenant of peace** be removed,” says the LORD, who has **compassion** on you.”*

Hesed, Shalom and Rechem – Love, Peace and Compassion

These are covenant words, guiding us to the very character of God. ‘Hesed’ carries the sense of an indestructible love which conquers all. It englobes the notions of loyalty, friendship and solidarity. It is one of the key inspirational concepts that empower the Psalms of David.

Shalom is much more than just peace. It carries a sense of wholeness, health and wealth. It has been summarised by the phrase:

“Nothing missing, nothing broken.”

Rechem comes from the Hebrew word for ‘womb’ and speaks of a deep, peristaltic yearning to have mercy. Waves of compassion flow from God’s heart into the world.

The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us – the Hesed, the Shalom and the Rechem became a perfect man in Jesus Christ.

Search your heart and allow the same incarnation of love, peace and compassion to fill your own pregnant silence.

To Do –

Quiet your soul. Read and meditate Isaiah 54:10 for at least ten minutes.

Ask – “How silent is my soul?”

Receive –

1. Hesed – The promise of unfailing love.
2. Shalom – The peace that passes all understanding.
3. Rechem – May your heart be like a fresh womb, birthing words of life and compassion for you and yours.

Envision – Christ lifting the cup of the new covenant, offering you life and forgiveness.

Pray – “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. Amen.”

Who will you Worship?

Week 20

The seasons come and go and we long to grow. Each passing year asks the most vital of questions. What will your heart and soul long for? Who will you worship?

This question is the source of a very deep well. Mysterious, cosmic conflict and earthly history play out a bellicose narrative around this worship wager. The popular singer, Bob Dylan, put it more simply in his song:

"You gotta serve somebody....It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody."

The book of Revelation with its wonderful unveiling of the person of Jesus, the Gospel and the church, hinges on this battle for worship. There is a lot of material written concerning the so called 'end times', and a quick visit to the Christian book store will take you into many different teachings on the subject. I'm still on my own awestruck pilgrimage through this tome.

The unfolding of Revelation leads us to the same challenge. Who will you worship? We see a whole horde of satanically inspired beasts and harlots craving worship. Icons and images become animated snares, entrapping the mind of multitudes to Godless ideology. All of this activity *"calls for patient endurance and faithfulness...and wisdom"* from the Christian church.

The verses 1-11 in chapter four of the book of Matthew recount the way the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert to face the twofold satanic challenge on his identity.

His very being was challenged: *"If you are the Son of God..."*

His worship orientation was also attacked: *"If you will bow down and worship me."*

It amazes and shocks me to think that Satan even had grounds to believe that Jesus might actually cave in and worship him. It says something about the 'kenosis' of Christ, emptying Himself of the Godhead and allowing Himself to be tempted in every way as a simple man.

Much has been written concerning this event. We often equate Jesus overcoming the fleshly temptation with the 'stones to bread', the spiritual pride with the 'temple miracle', and the lust for power with the 'world kingdoms'. I've always been intrigued that the Gospel of John does not mention the temptations, but instead gives parallel positives. Water to wine, temple cleaned out and a simple Samaritan woman worshipping in spirit and truth!

However, let me bring a new angle on this passage by linking it to the symbolic battles of Revelation. Using an 'Apocalypse Now' approach, I will attempt to see the three temptations in the light of the two beasts and the harlot.

The first beast represents the challenge of the power of 'the state' – the powers that be to all the people of God throughout all the ages. The second beast, who is also seen as the false prophet, is degraded religion and all Godless ideology. The harlot may also be another way of seeing the second beast and represents the world's seductive power and rule.

"Do not love the world or anything in the world." 1 John 2:15

These evil powers have been mighty influences in world history since the very beginning of time. The generations of men and women continue to pass, but there will be an ultimate climax and unveiling – apocalypse, of these powers. All this culminates in the return of Jesus, but He has already met and overcome these powers, with their challenges and temptations, through His ministry on earth.

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Colossians 2:15

This gives us hope as we rest in Him, empowered by the Holy Spirit to overcome, not just in some cataclysmic future, but in our present, everyday lives. We face daily the temptations to give our hearts to other loves, but our victory is in that cross.

The Roman state controlled the people by giving them *‘bread and games’*. Not much has really changed. In my country, France, the State sets itself up as some providential entity, aiming to meet the needs of all. *‘L’Etat Providence’* is a well known slogan here. Its materialistic, humanistic ideal of solving all mankind’s problems with more *‘bread’* squeezes out God from the agenda. Its velvet glove of tolerance conceals an iron fist for all who would hold to the absolutes of God’s word. It is being deeply tested as I write by its difficulty in dealing with the Covid 19 epidemic. Bread and games bring no healing.

Jesus refused the identity of the first beast, knowing that *“man does not live on bread - or games, alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”*.

He knew that the ‘word’ system was more vital than the world system. Do we?

State religion has always gone arm in arm with the powers that be. All sorts of monstrous wars and abuses have been sanctioned by the ‘temple’. Just throw yourself down, play the ‘miracle game’ right and you will be popular, beautiful and rich. Even the radical ‘stateless’ versions of the temple can still fall prey to the false ideology of bloodless success. The second beast was able to call fire down from heaven. In Elijah’s time, this prophetic ability to call upon the one who answers by fire was a proof of authenticity. ‘The elect’ will indeed have to guard themselves from such powerful, ‘signs and wonders’ deception.

Jesus, confronting this ‘temple deception’, refused this worthless religion of stardom and popularity. He chose the road less travelled by – the way of the cross, not playing for ‘messianic’ popularity, nor forcing His Father’s hand, but entrusting His soul to the one who judges justly, He built a living temple on the foundation of naked faith and sacrifice.

I wonder if Jesus’ mountain view of *“the kingdoms of the world and their splendour”* was not that different to the horrific whore that John saw in Revelation 17 and 18. That harlot is a grotesque antithesis to the bride of Christ. She is greater than the cities of Rome, Babylon and Tyre, the ultimate ethos of materialism and humanistic society – the world. Who can resist a sip from her polluted, golden cup?

Jesus could indeed resist and he knew - as did Satan, that every poisonous sip would lead to the ultimate depravity of turning away from the King of love to worship the lord of the flies.

If you, like so many, have been tempted to drink from ‘broken cisterns’, take courage and be empowered with these victorious words of Jesus who was the first, and last, to see Babylon sink like a stone.

“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”
Matthew 4:10

May it indeed be written for every one of your days.

To Do –

Read Matthew 4:1-11, and John 2:1-25, 4:1-26. Make a short list of the people and things that strive for your worship and allegiance.

Ask – Am I being tempted to give my heart to something other than Christ?

Receive –

1. Power to live beyond bread. Embrace the ‘word system’ and flee the world system.
2. A renewed commitment to sacrificial faith. Embrace the cross of Christ.
3. A hot coal from the Holy Spirit to ignite the flame of Christ-centred worship.

Envision – All the tribes and tongues of the earth worshipping the Lamb.

“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. All the angels were standing round the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying:

“Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” Revelation 7:9-12

Pray – “Praise and glory unto you Lord. I choose to worship and serve you only. Amen.”

What do You Want Me to Do for You?

Week 21

The good fairy waves her magic wand and gives you three wishes.

"I'd like a strawberry ice-cream please."

"I wish my nose was smaller."

Only one wish left and the world is still spinning on its tear-stained axis.

"Oh, let everyone in the world have strawberry ice-cream and small noses!"

Well, with a bit more wit, our hero could have asked for another million wishes. Or he could have turned to prayer, looking at the infinite power of promise in the word of God.

But what on earth do you ask for?

God's promises far outweigh a fairy's wand, but how do I handle the power, choice and responsibility that the promise of prayer gives me? Can I still have lots of strawberry ice-cream or do I now pray for peace in the world at Christmas?

Let's take a look at four people in the Bible who might help us find an answer.

The blind beggar Bartimaeus, the devoted disciples James and John and the glorious king Solomon. All of them had to handle a similar prayer promise.

"Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road." Mark 10:46-52

Bartimaeus had no destination. He had no vision and simply begged an existence from what other people gave him. He eked out a passive life of survival from yesterday's stale crumbs. His asking – or rather begging, was focused on his need to survive and to get through another difficult day.

He needed a new beginning, a fresh call from Jesus. He had the courage to cry out and repent. If you're in your own stale, visionless rut, ask Christ to have mercy on you and get ready to jump up.

“Ok, what do you want,” said Jesus.

“Ain't it obvious? I'm blind!”

It was obvious, but Jesus wanted him to take personal responsibility for his lack of vision and speak out his need in faith. Do you really want to see? Or are you secretly secure in visionless mediocrity? Bartimaeus found his sight and got back on the road. He discovered a desire to obey and found fresh momentum in following Jesus.

Going back a few verses we find James and John.

“Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.” “You don't know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.” When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark10:35-45

Here we see disciples of Jesus praying for position and power. Too much prayer energy is diverted into building individual reputations, rather than saving the lost!

“You do not know what you are asking”, may be the sure reply to many of our competition motivated prayers. A heady presumption, stimulated by unhealthy ambition, blinds us to the suffering and service which our prayers must inevitably own. This ‘personal promotion’ prayer is the world's way of praying and its fruits bring jealousy and division within the body of believers.

Jesus immediately brings the remedy; humble, sacrificial servanthood. Will we end up ‘mercenary ministers’, staking our claim in the ‘Jesus market’ or will we surrender our rights in order to follow our servant King?

Let's move from a servant king to a reigning king. Let's look at Solomon.

“That night God appeared to Solomon and said to him, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” 2 Chronicles 1:7

Solomon gets a great promise. Our knee-jerk reaction responses to such a revelation are found in most prayer meetings and on many Christian television channels. Well, what would you ask for; money, healing, victory or even ice-cream?

*“Solomon answered God, “You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place. Now, LORD God, let your promise to my father David be confirmed, for you have made me king over a people who are as numerous as the dust of the earth. **Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?**” 2 Chronicles 1:8*

This is such an important request. Seek wisdom. The fear of the Lord, a quiet abiding in His Holy Presence, is such a beginning to the incarnation of wisdom in our lives.

Jesus may well have been thinking about this event when He spoke to His disciples about prayer and provision in Matthew 6:29. We are blessed by the exhortation to seek first His kingdom. This kingdom rule has much to do with wisdom. Seek wisdom *“and all these things will be given to you as well”*.

Solomon's heart's desire was for divine wisdom. He wanted a daily cleaving to that relational, incarnated wisdom that cries out in the streets and fashions the earth. Such wisdom was so much more than an accumulation of mere intellectual facts. He desired the giver more than the gifts. This yearning for wisdom released God's pleasure and generosity over his life.

“God said to Solomon, “Since this is your heart's desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches or honour, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, riches and honour, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have.”
2 Chronicles 1:11-12

The ‘wisdom prayer’ opens up the floodgates of heaven’s generosity. It protects us from the imposed priority of a ‘prosperity prayer’ which seeks a ‘thing’ before our King. Wealth, health and victory can be entrusted to such divine intelligence which seeks relationship before provision, and humility before position.

So, here we have it. How do I handle the powerful “yes” of prayer?

Pray with eyes wide open to purpose and vocation. Be sustained and strengthened through obedience to the living word of the Lord.

“Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you.”

Embed your calling to follow Jesus in humble, sacrificial servanthood.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Live in a love relation with wisdom, an intimacy which listens and longs for divine revelation. Seeking first such wisdom will open the storehouse of heaven.

“Since this is your heart's desire...”

To Do –

Read and meditate on the prayer promise of John 14:14

“You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”

Ask – How pure are my prayers? Job 16:17

Receive –

1. Sight for your soul – a fresh vision of your purpose.
2. A servant heart – ask to be where Jesus is.
3. Wisdom – the right relationship with the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Envision – You and your community embracing the full provision of the prayer promise.

Pray – “Rabbi – I want to see.” Ephesians 1:15-21

What is that in your Hand?

Week 22

Successful ministry depends upon inner spiritual authority and depth. It is more about character than charisma. God constantly uses the events of our lives to disciple us into a deeper sense of His inner strength residing in our hearts through grace.

Authority comes through revelation not manipulation.

Exodus chapters 3 and 4 are such Biblical revelations, taking us into the heart of God's dealings with Moses in order to make him a true man of God. It all begins for Moses with a burning revelation of God. However, the 'burning wood' of the bush needed to become the 'held wood' – the staff of authority, in Moses' hand. Let's look at the beginning of Exodus 4:1-9 which gives us some insight into Moses' personal journey towards such spiritual authority. It may well help us on our own personal trek with the Lord.

"What if they do not believe me or listen to me?" v.1

Moses, like many of us, is scared of sharing his revelation. The budding evangelist in our heart is so often silenced because of a basic fear that people will not respond to the Gospel message. We may do more training, conferences, set up prayer houses, and a host of other worthwhile activities, but we risk remaining on the periphery of genuine contact with our target culture. However, we will at some point have to confront the reality of speaking God's word to other people.

"What is that in your hand?" v.2

Begin by accepting what is in your hand. Own your own character and history. Don't fantasise about what you don't have or can't do.

"Throw it down." v.3

There are seasons of abandon, of letting go and laying down our dreams and ministries before the Lord. Times of throwing down the masks and letting Him take the initiative again.

"It became a snake." v.3

What he feared happened. All hell sometimes breaks out! Our very 'ministry' can become hell. Believe me, this does happen. It is such a critical time. Perhaps we come face-to-face with our own sin and weakness, or get a revelation of the evil and danger around us. How will I react?

"He ran from it." v.3

Moses was human. He just wanted out. His knee-jerk reaction was to run. When you want to run, you can be sure that the Lord may have another option.

"Reach out...and take it by the tail." v.4

Face your fears head on. Grasp the nettle of your life. Confront the issues, the problems and the people. Some folks keep running from their fears forever and make a ministry of it! At some time, you have to stop running and reach out in faith to conquer your fears.

Are you a runner or a 'reacher out'?

"It turned back into a staff in his hand." v.4

Moses went from fear to faith. He overcame his fear and reached out in faith. The very fear he ran from became the authority that would open a sea! The ministry that walks by faith through hell gains the authority to speak faith into other people's hell. It lights a way in the 'valley of the shadow of death', encouraging many to walk into freedom.

After learning the principle of faith overcoming fear, Moses gets another lesson on grace.

The revelation of grace is a key to spiritual authority.

"Put your hand inside your cloak." v.6

Moses takes an inward journey to his heart - Mark 7:21, and finds leprosy – an Old Testament image for sin:

"It was leprous like snow." v.6

The great apostle Paul came to the conclusion that he was the worst of sinners. When we truly begin to assess the motivations of our own heart we will also be discouraged by our shortcomings. So, do we remain in leprous introspection and condemnation? Or do we respond anew to the call to repentance and grace?

"Put it back into your cloak." v.7

Respond to grace and plunge your hand back into humble repentance as Naaman plunged into the healing waters of the Jordan. The crimson streams of Christ's Calvary blood can indeed make the foulest clean.

"It was restored." v.7

He breaks the power of cancelled sin! The sin is washed away, and the very condemning power behind the sin is also done away with – '*katageo*', according to the teaching of Romans 6:6-7:

"For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin - because anyone who has died has been freed from sin."

One of Jesus' first miracles was to change water into wine. The last lesson Moses learns here is the principle of water into blood.

*"The water you take from the river will become **blood on the ground.**"* v.9

Jesus' blood soaked the ground of Jerusalem and manifested the spirit of sacrifice. The 'water' of a superficial Christianity is called to become the victorious 'blood' of a life laid upon the altar of service. Does our church have water or blood in its veins?

"They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." Revelation 12:11

So, here we have three principles for growing in spiritual authority.

Overcome fear through faith.

Overcome sin through repentance and grace.

Overcome the devil through sacrifice.

Moses still had his battles. He experienced his own 'personal Passover' in Exodus 4:25 when, before a nation could avoid destruction by putting blood on the doorposts, he had to avoid personal extermination by having blood put on his feet. When we walk in God's purposes, we need to be rigorous in personal holiness, keeping faith with the covenant of grace.

May your staff be true.

To Do –

Read and meditate on the beginnings of Moses ministry in Exodus 4:1-9. Remember and write down some key learning events from your own journey.

Ask – What am I running away from?

Receive –

1. Faith instead of fear – reach out with courage.
2. Grace to heal you from failure.
3. A renewed faith in the blood of Jesus which overcomes all opposition.

Envision – Moses, lifting his staff, defying the waters and seeing a way open up. See a new way opening up for your own life and ministry. Contemplate your authority to blow a hole in all your apparent 'dead ends'. Nothing is finished yet.

Pray – "Lord, you left your disciples with the words – "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Like Moses, let me reach out now and take up my own place in that authority. I speak against every dead end in my life, and proclaim a way through in Jesus' name. Amen."

The Four Cs of Foresee

Week 23

Jesus, speaking about the Pharisees says: *“Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit”*. Matthew 15:14

None of us want to end up in a pit, so we need to be able to clearly see the way forward, or at least be humble enough to follow someone who knows where he is going.

Many churches, missions and businesses insist on the importance of ‘visionary’ leadership.

“What do you see happening in the next 5 years?”

This quest for vision creates pressure on ordinary leaders to come up with a clear word which maps out the future strategy and direction. In its worst form, it can lead people to a frenzied search for the appropriate ‘prophetic word’ to see them through.

This can result in too much emphasis being placed on such ‘prophetic word’ and give undue credence to the lone, prophetic utterance. I encourage prophetic ministry, but we also need discernment. Just because someone proclaims: *“The Lord says,”* or *“I have a picture,”* doesn’t mean we should lap up whatever is delivered.

I’m amazed when, after preaching a living word from the Bible, some people are still waiting to get a ‘ministry’ time. I assumed the ‘ministry’ was already in the proclamation. I am being deliberately provocative, and I would hate to squash any budding prophetic ministries - including my own, but beware of dismissing the carefully crafted sermons for a few shallow predictions. I’m aware that a personal prophecy can bring great encouragement, confirmation, blessing and healing. God seems to come with greater immediacy in a direct, personal word. Some of the difference between prophecy and preaching may be seen in the distinction Greek scholars make between the impact of a ‘rhema’ word for a particular person in a specific situation, compared to the more general framing of the ‘logos’ word.

Having underlined the need for caution, let me now strengthen your gift of prophetic utterance by sharing with you the four Cs to help you ‘foresee’.

Canon

However the word is delivered, it must remain within the scriptural grid already given in the Bible. The most impacting prophetic words often reiterate in word or picture what is already clearly given in Scripture.

In John 6:63, Jesus, contrasting natural effort with spiritual inspiration, says:

“The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”

Could you say the same thing about the words you share? Do you hear anointed words coming to you from the Bible? For a word to be living to others, it must first be living to you. Learn to choose ‘living words’ from the canon of Scripture.

The shepherd boy, David, chose 'smooth stones', long-fashioned in the flowing stream, to be the weapons that destroyed Goliath. Allow the Holy Spirit to wash over the long-meditated words in your heart, so that they become a comfortable part of your Christian being. Your anointed mouth can then be the sling that releases such time-honed treasures into prayer, preaching and prophecy, destroying the lies of the enemy.

Culture

The missionary scholar, Andrew Walls, speaking about the importance of culture, rewrites the beginning of John.

"The Word became flesh and spoke with a Galilean accent."

God speaks your language and knows your culture. He didn't invade this world as an alien, but came in a relevant, cultural context.

Our words must also be clothed in this same cultural relevance. The more monocultural a movement becomes the less effective they are on the global stage. Some of the in-house Christian phrases are totally unintelligible to the unchurched people groups around us. Are we sensitive enough to bring a word in season to different settings? How do we cope with presenting the truth of the Gospel to other cultures and backgrounds?

Character

When I was a little boy, I would often heap huge portions of food onto my plate, only to finish defeated, with half the food left over. My mum would then say:

"Your eyes are bigger than your belly!"

It could also be said that:

"Our words and visions are bigger than our characters."

We have a vision to change the world when we can't even forgive the man next door! Or, as the missionary singer Keith Green used to say:

"Jesus rose from the dead...but you can't even get out of bed!"

In Romans 12:6, Paul talks about *"prophesying...in proportion to his faith."* Are our words in proportion to our godly character? Of course, we must live in grace and gaze at him who can do immeasurably more than all we can hope or imagine, but in doing so, let us not jettison our credibility. Let us avoid becoming mere clanging gongs, devoid of the sacrificial love and commitment so necessary for relevant ministry.

Cairos - Kairos

"The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right" John 7:6

There is a distinction in Greek between the Chronos - time as hours and minutes, and the Kairos - time as an event or opportunity. We need to be sharing our words and visions at the

appropriate moment. Not everything we receive is to be blurted out straight away. Do not be like Jesus' brothers who had no discernment of the Kairos moment.

Allow your dreams the time they need to incubate and hatch.

We seem to be living in a society that is moving faster and faster - a society in which "*any time is right*". It needs courage, discernment and patience to go against the flow and wait for the appropriate moment to speak and act.

These four Cs lead us to the classic understanding of how to handle prophesy.

It comes through *Revelation* - Credo, needs *Interpretation* – Culture plus Character, and careful *Administration* – Character plus Cairos.

So, let us press into these four Cs of foreseeing. Love the word, embrace global cultures, learn to serve and discern the times.

To Do –

Read Jeremiah 23:18, 22, 25-29 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 14:1-5. Write down a prophetic word the Lord is saying to you this week.

Ask – Is this my time to speak?

Receive –

1. Spirit-washed word from the Bible.
2. A deeper tasting of the fruit of love. Empathy for others.
3. Deeper cultural sensitivity. Think out of your box.

Envision – The word of God being like honey on your lips, bringing pleasure, sweetness and sustenance to many around you. Imagine your neighbours and different people groups receiving a specific encouragement from your mouth and hearing about Jesus from you.

Pray – “Lord, I want to grow in the prophetic. I ask you to give me the gift of prophecy and to develop the seeds I already possess. Let me speak to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. I ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.”

The 3D Christian

Week 24

“Have you seen Star Wars in 3D?”

Whatever your preference for 3D films might be, have you ever wondered what a 3D Christian looks like?

In 1 Samuel 22:2, we see a group of 3D followers, gathering around David.

*“All those who were in **D**istress or in **D**ebt or **D**iscontented gathered around him.”*

God is not afraid to take us as we are. As times worsen, many folks may end up qualifying for a place in the *‘Adullam cave training school’*!

Problems weren’t the only thing present in that cave. The anointing of God upon David and his promised destiny were also present. It was this anointing and sense of purpose that transformed a *‘ragtag’* bunch of misfits into *‘mighty warriors’*. 1 Chronicles 11:10-15, gives us a brief biography of some of these soldiers.

So, if you’re feeling a bit 3D this week, renew the anointing and sense of purpose in your life.

In Luke 9:28-31, we find another 3D situation.

Decision

Jesus and His disciples made a quality decision to go:

“Up onto a mountain to pray.” v.28

Language is the gift that God has given to mankind and the highest use of language is to put it into dialogue with God.

Make a deliberate choice to set time apart to pray. In the Old Testament, offerings were made at break of day and at twilight. Why not begin and end each day with a decision to pray?

Divine Identity

“As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of light.” v.29

If you want transformation you will find it in prayer. We sometimes hear phrases about the *‘new face’* of church or mission. Like others, I’m challenged about keeping my ministry relevant in the ever-changing cultural and social context. It’s helpful to read the latest books on the subject, but the only safe way to stay fresh is to get a regular *‘prayer face-lift’*. This is how we stay vibrant.

‘Ontological Inversion’ – No, it’s not a disease! Ontological is a term in theological jargon referring to that which pertains to personhood or essential being. When God created mankind,

he made us spiritual beings. This is our 'ontological distinctiveness'. Let me quote Pastor E. Chan from his book 'Growing Deep in God'.

"We were orientated first as spiritual beings, then as physical beings. While it is true that we relate to the physical world as physical beings, our primary consciousness is in our essential make-up as spiritual beings. However, at the fall of man because of sin - Genesis 3, there was an ontological inversion that took place. We are now 'reversed' in our identity. We see ourselves as physical beings rather than as spiritual beings, and have been existentially warped in this faulty orientation. As material beings, our appetite for spiritual things is radically diminished. Our dependence on God is radically compromised. We become deludedly self-sufficient, egocentric and spiritually blind. We walk around with a false sense of security and superiority. We stop praying. Prayer is theologically significant not for what it can do for us, but for what it can bring us back to! Prayer brings us back to a dependence on God... We have finally come home to God. He is our final quest!"

Prayer takes us back to our happy, heavenly home, revealing our adoption into the divine nature of Christ. Like Moses transfigured face, our very beings can be impregnated with the glory of God's presence so that we might shine like stars in a crooked and depraved generation.

Destiny

"Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure - exodus." v.30

Jesus' life was not divorced from the ancestral inheritance of Israel. His destiny sprung from a 'synergy of generations' - the apostolic and prophetic roots of his national inheritance. These roots had always sustained the messianic purpose of Israel, but now they were given a visual substance as the full glory of the ultimate Messiah was revealed. The man of 'Exodus', who had seen a whole nation come out of the bondage of Egypt into a land of promise through the Red Sea, now considered the even greater miracle of the whole of mankind having the opportunity to be freed from the power of sin through the blood of Jesus. The great prophet, who had called fire down from heaven and defeated the evil of false prophets, was about to envisage the falling of Pentecostal fire on the world to break the bondage of death and Satan.

Our modern world neglects its heroic ancestors. We forget the lessons and legacy of history. In reaction to the older Greek and Roman churches, my own Protestant community is prone to squander the precious spiritual capital which previous generations have faithfully stored up. This 'capital' is found in the word of God but also in the witness of tradition and in those faithful members of the Body of Christ who have been in prayer over generations. Don't be afraid to search for the spiritual sap in your own history in order to be propelled into your future destiny.

Step into your own personal exodus from sin, receive the holy fire from heaven and enter into the kingdom promises that are yours in Christ. Your destiny is freedom and new life.

I'll finish by getting our feet back to the ground with a final 3D flourish!

Everyone has three potential areas of growth.

Devotional

Get over your 'ontological inversion' and renew your love of the word and prayer. Take some timeout for God.

Domestic

The devotional must flow into the reality of loving service and relationships on the family and local front.

Development

What talents and gifts do you need to develop? What new skills or projects might you undertake? Don't let entropy set in. Habit is the great deadener.

May you flourish this week in your 3D self.

To Do -

Read 1 Chronicles 11:10-25. Think of a couple of areas of your life this week which you could develop. Write them down and make realistic goals.

Ask – Am I suffering from Ontological Inversion?

Receive –

1. Time on the mountain.
2. A fresh illumination from your prayers.
3. An 'exodus' from sin and worldliness.

Envision – Jesus shining and communing with a different dimension on that mountain. See yourself rising to a new level of spiritual sensitivity this week.

Pray – “Lord, let me shine for you. Raise me up on wings of eagles, fill me with your Holy Spirit, take me out of the slavery of Egypt and lead me to the promise land you have prepared for me. Amen.”

One Thing

Week 25

“One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”

Psalm 27:4

Is your life and Christian service a success?

Well, having got over the condemnation of that question, we're ready to begin. Most people rate success on outward visible values.

“Am I rich and beautiful? Do I have important relationships and exciting activities?”

The Christian version may begin.

“Am I seeing folks saved? How big is my church and ministry?”

These exterior factors have their place and they are not without importance. However, they possess a very secondary importance to the true criteria for success. Try this as a definition – and proclamation, of true success:

“I am deeply loved by God and in joyous response I love Him back, therefore my life is a success.”

Such success is a hidden, inner value which we need to cultivate and ask for.

John Piper's slogan on the 'Desiring God' website proclaims:

“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.”

This echoes the reply of the traditional Westminster Catechism to the question about the chief goal of man's existence.

“Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

We have so many things cluttered into our busy lives but only one thing is truly necessary to find satisfaction and success.

David was a worshipping, warrior king with many pressing duties and demands. However, he discovered the divine priority and found his true identity, not in his kingly role, but in his intimate relation with the Lord. He learnt to gaze on the beauty of the Lord, thirsting after His love.

“Faith is the gaze of the soul upon a triune God.”

We came upon this quote from Tozer in our 'week 5' winter season, but it is so relevant to the psalmist's passionate 'pursuit of God'.

Let's move from a king to a cook and meditate on the Lord's words to a bustling Martha.

*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about **many things**, but **only one thing is needed**. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."* Luke 10:41-42

It is sometimes necessary to make a deliberate choice to turn away from the "*many things*".

Refuse to build your identity on tasks and duties.

"How painful is it to you when your tasks and duties are taken away or performed by someone else?"

Success is having the authority to discern all the things that really don't need doing in your day. This is what Martin Luther said:

"If I fail to spend two hours in prayer each morning, the devil gets the victory through the day. I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer...He that has prayed well has studied well."

Mary chose to listen to words from the 'King of Love'. Correct listening eliminates the stress of "*many things*".

The success of a listening life is enduring and stable whereas the 'stress success' of 'deaf-to-God doing' is variable and subject to change. Like Mary, we must learn to give priority time to listening at Jesus' feet.

The book of Philippians shows the apostle Paul languishing in jail, a prisoner of Nero. The enemy outside is persecuting him but he is also being hassled from inside the church by those who "*preach Christ out of selfish ambition*", trying to build their own empire on the sacrificial foundations that he had laid down. In his writings, he has much time to meditate on his hardships and failures. However, there is no trace of bitterness in this prison epistle. He couldn't care less about his own 'rights as an apostle' and avoids all the pain of having his identity tied up in his work by stating:

"What does it matter? The important thing is that...Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice." Philippians 1:18

His 'raison d'être' is Christ. This is what inspires the joy which permeates the whole letter. We can learn from his attitude. Instead of getting caught up in a maelstrom of accusations and justifications, why not realise that in the grand perspective of things it really doesn't matter that much.

The key to Paul's success is his unflinching gaze on Christ and his ardent kingdom quest.

*"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. **But one thing I do:** Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* Philippians 3:12-14

Don't get bogged down in your history. Revive the passion of your call and personal destiny.

I woke up one day with these words in my mind:

“Your present must be filled with future possibilities and not sabotaged by the painful memories of the past.”

May a new season start for you this week; may we have the grace to be more focused on Jesus and find fresh momentum in doing the good works that He has prepared for us to do.

One thing – Jesus!

May the love of Christ keep you smiling on the inside.

To Do –

Read Philippians 3:7-14. Make a short list of all the things that give you a sense of status and success in your life.

Ask – What things can I give up or stop doing?

Receive –

1. A fresh gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.
2. Revelation of how successful your life is because you are deeply loved of the Lord.
3. A present filled with future possibilities.

Envision – Mary at Jesus’ feet, listening to His word. See yourself growing in the ability to sit still, taking stock of what really matters and being wooed again by the Word.

Pray – “Lord, I forget what is past, abandoning it to your redemption, grace and providence. Help me to press on into all you have prepared for my life. Amen.”

New Lamps for Old

Week 26

“From Anywhere to Everywhere”

Times are changing rapidly in the world. The recent ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement has shone a piercing light on the need to reconsider ancient paradigms. The following quotations show how two leaders in church and mission are grappling with this change.

“The greatest challenge today for leadership of traditional western missions is to navigate the transition from the historic paradigm of ‘from the West to the rest’ into the not yet fully understood paradigm of ‘from anywhere to everywhere’. This transition is requiring that many consider new organizational structures, revision of policies in personnel and finance, and the morphing of an organizational culture from western to global.” Marv Newell

“We live in a period of transition, on the borderline between a paradigm that no longer satisfies and one that is, to a large extent, still amorphous and opaque...in the field of religion a paradigm shift always means both continuity and change, both faithfulness to the past and boldness to engage the future, both constancy and contingency, both tradition and transformation...Neither extreme reactionary nor excessively revolutionary approaches will help.” David Bosch

In the famous Aladdin story, the sorcerer regains his power by promising Aladdin’s wife, ‘new lamps for old’, convincing her of the superiority of the new over the old and thus possessing the inner ‘spirit’ of the old lamp.

We live in a world where the temptation to simply get rid of the old is growing. ‘New technologies’ and the ‘5G mobile network’ have an almost magical grip on our societies, demanding ever increasing speed of connection.

Traditional world views are under pressure in a society that demands new answers to the old questions about life. Both church and mission are deeply challenged to find new ways of working.

In the face of this Western world quest for the new and youthful, I find it refreshing to step into the ‘worldview’ of Africa where the value of the old is still appreciated.

“An old man who dies, is like a library that burns down,” says a traditional African proverb.

Much of Asia also maintains a high level of respect for the traditional elements of society while, at the same time, leading the way in the development of the new.

It goes without saying that there is always a strong element of culture involved in the way we perceive progress. Even within the family unit we experience tension between the aspirations of a new generation trying to forge their identity within the boundaries of the parental culture.

The great challenge we face is to embrace the new while honouring and retaining what is good in the old. No easy task!

Let me quote two verses.

"The old is better." Luke 5:39 The Greek word *'chrestos'* for 'better' can also be translated good or useful.

"New wine must be poured into new wineskins." Luke 5:38

The old is good and useful, if not always better. It is hard to change established habits and move beyond traditional comfort zones. This verse is a plea to honour the old. Let us not wantonly discard that which has proved good and useful over the years.

New wine needs a place to mature. The youthful dynamic of so much that is new is often immature and in need of suitable new *"wineskins"* that will safely hold and encourage the natural fermentation process. New structures, processes and world views are urgently required to become such wineskins, but our personal capacity and adaptability to receive the 'new' are also important. It is vital that our hearts embrace change and renewal in order to become the *"new wineskins"* needed to build cross-cultural relationships and listen to fresh, effervescent initiatives.

The parable shows us two dangers to avoid.

"No-one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old."

Avoid quick 'patch up' jobs.

Some groups are eager to partner with younger movements, not primarily to help the newer group achieve its own objectives, but simply to save their own aging structures. This will not work in the long term and will lead to pain and tearing in the future with both garments losing out. It is a call to keep the old hands off the new garment.

"And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined." Luke 5:36

Try not to mix the old and new in the same old structure. New worldviews forced into old ways will inevitably create explosions! This is a call for the creation of new wineskins. The desire here is not for the old wineskins to be ruined – they still have plenty of good, mature wine to maintain, but to be clever enough to create new, safe spaces.

A particular kind of leadership is needed at this critical time.

Women and men, who are not desperate to save their own skins by tearing at new opportunities, nor indiscriminately allowing volatile elements to overwhelm them, but who are able to mentor both the new and old from the breadth of their servant hearts.

Matthew 13:52 gives us a fitting conclusion.

"Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

May the storeroom of all our hearts be enlarged.

To Do –

Read Mark 2:21-22. Think about areas in your own life and service this week that are facing the struggle of ‘changing times’.

Ask – How successful am I at managing change?

Receive –

1. Honour for your past contribution – it was good and useful.
2. A ‘new’, enlarged wineskin of the heart.
3. Joy at seeing explosive new wine and colourful new garments.

Envision – Dream of the new structures and expressions of church life as it embraces global and trans-generational beauty. See your own capacity to cross cultures expand.

Pray – “Lord, enable my heart to embrace both continuity and change. Give me a greater faithfulness to the past and a boldness to engage the future. Help me to respect my tradition while being empowered by your Holy Spirit to dynamic transformation, in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Summer – Reaping



Awake! Come! Blow! Spread!

Week 27

“Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread abroad.” Song of Songs 4:16

God is bringing a new intimacy to world mission. The *‘Song of Songs’* brings some prophetic insight into this. New winds, like the ‘new lamps’ we saw previously, are blowing through the world. The nations of the Global South are rising to fulfil their God-given destiny, adding their share of beauty to the bride who is making herself ready.

The text allows us to overhear the lover’s longings for his beloved and, seen symbolically, we can interpret the Lord’s love for His global church. We are challenged to share something of God’s heart, entering into these dynamic prayers.

“Awake!” - A cold wind of indifference has been blowing over ‘the North’. Our passion for Christ slumbers in the once fruitful cradles of Christendom. Yet all is not lost. We still possess the heritage of heartfelt prayers and spiritual revivals which have left their hidden roots in our historic soil. In the same way as a dead man came to life when he fell on Elisha’s bones - 2 Kings 13:21, a fresh vitality can come to us if we wake up and realign with deep-seated, divine purpose. Pray for a new wind of awakening to blow over these lands, unblocking old wells and redeeming ancient dreams.

“Come!” - The warm wind of the South is on its way. This wind represents the millions of *‘11th hour workers’* arising from the Global South nations. This generous wind will blow over the deserts of this world, turning them into living streams of water - Isaiah 43:19. The rugged, old prophet Ezekiel, after talking to the bones in his desolate valley, was asked to prophecy to the four winds. He rose to his full, passionate stature as he echoed the Lord’s own longing voice:

“Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.”
Ezekiel 37:9

Such a prayer released an army and our own struggles, sufferings and deep groaning might also birth more wind-blown battalions.

Although we are always grateful for the extra troops, our missionary vision goes further than our present, earthly struggles. We pray beyond the battle. We pray into eternity where a divine purpose awaits fulfilment. A global bride and a glorified Christ sit down to reign for evermore.

“The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” Revelation 22:17

“Blow!” – The synergy of the north and south winds blowing together will stimulate the sweet fragrance of nations in unity. In 1 Chronicles 12:39, we see a uniting of the diverse tribes of Israel around one goal.

“They came to Hebron fully determined to make David king over all Israel.”

The passion of their purpose was greater than the challenge of their diversity.

May the Lord blow on us afresh, north and south, renewing our desire to see a greater king than David, our servant King Jesus, reigning over all the peoples of the earth.

“Spread your fragrance abroad!” - *“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.”* 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

The world is waiting to smell us. Just as salt needs to retain its ‘saltiness’, we need to retain our fragrance - the fragrance that comes from living a sacrificial life of intimacy with Jesus.

Are we ‘peddlers for profit’ or ‘sincere sent ones’?

Alas, the blight of a false ‘prosperity gospel’ which has profit at its heart, is offering a fierce challenge in some of the emerging mission fields to the sincerity of the simple Gospel message. Isaiah saw the Lord, heard his call and asked the Lord to send him. Let us also engage with the longings of our Lord, enter into the glorious ‘Missio Dei’ and, caught up in the wind of the Spirit, become men and women sent from Him. Impregnated with the fragrance of Christ, may we be the ‘scent’ ones.

To Do –

Read the book, ‘Song of Songs’ in the Bible. Look at all the places in the world this week where the Body of Christ is growing. Choose a country from Asia, Africa or South America where the church is strong and pray for the missionary army to ‘come’.

Ask – Where is revival buried in my own life and land? How can I realign with this blessing?

Receive –

1. A fresh passion for your missionary purpose.
2. The fragrance of Christ upon you to be a ‘scent’ one.
3. A sense of belonging in the global goal to make Jesus King of the world.

Envision – See the global armies rising in all their cultural diversity and bridal beauty.

Pray – “Let us awake, let the armies come. May we blow blessing to the nations and send forth the fragrance of salvation, in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

Fat and Perfumed

Week 28

“In that day their burden will be lifted from your shoulders, their yoke from your neck; the yoke will be broken because you have grown so fat.” Isaiah 10:27

“You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox; fine oils have been poured upon me.” Psalm 92:10

The people of God are beautiful when they worship Christ, feasting on His word and perfumed in prayer. The Lord longs to take us, his beloved bride, into a deeper anointing. Like a car that comes in for an oil change, the Holy One is filling us with a fresh dynamic. We are maturing, throwing off the old yokes that have chafed. We receive healing and comfort, looking forward to the wide spaces of opportunity that a new yoking with our Beloved offers to us.

King David grew into the anointing. This ‘warrior-poet, lover-prophet’ models for us several aspects of our history and future destiny in Christ. He was anointed three times in his life. With each fresh touch of God, the anointing drew him into deeper conflict with the enemy. As the classic phrase says:

“Higher levels, new devils!”

We shall take a look at these three moments of anointing, as they mirror principles that we are called to practice.

1. The ‘disciple’ anointing of a young man – 1 Samuel chapters 16 and 17

“So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power.” 1 Samuel 16:13

We are all ‘born again’ into this anointing. God looks at our heart, not our external qualifications. We learn to love God's word and meditate on His precepts. We strive in prayer and are touched by joy in intimacy and worship. We smooth our pebbles in the river of revelation and store them as vital weapons in our heart for the coming kingdom conflicts. We are called to be those who get up early, winning the daily blanket battle, to pray for the nations; those who give and serve sacrificially, refusing the passive life of unbelief. We may be called to travel long distances, driving miles and trekking together to adventure and challenge. We face our Goliaths, the personal fears and temptations, the crucifying choices, and we get the victory which sets us free to enjoy God's Holiness. We receive the generous gift of life and strive to pass it on to each new generation.

2. The ‘building’ anointing of gathering a tribe – 2 Samuel chapter 2

“Then the men of Judah came to Hebron and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah.” 2 Samuel 2:4

At some point, we need to have a track record of having actually built something. We are not just called to individual fulfilment, but rather to the greater challenge of building a family, a team and a church. Any who have put their hands to the plough in this will know that it takes time and effort, with many tears on the way. Whenever you look to join a few people together you will confront one of the greatest challenges of the enemy – the spirit of division. Brother

against brother. Back stabbing, rejection, hurt and betrayal are all part of the enemy's demonic cocktail designed to destroy the Body of Christ. We may risk falling in our very own “*field of daggers – Helkath Hazzurim*”. May God help us overcome all forms of division, strengthening our determination to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace by speaking the truth in love. Faced with the challenge of re-evangelising Europe and with the vast unreached swathes of the world, let us commit ourselves afresh to the long haul of digging in and building brick by brick.

3. The ‘Hebron Alliance’ anointing of many tribes – 2 Samuel chapter 5

“When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a compact with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.”

2 Samuel 5:3

The Lord is underlining this aspect of our anointing to the church today as we see the rise and tremendous growth of the Global South churches. We overhear the prayers of mighty African, Asian and South American Christians and we feel humbly led to ask for a greater understanding of how to move on, shoulder to shoulder with our brothers, to proclaim Jesus as King of all the earth.

We cannot underestimate the battle and we will enter many valleys of ‘giants’ – ‘*Rephaim*’. However, the Lord is with us in the conflict. He has already given us victory. We will know a fresh ‘*breaking out*’ of supernatural power to overcome the enemy, see souls saved and nurtured in the church family as we step forward in faith.

“As waters break out the Lord has broken out against my enemies before me.” 2 Samuel 5:20

Let us seek to develop and strengthen strategic partnerships with indigenous church and mission groupings. Like David, we will need to enquire much of the Lord to understand his unique, creative way of bringing the victory in each situation. However, one thing is sure.

Missionary ‘*armies*’ are marching!

We need to hear their steps and rapidly reposition our resources in order to share in the coming victory.

“As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, move quickly, because that will mean that the Lord has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine enemy.” 2 Samuel 5:24

The ‘balsam tree’- *baw-kaw* in Hebrew, means the ‘*weeping tree*’. As we come to terms with the real prospect of martyrdom and the suffering that these armies will gloriously endure, our tears will surely flow with theirs.

There is only one true Holy Spirit anointing which glorifies Christ in our lives. However, the Lord has given us, in that one ‘*Christening*’, the call to be and make disciples, to build teams and churches, and to develop and partner with mission movements from many nations.

Christ's life knew the anointing at baptism which led him to the conflict in the desert. He endured the ‘baptism of the cross’ where he was pierced for our transgressions in his own ‘*Helkath Hazzurim*’. He sent forth His Holy Spirit on the glorious day of Pentecost, when His resurrection life was given to the church. The noise of rushing wind has become a symphony

of marching feet as generations of happy missionary wanderers from all nations work together to make Jesus King of the world.

Let us be encouraged and step into all that the Lord has on offer to our faith in the days to come.

Be fat and perfumed in the anointing!

To Do –

Read 1 Samuel 16 and 17, 2 Samuel 2 and 2 Samuel 5. Meditate on these three moments of anointing for king David.

Ask – In what areas do I need a fresh anointing on my life?

Receive –

1. Discipleship anointing – love of word and worship.
2. Strength to build community in your family and church. Overcome division with Calvary love.
3. Intuition to be lead to strategic cross-cultural friends and partners.

Envision – The holy anointing oil running down David's head. Psalm 133 speaks of the same oil running down over the high priest Aaron's beard and clothes. Imagine your own life drenched with the precious oil of love.

Pray – “Come Holy Spirit, anoint me afresh and drench me in your love. Amen.”

He Said, I Said, Perfect Love

Week 29

Who do you listen to the most? What sounds and images model your mind? In the depth of the night, as you listen in semi-slumber to your inner soul, what rises to fill your dreams or inhabit your nightmares?

We humans are complicated psychological beings. It's amazing how many things we can find to distort our perceptions on life and bring us to discouragement and needless fear. The Lord is constantly calling His people to listen to Him so that they can come back to a true perspective on things.

In Isaiah 49:3 the Lord calls His people:

“He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour.”

However, the years of suffering and the yoke of bondage have deadened this joyous vocation. This promise of empowerment lies entombed under the following discouraged declaration:

“But I said, “I have laboured to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing...” v.4

Despite the conviction of a future *“reward in the Lord's hand”* v.4, the people have lost their sense of destiny. They are tired, fruitless failures. In many senses, they are simply speaking the truth of their present experience. They need to once again hear the words and commissioning of the Lord from the verses 5-13, which follow.

The heart of these words is in verse 6:

“He says: It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Let us turn away from our own negative experiences and cleave afresh to the living words of the Lord which catapult us into our destiny as a people of light.

The wound of despair and rejection runs deep, and in verse 14 we find another broken-hearted cry:

“But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.”

Jesus experienced the same desolation on our behalf as he hung, broken and forsaken, on the cross. Painful experiences are inevitable as we pioneer the paths of life. However, in the midst of our sense of abandonment, we need to hear the one voice which speaks ultimate truth, leading us to resurrection and love.

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands...” v.15-16

God's overwhelming love always triumphs and we need to receive this love which is cradled in the heavenly words overheard in Biblical meditation. Make space in your life for grace by creating such an environment of patient listening.

Why not make Isaiah 50:4 a lifelong habit?

"He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught."

A successful campaign encourages many in the church to be praying for the Muslims in the month of Ramadan. There are some good booklets published for this. As I began to pray during one specific season, I found myself troubled. My heart was not right. I was shocked to discover that, even after decades of encouraging folks to 'love' Muslims, my own missionary heart was dulled in this respect.

Years of travail without much fruit, coupled with an underlying distrust and fear, had robbed me of genuine love.

I cried out to the Lord and, over the following days, I meditated the precious verses from 1 John 4:18.

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear."

My own love is so imperfect and limited. It has no power to break the bondage of fear. Only a crucifixion of self and a grace-filled abandonment to Christ can infuse us with the free gift of His perfect love.

Love in this context is the sacrificial 'agape' love which gives itself wholeheartedly. It is all about a costly act of the will rather than a nice feeling. The word 'perfect' comes from the Greek word, 'telos', which means goal or destiny.

Sacrificial love with a purpose casts out fear!

Jesus incarnated this 'love with a purpose' as he set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem and die a cruel death on a wooden cross.

We are also called, as His Body on earth, to play our part in this love with a purpose.

I was recently challenged by the testimony of a young Frenchman. He said:

"Every moment that is not lived for someone else is a wasted moment."

I'm still thinking about that.

Let's make every moment count by turning to God in prayer and to our neighbour in service.

Let us overhear our heavenly commission:

"I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

To Do –

Read Isaiah 49. Make a short list of any ‘dark’ places within your immediate area of geographical, social and spiritual influence. Pray out your vocation to be a light into these areas, from Isaiah 49:6, every day of this week.

Ask – Am I a good listener? Do my ears need a ‘wake-up’ call? Isaiah 50:4

Receive –

1. The ability to hear deeply on the inside that you are not forsaken and useless, but deeply loved – engraved on the palms of Christ’s crucified hands.
2. Perfect love which drives out fear.
3. An influx of Christ’s truth into your life to make you a presence of light in the dark places.

Envision – See the dark places of your past being illuminated by Christ’s presence. His eternal redemption and providence brighten every memory.

Pray – “Lord, I hear and embrace my vocation. I turn away from failure and rejection. I follow your holy steps to become a light to the nations. I proclaim this in the name of Jesus. Amen.”

The Goal of Intimacy

Week 30

“David longed for water and said, “Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!” 1 Chronicles 11:17

How does a pioneer work begin? What are the staff qualifications and what do the facilities look like?

We already gleaned a hint of the answer in ‘Week 24’ when we saw the 3D pioneer teams gaining their vital 3D qualifications.

1 Samuel 22: 1-2 shows us David is running from Saul and having to make a new start. His first ‘mission's base’ is a cave called Adullam! A team of folks are drawn to him. At first glance, they do not seem to be the most promising of people. As we saw earlier, they all had three Ds to their name.

*“All those who were in **distress** or in **debt** or **discontented** gathered around him and he became their leader.”*

Distress, debt and discontent also make you more **desperate** for God. God uses desperate people! The superficially successful ‘beautiful people’ never really change the world.

Team life may be a bit stressful with such a group of folks! You have a cave, people in debt, distressed, discontented; and something else. You have David's holy anointing! You have God's heart, vision and passion residing in the cave as well. This is a transforming anointing. It changes 3D Christians into ‘mighty men and women’. You might have a cave of problems but you will make it through if you have the passion and purpose of the ‘Jesus’ anointing with you.

1 Chronicles 11:10-47, shows us how these desperate folks were transformed into mighty warriors. One of the keys to such transformation is intimacy with the king. Our intimacy with ‘King Jesus’ will effect positive change in our lives.

Some of David's key men were so sensitive to the king's heart that they could hear his longings. The Philistine garrison had occupied Bethlehem, making it enemy territory. So what was David's longing? What indeed is the longing of Christ?

He is thirsty to drink water from the wells of occupied lands

It is a missionary longing, a longing to see the living water of life springing up in the occupied hearts of the nations. Jesus longs to drink living water from Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu hearts.

Like the three mighty men, our intimacy with Christ, if it is genuine, must lead us to heed His Apostolic passion.

This ‘hearing’ of longing goaded them into concrete action and adventure.

“So the Three broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem and carried it back to David.” 1 Chronicles 11:18

True intimacy leads to breakthrough

True intimacy inspires courageous action, apathy is vanquished and ‘breakthrough’ prayer rises from faith-filled hearts. People become ‘risk takers’, fear is cast out and bold projects in enemy territory are undertaken.

Superficial intimacy lacks missionary passion. At its worst, it spawns endless gatherings of the enthusiastic, meeting in well-heeled halls of prosperity. Soaking in the selfish world of an unreal comfort zone, it never takes an inch of territory in the real world. The ‘bridal paradigm’ becomes an impotent wedding – the hotel was nice, the beach pleasant, the food good, but no real action at bedtime.

True intimacy leads to personal sacrifice and ‘risk’

“Because they risked their lives to bring it back...” 1 Chronicles 11:19

The three mighty men undertook bold action in a dangerous place which could have cost them their lives. The longing of their king inspired their wild dream. They lived on the edge, enjoying the fellowship of the bold and the ‘sold out’.

True intimacy leads to ‘poured out’ worship

“But he refused to drink it; instead he poured it out before the LORD.” 1 Chronicles 11:18

All the glory of the missionary endeavour of the church goes to Christ. No prominent heroes; only prostrate worshippers.

The goal of intimacy is to overhear the longings of Jesus to ‘drink’ from occupied lands. Intimacy will give us a missionary heart, willing to take risks to satisfy our King.

Jesus also longs to drink from the well of your own heart. Guard your heart from becoming occupied by the enemy through sin and unbelief. Come close to Him and breakthrough into fresh anointing and grace. Allow Him to drink more deeply in your own life.

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” John 7:37-38

May new streams of worship and love pour forth from you this week to satisfy the thirst of your King, Jesus.

I wish you a very happy ‘bridal paradigm’.

Enjoy your intimacy and take territory!

To Do –

Read 1 Chronicles 11:16-20. Following on from last week's prayer to be 'light', think about any 'occupied lands' that need taking back for the King. Go to a quiet place and try to hear the longings of Jesus for specific areas around you. They might be specific towns or villages, people, family members or even areas of your own heart that need conquering for Christ.

Ask – Is my relationship with you Jesus producing missionary endeavour in my life?

Receive –

1. The 'longing' of Christ in your heart to drink from 'occupied areas'.
2. Boldness to act and take risks.
3. Fresh streams of love and worship.

Envision – The church's worship leading to an increased involvement with global mission.

Pray – "Dear Lord, let me overhear you longings for a lost world. Amen."

D.O.E.R.

Week 31

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” James 1:22

James instructs us to be more than passive listeners. He wants action. He wants doers! There is a time when the talking has to stop and the concrete actions begin.

How can we become successful doers of the word? Here, I hope, is an inspired acrostic.

Dreams

We must work from our dreams and not simply from duty.

“Tell me your dreams”, said Joseph in Genesis 40:8. The Holy Spirit may be asking us the same question. So many times, we are overwhelmed by the immensity of our problems. They seem to develop into huge mountains which block our vision and suck away our strength. We need to shrink these mountains of problems to dots by allowing our dreams and visions to take their place on the inner horizon of our hearts. You might want to refresh your dreams by re-reading the devotional of *‘Week 7’*.

Origins

“Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” Acts 5:38

We must spend quality time discerning the origins of our actions. Anything manufactured solely out of man's money or ingenuity will ultimately fail. The wreckage of ‘humanistic endeavour’ without God fills the history of Christendom. If we do not take the time to seek out God's word and ways we will pay a greater price later on, trying to shore up man-initiated works against the eventual tide of God's judgment. All too many aggressive appeals for finance are based on the consequence of this failure to truly discern God's initiative in an enterprise.

When we get our origins right we are onto a winner! Work from God is unstoppable. This gives us hope to launch out in faith, and courage to pursue our calling, even if it leads us to some of the most dangerous and inhospitable places on earth. God Himself will defend and fight for His purposes. The apostle John expresses this same principle in other terms.

“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” John 3:6

Ekballo

*“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out – **ekballo**, workers into his harvest field.” Luke 10:1-2*

Jesus was so overwhelmed by the spectacle of the harassed and helpless crowds, milling about without hope, that He urgently summoned the use of prayer to see workers ‘thrust out’ into the harvest fields. The word Jesus used here, ‘ekballo’, is very strong. It is the same word that

is used to 'cast out' demons or 'chase out' the thieves from the temple. Jesus is not being a nice, English gentleman, politely hinting:

"Would you mind being sent?"

Welling up from of His desperate compassion, He is saying:

"Get out of your comfort zone!"

Many folks have lost their passion for souls because they have got stuck in a rut of comfort and habit. Even ministers and missionaries can get caught up in going through the motions of Christian work without really engaging with the crisis of the crowds. If this is the case, we need to stir ourselves up and take on the uncomfortable challenge of connecting with the crowds again. Dare we allow ourselves to be kicked out of our complacency and reconnected to the uncomfortable reality of the world around us? True 'doers' need the kick of '*ekballo*'.

Peter needed an '*ekballo*' vision of a reptile-filled table cloth to take him out of his cultural prejudice and thrust him into the home of Cornelius. Ananias needed an '*ekballo*' from the Lord to take him through his fear barrier so he could lay hands on his so-called 'enemy', Saul of Tarsus. In Acts 8, the whole church needed the '*ekballo*' of persecution in order to fulfil the command to 'go' to the nations.

What kind of '*ekballo*' will it take for us to change?

Refreshment and Restoration

*"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that **times of refreshing** may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to **restore everything**, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets."* Acts 3: 19-21

If you are going to be a long term 'doer' you will need times of refreshing and restoration. Keep yourself God-centred through the gift of repentance. Don't be like Samson who didn't even realize that his strength was gone until it was too late. Keep turning to God in prayer and worship. A long distance runner often needs a 'second wind' in his race. The rare Greek word used here for refreshment – '*Anapsuxis*', means a recovery of breath, a cooling and reviving with fresh air.

Doing will involve losing sometimes. Our lives and loves will encounter a cross on the highway. The thief does indeed come to kill, destroy and steal. In such times, we need to remember that our 'painful doing' is only a pale reflection of God's chosen 'loss' as He worked redemption through the giving of His Son to save us all. The mystery of missional suffering makes us partners with God in His ultimate 'doing'.

In our action we can look ahead to God's final victory when, through Jesus, He will restore everything. With another rare Greek word – '*Apokatastasis*', which denotes a complete restoration of health or the restoring to its place of a dislocated joint, the biblical text is encouraging us to believe and work for the healing of the world.

We are certain that this will be fully achieved at Christ's return but, as it says in Hebrews 6:5, we can already taste the "*powers of the coming age*", breaking into our world as we believe for restoration and healing in our own personal and national situations.

May you be refreshed and restored as you read these lines and able to persevere in your doing of good works for the Lord and His Kingdom.

So, enough talking, enough meetings, enough conferences - just do it!

To Do –

Read James 1:1-27. As the title for this week suggests, think of any projects or good ideas you might have had or heard about recently. How many of such projects are actually being done?

Ask – Do I need an ‘ekballo’?

Receive –

1. A reinvigorated dream.
2. A rerooting in God’s original purpose for your life.
3. Refreshment and restoration from the Holy Spirit.

Envision – Words becoming actions.

Pray – “Father, may everything I do begin with your inspiration. Redeem my dreams, touch my lips anew with fire from your altar and send me into the world to do the works you have prepared in advance for me, in Jesus’ name, Amen.”

If Only You Knew

Week 32

Jesus was on a journey to Jerusalem. It was His goal and glory. We also have our own personal journeys and goals. Like Jesus, we may end up being rejected and misunderstood by the very people we are reaching out to. We may encounter the same resistance – within and without, to the Lord's purpose for our lives.

On arriving at His goal, he made two powerful proclamations over the city, cries from a holy heart which help us to interpret our own realities.

*“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, **“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.”** Luke 19:41-44*

Jesus wasn't a man of theory. He was directly, painfully involved in the cosmic drama in which He was playing a lead role. It was difficult for Him to see the unbelief of His beloved people. He shed tears.

Many solutions are offered in our modern world to give people peace. Only a deep, intimate relation with Jesus Christ can bring us true peace.

“If only they knew”, we cry and pray.

“If only we knew” as well. Are we able to hold that true ‘peace’ in Christ when challenged by tragedy and failure? Does a veil of legalistic religion separate us from such ‘shalom’?

The apostle Paul spoke about a ‘veil’ which covered the revelation of Christ from the chosen people. Sometimes, we also find that our true peace is ‘hidden’ under the same kind of veil. The solution is to turn our eyes afresh to Christ.

*“We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. **But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.** Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 3:13-18*

Jesus' second proclamation represents the tragedy of a missed opportunity.

The ‘*kairos*’ moment had come. The long awaited advent of the Messiah had dawned, and yet the opportunity was scorned and missed! It is so important that every veil of unbelief be torn away from our hearts so that we do not suffer this same tragic fate of missing the moment that God sends our way. Pray that the families, peoples and nations we live amongst might also

come free from veils of deception and recognize God's opportunity for grace and transformation.

The parallel passage in Matthew gives another aspect to this.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”
Matthew 23:37-39

Jesus expresses His longing to gather people to Himself. Intimacy with the Lord will lead us to share this same longing to love our friends and neighbours. After two thousand years of divine longing, surely the time is coming for such a heartfelt desire to be fulfilled; the time to be praying for a ‘gathering’ of Israel to their Messiah, but also the time to be praying for a gathering of many nations to the Lord.

Christ uses the beautiful image of a mother hen gathering her chicks. This was an important concept in Jewish tradition and, apart from reflecting the feminine side of God’s caring character, it was also a metaphor for those who joined the house of Israel to become true followers of the Lord. The story of Ruth is an example of this. 2:12:

“May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” Ruth 2:12

Here are some more encouraging verses on being covered.

“He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.” Psalm 91:4

“Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.” Psalm 57:1

“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.” Malachi 4:2

These words express the wonderful opportunity that is being offered to the world - the chance to be gathered to a place of love, healing and security. We carry an innate desire to be gathered. Little chicks hurry to the safety of their mother's wings and tiny babies hold out their hands in gleeful anticipation of being lifted to a nourishing breast.

Tragically, Jesus’ offer is doubly refused in this Jerusalem context. The first refusal was due to a veil of unbelief and legalistic religion. This second refusal is based on a supernatural, demonic stubbornness - a spirit of rebellion.

“You were not willing.”

May the Lord never have to say such a tragic phrase over our own lives, as we seek to overcome our own selfish ways and come to Him.

Rebellious ways will always lead to a place of empty desolation. Submitting to the loving wings, turning around to be gathered to God's way, will lead to a life of celebration.

Let us respond to Jesus' love by crying out:

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Let us pray that the stubborn rebellion of peoples and nations will be broken and that they may submit to be gathered to Christ in their own cultural contexts. May they hear the Gospel in their own accents and find refuge under the forgiving wings of Jesus.

"How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings."

Jesus calls us to the shelter of His protecting wings. He calls us to the safety of His arms stretched out for us on the cross. He calls us to trust Him, no matter what our fears, hurts, or troubles; to trust that His outstretched arms are strong enough, His wings broad enough to keep us safe. And in the shadow of those wings we are saved.

The power of the cross tears away the veil of unbelief and bends our wayward, rebellious wills, leading us to that place of security and love.

To Do –

Read Luke 19:41-44. Think of some of the missed opportunities over the last seasons of your life. Move on. Jesus is with you, inviting you to recognise a new season of opportunity. With the help of the Holy Spirit, write down some of the new beginnings you perceive.

Ask – Am I willing?

Receive –

1. Fresh faith as the veil of unbelief is torn away.
2. Submission through the gift of repentance.
3. A safe place, gathered under His wings.

Envision – Rebellious friends and family members being gathered to Christ, bending their wills to receive His love and forgiveness.

Pray – "Yes Lord, may my friends and family feel the warmth of your healing wings. May they seize the opportunity and may every rebellious spirit be broken in Jesus' name. Amen."

No-One Has Hired Us!

Week 33

I've always been inspired by the parable in Matthew 20:1-16 which talks about the workers in the vineyard. It is encouraging to see how, throughout the ages, the great 'landowner' has been pursuing His purpose of sending out workers into the harvest field. David Bosch, in his classic book 'Transforming Mission', presents different paradigms of mission throughout the ages. Here is a brief summary of the 6 different periods of mission he develops, with a few dates, comments and references designed to sum up the essential idea of each age.

- The Apocalyptic paradigm of primitive Christianity – Jesus is coming back.
- The Hellenistic paradigm of the patristic period. 313 AD – Edict of Milan – Principle of Theosis - God becoming man, so man might aspire to God. – John 3:16.
- The Medieval Roman Catholic paradigm. Latin language. 600 – 1500 - Luke 14:23 – *"Compel them to come in"*. Individualisation and Ecclesiasticisation of salvation.
- The Protestant Reformation paradigm. 1517 – Wittenberg – Romans 1:16
- The Modern Enlightenment paradigm. 1700 Newton - 1750 Voltaire
- The Emerging Ecumenical paradigm. After 2000 – Death of modernism.

So for Bosch, the *"emerging ecumenical paradigm"* or 'postmodern' period, would perhaps equate to our 'eleventh hour' in the parable.

God is bringing to birth new missionary movements from the four corners of the earth to facilitate the task of gathering the harvest. A prophetic word, given during a prayer vigil held in Jerusalem many years ago in May 1989, contains an encouraging confirmation of the pioneer purpose that is in God's heart.

"Today is the time of harvest and ingathering, a time when the Spirit is being poured out upon all flesh in these last days... Through the centuries, he has called workers into his fields and has promised that they are worthy of their hire... These have indeed borne the burden and the heat of the day. And still, the harvest is not finished.

Now, the Lord says, I will send to work at your sides, eleventh hour workers, those who have been idle because no man would hire them... This army of workers will be mostly young people who will go forth to proclaim the gospel without fear or compromise... They will come from the nations and peoples that you least expect. They are a great company that you do not know at this time, but the Lord is preparing them even now...

You must pray for and welcome these eleventh hour workers that I will give to you. You must not be jealous of them, but rejoice at the reward that I will give them – for they were willing to come at the last hour – and without them, the harvest would not be complete."

That word came over thirty years ago. The world is a different place now, and the church has indeed seen a rise in the number of missionaries from the Global South. However, the challenge of genuinely empowering the eleventh hour workers remains. We find it so hard to break out of the beloved 'paradigms' of the 8th, 9th and tenth hour. Past waves seem to be coming to an end and we find it hard to catch the new one!

I was recently teaching at a well-known Bible school which had only been able to recruit a few students. Many mission agencies are also reporting record low numbers in new candidates and immense financial challenges. I know that this may not be the same story

everywhere, but there seems to be a mismatch between the present needs and the available workforce.

At the ‘eleventh hour’ the workers were abundant, but redundant!

“Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” v.6

Their reply may be God’s word to us at this time.

“No-one has hired us.” v.7

No context had been created to link the tenth hour to the eleventh. A ‘paradigm shift’ is needed.

We are called to create a context for the next generation of young, eleventh hour workers.

I can think of three pioneer areas which might begin to knit together a context to release the full potential of these end-time labourers.

- Missional business.
- International partnership and mentoring contexts for the emerging missions in the Global South.
- Vibrant prayer and worship communities.

Great progress is being made in the domain of ‘Business as Mission’ and the prayer movements. Platforms of missionary mentoring, where the experience of the West meets the youth of the ‘rest’, are also being nurtured. All this can help and encourage, but the fundamental factor of growth for every new worker will be a revelation of the privilege of bearing, *“the burden of the work and the heat of the day”*.

Our reward is the sharing in the sufferings of Christ - Romans 8:17. If we lose sight of Him, our glory, we will quickly slip into legalism and grumbling. The work will become heavy and joyless, rather than a glorious celebration of Christ’s ultimate victory over sin and death. Christ was the first and last - Revelation 1:8, the first worker at the Father’s side in creation and the last worker returning for the heavenly harvest. He fills up each hour with His life and the gift of Himself. To see who truly bore the burden of the work and the heat of the day we need only to look to that naked figure, nailed to a wooden cross under the hot Palestinian sun, bearing the sin of the world and the heat of hell upon His shoulders. No grumbling for him! Rather, the glad accomplishment of the heavenly mission.

“For the joy set before Him, he endured the cross and scorned its shame.” Hebrews 12:2

His joy was in seeing the host of workers who were being raised up to follow Him. His prophetic joy was a vision of the emerging missionary communities – the Ethiopian, Brazilian, Chinese and Korean labourers. His joy is in us! Perhaps, we feel last as a person or a nation, but God wants to make us first in our desire to witness and glorify Him. We may be the last in a long history of missionary movements, but perhaps we may well be the first to usher in the return of the King!

“The last will be first, and the first will be last.” v.16

Many years ago, my wife was pregnant with our third child. As the bump grew bigger, I asked the Lord to give me a prayer of blessing for the future life. I laid hands on the yet unborn child

and heard the Lord give me the verses from Matthew 20:1-16. Could there be a greater blessing than being a worker for God and inheriting the glory of Christ.

“Oh God, please let there be some work left for her as she grows up! Give her the joy of serving you as a child of the eleventh hour.”

My daughter is now nearly thirty and successfully promoting Christ in the paradigm of Business as Mission. In the same way, may God give the emerging nations of this world - may He give you, the joy of being eleventh hour workers in His harvest field.

“You also go and work in my vineyard.” Matthew 20:7

To Do –

Why not deepen your grip on history this week? Look at Bosch’s six paradigms of mission and, as you feel led, do some of your own research on the areas that interest you.

Ask – Where is my vineyard - that place where I might gather some fruit?

Receive –

1. The blessing to become an eleventh hour worker.
2. The supernatural joy of bearing the burdens of responsibility and the heat of the battle.
3. The gift of fellowship with the emerging missionary movements around the world.

Envision – New contexts of prayer, business and mentoring emerging across the church.

Pray – “Lord, sometimes I feel like no-one has hired me. My talents and energy are not being fully used. Open my eyes and give me courage, so that I may step into the new context that you are creating. Empower me to go and work in your vineyard. Amen.”

Praying for the Harvest

Week 34

God wants us to take up prayer as a key to missionary breakthrough. He longs for us to look beyond our own problems and see the potential of peoples.

Matthew 8:25-26 reveals how most of us are used to praying.

Let's call it, '**panic praying**'.

Often, it's the only prayer that ever rises from the church, for without a crisis or problem to inspire us, we remain prayerless! Anyway, the boat begins to fill up and the storm is raging overhead. All eyes are on the problem. A prayer rises out of the disciples' basic instinct for survival:

"Lord, save us!" v.25

This is as good as it gets for many of us. **Save me! Help me! Bless me!** As their eyes are fixed more and more on the storm, the prayer becomes prophetically negative.

"We are going to drown!" v.25

Their prayer is being inspired more by the spirit of death than by the Holy Spirit. I'll leave each one of you to judge which spirit inspires your own prayer meetings. Unfortunately, too many prayer meetings focus on the problem, hence risking the danger of praying out negative statements over the peoples and places concerned.

Jesus hears the request, as He hears all our words. He hears more than the words, He hears the spirit and motivation behind them. With cutting discernment, He succinctly summarizes the spirit behind their request:

"He replied: You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" v.26

Here we have it. **Unbelief** and **Fear**, the two foundations on which our 'panic praying' is based. Focussing on the problem always leads us into such faithless attributes. We need to turn away from the unenlightened urgent, giving space for Jesus and His word to fill our hearts, until we find faith and boldness rising to change our perspective.

We all know what it's like when the water starts filling our boats. We get that 'sinking feeling' inside and want to pour it all out in prayer. However, before pushing the panic button, look to Jesus, "*sleeping*" in peace as the waves rage. Try to silence the inner urgency, finding rest in Him. Discover the inner 'snooze of faith' in the midst of that sinking feeling. Let Christ's quiet sleep inspire faith in your heart. Take time to contemplate His power and authority rather than your own weakness and problem. Let Him rebuke the waves and the wind, the earthly and the spiritual powers, and bring the calm.

Don't 'panic pray' the problem, but look to the serene authority of Jesus. Then pray.

The home of Mary and Martha, in Luke 10:40-41, gives us more insight into the way we pray.

This time, we'll call it **'worry prayer'**.

Folk relate well to Martha, and we need to honour those with servant hearts and practical gifting. However, in this particular incident, Martha proved herself to be quite a formidable character.

First of all, she wasn't thinking straight. She launched into the 'prayer' - talking to Jesus, *"distracted by all the preparations that had to be made"*. v.40

How many prayers die before they even begin because of **distraction**? It comes as no surprise that Jesus went to the quiet, desert places to pray – Mark 1:35. He taught his disciples to shut the door of the hidden chamber in order to find a place far from distraction – Matthew 6:6.

The place of inner calmness, even if the outside is bustling, is the place where prayer begins.

Anyway, Martha is getting more and more agitated and, as the deadlines approach and she imagines the guests arriving, she blurts out.

"Lord, don't you care?" v.40

Fancy that! Accusing Jesus of not caring.

The distraction and agitation have given her a completely erroneous view of the Lord. She begins to lose sight of His love and compassion. This happens to us all in the face of fatigue, weariness and advancing deadlines. We may not be as direct as Martha, but the hurt is there in our prayer, accusing Jesus of not caring. True prayer can only be birthed when we arrive at that place of knowing God's total commitment and compassion for a world of people. He may not care so much about our own selfish agendas!

"My sister has left me to do the work." v.40

She accuses her sister next!

'Worry prayers' are marked by their spirit of **accusation**, no matter how religiously veiled they may be. Martha was focused on the work, whereas her sister was focused on the word. The key to successful prayer is to abandon the world system for the word system. Get the 'I' (hell?) out of your world.

Don't let yourself get too consumed by the task, which will only lead to worry. Be listening to the word of God instead, which will lead us to Jesus' feet!

"By myself." v.40

Martha is now expressing the spirit of **self-pity**.

Looking only at the work has given her a false sense of martyrdom. Somewhere inside, she is wounded with rejection. This shows itself in the desperate plea for help. Many missionaries, pastors and servants of the Lord, like Martha, pray out of their feelings of frustration and loneliness. We long for more 'workers', but our asking is based on worry, need and a sense of getting an 'uncaring' Jesus to act on our behalf.

"Tell her to help me!" v.40

Now she's giving orders to Jesus!

At first glance, it doesn't seem too serious - we all fall victim to the arguments that need and worry present before us. However, it really is quite sinful, and Martha has slipped into a spirit of **manipulation**, rather than resting submissively in the will of the Holy Spirit. She is unwittingly calling on darker spirits to bend others to her will. We need to be careful about how we pray for workers and the 'needs' of the mission field. If we drift away from the centrality of Jesus, His unstinting love and provision, we risk becoming self-righteous, accusing, worried and rejected manipulators!

However, before giving up in despair, let's take a look at Jesus' loving response to Martha.

"Martha, Martha!" v.41

He quietens her down. Speaking out her name restores the relation with Him. One can sense the love and patience of Jesus coming over in His double mention of her name. We need to be quieted by Jesus' loving words to us.

"He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing." Zephaniah 3:15

In the same way as He revealed the motives of His disciples' 'panic prayer' in the boat, He puts His finger on the true inspiration behind Martha's prayers.

"You are worried and upset about many things." v.41

The Greek word, 'turbazo', translated 'upset', means to make turbid like troubled waters in tumult and uproar. The disciples needed to overcome their 'sinking feeling' and Martha needs to overcome her 'troubled waters'.

Worry should never be a substitute for true prayer.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Philippians 4:6

Let the Lord calm our 'troubled waters' before we pray. Worry and upset - although being valid human emotions worthy of pastoral care, should never infiltrate our prayer times.

Jesus brings the solution.

"Only one thing is needed." v.42

What's that we cry?

Well, Mary was clever enough to have chosen it. We can choose it too. It is not forced upon us as a rigorous duty.

What is it then?

Listening at Jesus' feet - prayer is all about listening.

"Mary...sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said." v.39

We need to return to Jesus' advice about praying for His work and mission which we find in Matthew 9:36-38.

Let's call this '**harvest praying**'.

"When He saw the crowds, he had compassion on them..." v.36

Jesus' eyes were not on Himself. He saw the crowds and their utter helplessness. He had compassion. This is His spirit, the same spirit which He wants to inspire within us as we pray.

He wants to melt our hard hearts with His compassion.

"The harvest is plentiful." v.37

Jesus emphasises the opportunity, not the problem.

Just take a look out there - all those nations to be won for Jesus. They are ready for harvest. What an opportunity!

Compassion and Vision are the two pillars of 'harvest praying'. We are called to love beyond our fear and see the opportunity beyond the need.

"But the workers are few." v.37

Jesus is saying this as an opportunity, rather than with fatalistic resignation.

At the time there were only 12 disciples. As they prayed and obeyed they quickly became 72 and then 3,000 on the day of Pentecost. Some less enlightened ministers continually whine out this phrase as if it was set in stone for all time. We have moved beyond the little band of Christ's followers. The world is pulsating with Christians looking for an opportunity to be sent. Never use this phrase as an excuse for failure to pray, recruit and create a context for more workers. The whole idea is to multiply the workers!

In an age when millions of 'eleventh hour' workers are waiting to join the final thrust of world evangelisation, surely we should be taking the prayer opportunity that Jesus offers us seriously.

"Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." v.38

The key prayer for our generation is to ask God to release the workers from Africa, Asia and the Americas and hopefully a few more from the West as well. Those who genuinely ask will probably find themselves going as well.

Ask and Go!

To Do –

Read the three different passages this week - Matthew 8:25-26, Luke 10:40-41, Matthew 9:36-38, and think about how you pray. Write down what you learned and look for an opportunity to share this with someone else.

Ask – What is my prayer life like? Do I panic pray, worry pray or harvest pray? Do I easily sit at Jesus' feet listening to His word?

Receive –

1. A deep sense of God's love for you to quiet your soul.
2. Compassion for the crowds – the sheep without a shepherd.
3. Faith for new people to work and collaborate with you.

Envision – A group of people praying with no fear, unbelief, rejection, distraction, unbelief or worry. See yourself, serene and shining, full of faith, revelation, compassion and vision, praying with them all.

Pray – “Lord of the harvest, send out workers into your harvest field. Amen.”

Inside, Breaking Out

Week 35

“Jesus is causing the Gospel to break out of Christianity.”

I have always enjoyed praying through a booklet called, ‘30 days of prayer for the Muslim world’, which encourages the church to reach out in love to their Muslim friends. I’m encouraged to see all that is happening and the quality of many Muslim brothers and sisters in Christ who have paid a high price for their commitment to Christ.

However, I was slightly disturbed by the repeated pattern of conversion, persecution, and subsequent extraction from the community - often to study theology abroad. On a recent trip to India, I was also listening to testimonies which said how hard it was for Hindus to ‘change religion’ and convert to Christianity. This also meant ostracism from the family and the adoption of a new ‘Western’ lifestyle in a local church.

I began asking myself what kind of Christian breakthrough I could envisage and believe for in the Muslim and Hindu worlds? Will the mosques come tumbling down one of these days to be replaced by evangelical churches?

Rather than talk about converting to Christianity, is it not more useful to encourage the concept of being a Hindu or Muslim who follows Jesus? This does not mean that they remain in the bondage of idolatry, lie and religion, but that they simply retain their cultural identity as Muslims and Hindus while pursuing faith in Christ.

Some Jewish believers had incredible difficulty in grasping the possibility that the Gospel could be clothed in Gentile culture without the ‘essentials’ of the Jewish faith. In a wise statement, the apostle James concluded:

“We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” Acts 15:19

Do we unknowingly make it difficult for our friends to come to Christ? Does our long established church culture inflict pain on ‘outsiders’ wanting to join, in the same way as the literal circumcision ritual inflicted physical pain on new converts to Judaism?

“Ah, but what about the cross?” you may say.

“Surely Christ requires the pain and violence of the cross in the conversion experience.”

Right and Wrong Violence

Many people complain about the violence of conversion and the damage it does to families and the community. Matthew 10:34-39, clearly speaks of such a work of the cross in the believer's life. However, this has to be placed in balance with verses like 1 Corinthians 7:12-14, in which Paul urges the respect and maintaining of the marriage bond.

Some theologians speak of the ‘Cultural Mandate’ in Genesis and the ‘Redemptive Mandate’ of the Gospels. God ordained marriage, work, society, government and culture in the first chapters of Genesis. Paul's defence of marriage to the Corinthians could be taken as a defence

of this mandate. Where possible, we should not do unjust violence to the cultural mandate established by God which sees beauty and life in the world's communities. Sometimes, in the name of cross centred sacrifice, we may well have erroneously inflicted abuse on the cultural mandate.

The result can be '*extracted communities*' of misfits who are no longer truly belonging anywhere, and who are no longer viable witnesses to their own societies.

As an absolute learner in this area, I have no authority or pretension to 'give lessons' to anyone and I admire all who have had the guts to 'have a go' at evangelism in whatever context. However, I will share a few ideas that are stimulating me at the moment. Have you heard of the concept of '*Insider Movements*'?

This is not really that new and finds its roots in the writings of such missionary statesmen as Donald McGavran – '*The Bridges of God*', who recognised that 'group decisions', which preserved the corporate life of the society and enabled men and women to become Christians without social dislocation, were the route by which most humans have moved to Christian Faith from Non-Christian Faith. He saw that the goal was not one by one conversion out of the castes and tribes, but rather the conversion of social units which remained part of the caste or tribe, and continued living in their ancestral homes.

More modern reflections on the subject come from John and Anna Travis who worked for 20 years in a tight-knit Asian, Muslim neighbourhood.

"We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our context such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wide scale...But we do have great hope, as great as the promises of God, to believe that an 'insider movement' would get off the ground – that vast numbers could discover that salvation in Isa the Messiah is waiting for every Muslim who will believe. We sense the desire of Jesus Himself to take the 'yeast' of His Gospel to the inner chambers of Muslim communities, calling men, women and children to walk with Him as Lord and Saviour, remaining vital members of their families and Muslim communities."

Christianity – Religion or Relation

Many people feel that fighting the 'religion changing' battle is a waste of time. Do I want someone to 'convert to Christianity' or get to know Jesus. Unlike many religions, Christianity does not need a particular culture to survive. Jesus came to bring life not religion. As Charles Kraft, in '*Appropriate Christianity*' states:

"Christianity correctly understood is commitment and meaning-based, not form-based. A commitment to Jesus Christ and the meanings associated with that commitment can, therefore, be practised in a wide variety of cultural forms."

God obviously used the rigour and depth of the Greek language and Philosophy to clothe the Gospel, and the Roman roads and society were a wonderful context within which this Gospel could expand and grow. He borrowed the culture of the time. Have you ever wondered what Christianity might have looked like if Christ had been conceived in an Indian womb in the city of Dehra Dun?

As Christ is clothed within various cultures, the fear that most people have is of syncretism - the amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought. It might be useful to ponder how much 'Western syncretism' already exists in our own churches? I'll let Kraft give us a bit more advice.

"What about the concept of syncretism? Is this something that can be avoided or is it a factor of human limitations and sinfulness? I vote for the latter and suggest that there is no way to avoid it. Wherever there are imperfect understandings made by imperfect people, there will be syncretism. That syncretism exists in all churches is not the problem. Helping people to move from where they are to more ideal expressions of Christian faith is what we need to address."

Herbert Hoefler wrote a book in 2001, *'Churchless Christianity'*, in which he defended the concept of *'Insider Movements'*. He discovered that in the city of Madras alone there were 200,000 Hindus and Muslims who worshiped Jesus – an amount equal to the total number of Christians in that city. Hoefler said that most wanted baptism, but had never seen a baptism which did not entail becoming an official member of a particular church. It seems that they wanted a living relation with Jesus rather than a change of religion.

Church Planting or Nurturing Gospel Movements

Some pioneer people think that the term 'church planting' implies inventing a new structure. They prefer to envisage a spontaneous spread of culturally relevant Gospel movements through pre-existing networks, offering themselves as 'catalytic agents' in the spawning of new movements.

A missionary couple working in Asia report:

"In 1990 we were sent out into the field as church planters. But over the last year, we have observed that when the gospel is sown on fertile soil within already established social groupings – like a circle of close neighbour friends, or the multi – generations of an extended household – the church emerges from the inside. It is not so much that we are planting a church but that we are planting the gospel, and as the gospel seed grows, the church or churches form to the shape of the existing networks."

How far can we go down this road? What are the pre-existing networks around me? What about Catholics, New Agers and Animists?

I'm probably asking more questions than proposing answers and, to be honest, I'm still on a journey myself. For about four years, I have been trying to plant the Gospel seed in 3-4 'circles' of various cultures and beliefs. I struggle with the fear of syncretism and slow repentance, but also rejoice in the simple way some of my friends have embraced Jesus into their lives, families and social networks.

Perhaps I've got you thinking and you may even be challenged by the possibilities 'insider movements' offer. I'm still living out the practical 'test' of 1 Thessalonians 5:21 in my own experience. I hope I'll be left holding something.

"Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil."

I'll finish with a quotation from another missionary learner, John Travis:

“What is all of this leading to? Is there not blatant idolatry in traditional Hinduism? Yes, but not among those Hindu followers of Christ described by Hoefer...Is there not denial by most Muslims that Jesus died on the cross? Yes, but not by those Muslims we have known who have put their faith in Christ...We are tentatively coming to the conviction that God is doing a new thing to reach the remaining nations (ta ethne) dominated by mega faiths. If Bosch has it right that faith in Christ wasn't meant to be a religion, could it be that we are witnessing some of the first fruits of vast movements where Jesus is causing the Gospel to break out of ‘Christianity’? Where those who know Jesus remain as a sweet fragrance inside the religion of their birth, and eventually the number of born-again adherents grows so large that a reform movement from inside that religion is birthed?”

To Do –

Read Acts 15:1-29. Engage in some research on ‘Insider Movements’. You will find it is quite a controversial subject. You might want to read two articles by two Travis’ on the internet – one against, and one for.

‘A City under a Hill – 5 problems with Insider Movements’ – Travis Myers.

‘Roles of Alongsiders in Insider Movements’ – John and Anna Travis

Ask – Are there any pre-existing networks I might be able to nurture towards Christ?

Receive –

1. An enlarged vision of what church planting may look like.
2. An openness to engage with people from different backgrounds and cultures.
3. Boldness to share the story of Jesus. Sow seeds of life into the soils the Holy Spirit leads you to.

Envision – The church emerging from inside various cultural and social groupings around you.

Pray – “Lord of the harvest, you love the peoples of the world. You came to the earth in Jewish clothing and culture. May your Holy Spirit reveal and incarnate Christ in the many social and cultural networks around me. May your life break out from all restraints and fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. Amen”

Eating with Pharisees

Week 36

“The restoration of relationship is more important than the condemnation of sin.”

Jesus entered fully into the ‘hospitality’ culture of His time, making the most of long hours of relationship building around a meal. Luke 7:36-50, describes one such gastronomic teaching session.

Jesus is *“reclining at the table”* – no quick self-service here, in Simon the Pharisee’s house. The cold eyes of the religious establishment are upon him, watching his every move to see if it conforms to the Law. Everything seems nicely ‘kosher’ until, like the proverbial fly in the soup, a woman appears in this man’s world. And not just an ordinary woman – a notorious harlot, *“who had lived a sinful life in that town”*.

All the religious alarm bells start to ring. The society of pure separation has been invaded by an ‘unclean’ incarnation. One can almost hear the bouncers at the door, coming to chuck her out!

Jesus doesn’t choose his religious friend’s strategy of exclusion. Instead, he receives the woman and offers her true intimacy.

Her lips kiss His feet. Think about that for a minute. Her tears fall on His flesh and her long hair dries divine toes. The masculine purity of Christ heals the years of abuse by sinful men, redeems physicality and elevates heartfelt love above legalistic dogma.

The perfume, generously poured out, reminds us of the sweet aroma of the holy, temple sacrifices. Jesus was going to sacrifice His body – the new living temple, inviting not just Jewish men, but a whole world of people to commune with Him. The woman’s perfume was a fitting epiphany to such divine inclusiveness. Jesus’ body is alive and well today, reclining where He is invited and receiving, as friends, the humble sinners who choose to kneel at His feet.

The Pharisees were not happy, blind to His fulfilling of their law with sacrificial love. Their ‘separation mentality’ couldn’t handle the ‘touch’ – the living incarnation of God in skin.

“If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.” v.39

Jesus takes the opportunity to teach Simon a lesson.

Two men owe money. One owes about 3,000 Euros and the other 300,000 Euros - a denarius was worth about a day’s wages. Both men have their debts cancelled. Which of the two men will love the money lender the most? Simon answers correctly, saying the *“one who had the bigger debt cancelled”*.

How big is your own debt?

Thinking back to another story, the one about seeing the speck of dust in our brother’s eye but being blind to the enormous plank in our own, we seem to have a tendency to not see our own faults. Religious blindness is perhaps the worst kind. Religion can, like those who seem to need little forgiveness, invite Jesus into the house, but give Him a less than warm welcome.

No genuine ‘water’ of repentance is poured on His feet, no ‘kiss’ of grateful, intimate relationship, no ‘perfume’ of genuine prayer and worship.

The problem for Simon was that he had forgotten how big his debt really was.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23

If I had been the only person in the world, Jesus would still have had to die the same painful death to pay the price for my sin. We have all been forgiven much. We all have a big debt!

This is actually quite good news because, *“he who has been forgiven little loves little...”*

Don’t fall into the temptation of ‘loving little’. A fresh revelation of all that Christ has paid for us on the cross can push us towards a more passionate, intimate celebration of our love for Him. Refuse to believe the lie that you are a pretty decent sort of person who’s trying, day by day, to be a little better. You couldn’t be worse! We all need Christ to pay our 300,000 Euros.

Accept the free gift of a perfect sacrifice that does indeed make you righteous.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

May you find joy and hope in redemption. May you recline at Jesus’ feet, enjoying fellowship with Him and overhearing His voice saying:

“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” v.50

To Do –

Read and imagine Luke 9:36-50. Think about how big your debt to Christ is?

Ask – Do I judge others before taking the speck out of my own eye?

Receive –

1. Renewed repentance.
2. Knowledge of forgiveness at Jesus’ feet.
3. A generous heart of grace for those around you.

Envision – Jesus looking into the woman’s weeping eyes and saying “Shalom.” Hear his “Shalom” in your own heart.

Pray – “Jesus, receive my tears, the fragrance of my prayers and the kiss of worship. Amen.”

Go now and Leave your Life of Sin

Week 37

Is it really possible to ‘love the sinner but hate the sin’? It was probably St Augustine who first coined this phrase when writing, in parenthesis, to a few nuns:

“Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum.” – “With love for mankind and hatred of sins.”

Is it possible to separate the actual person from their sin? In our righteous anger at sin, are we not in danger of becoming people haters as well? D.H Lawrence, in his short story ‘*Daughters of the Vicar*’, gives a vivid description of a minister’s decline into such hatred.

“At last, passing from indignation to silent resentment, even, if he dared have acknowledged it, to conscious hatred of the majority of his flock, and unconscious hatred of himself, he confined his activities to a narrow round of cottages, and he had to submit. He had no particular character, having always depended on his position in society to give him position among men. Now he was so poor, he had no social standing even among the common vulgar tradespeople of the district, and he had not the nature nor the wish to make his society agreeable to them, nor the strength to impose himself where he would have liked to be recognised. He dragged on, pale and miserable and neutral.”

A glimpse of answer to our initial question may be found in the key words – ‘*unconscious hatred of himself*’, used in the above passage.

The apostle Paul, writing in Romans 7, didn’t seem to see ‘sin’ as a separate entity out there somewhere, but as an intimate, indwelling part of his very make-up.

*“Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”*v.20

He hated himself for it!

“For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” v.15, 24

Can we hear the cries to be rescued rising up within and around us?

You don’t throw a stone at a person who wants to be rescued. You throw a lifeline!

There are only two types of people in the world. Are they man or woman, gay or straight, black or white, rich or poor, good or bad? Not that simple I’m afraid. The answer is found in 2 Corinthians 2:15:

“For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”

There are those who are “*being saved*” and those who “*are perishing*”.

We desperately need a Saviour, and like St Paul we can gratefully cry out:

“Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” v.25

The ultimate fragrance of salvation was released from the crucified body of Christ as His blood was shed to forgive us and pay the full price for all of mankind's sin. God's absolute hatred for sin fell on the sinless innocence of Christ.

We can be rescued by faith in Jesus!

"This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labour and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe." 1Timothy 4:9-10

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8

The lifeline of Jesus is available to a perishing world.

There is a beautiful story in the Gospel of John, chapter 8:1-11, of Jesus' encounter with a woman caught in adultery.

The religious establishment is poised to stone the sin - and no doubt the woman along with it! Jesus exposes their need to be free from sin:

"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." v.7

The stones are quietly dropped.

He alone has the right to throw, but He extends stoneless hands of embrace to the broken lady. She looks up, her heart expecting another habitual masculine beating, and is astonished to meet the forgiving gaze of Christ:

"Neither do I condemn you." v.11

She feels His strong, supporting hand pull her gently to her feet - a pure, manly touch that is all give and no take. For once in her life, she finds acceptance and grace.

She can learn to live again.

Accompanying the power of His love, He speaks the word of truth over her negative lifestyle.

"Go now and leave your life of sin." v.11

Having just encountered the empowering grace of Jesus, that must have been the one piece of advice she most wanted to take!

This is the attitude that the church - the Body of Christ in the world today, must adopt to reach out to the 'perishing' and broken.

Put your stones on the back burner and liberate the perfume of Christ's grace and forgiveness through the Gospel message.

And in shedding our Gospel love abroad to all comers, we must never forget the essential, accompanying advice to turn away from sin and live close to Christ.

So, immensely love the sinner and create a discipling context to facilitate a chosen turning away from sin.

To Do –

Read Romans 7:14-25 and John 8:1-11. Look at areas in your own life where you are confronted with the tension between hating the sin, but loving the sinner.

Ask – Am I keeping my love alive? Am I stoning myself or others with judgement?

Receive –

1. The truth of Romans 5:8 – God’s love for you is so much bigger than your sin.
2. The perfume of salvation.
3. An overflow of thankfulness to Jesus for your freedom.

Envision – Many ‘*perishing*’ people stepping into salvation. Imagine a mini-revival in your neighbourhood.

Pray - “Lord Jesus, thank you for breaking open your perfect body of clay to bring the perfume of salvation into the world. May sinners find forgiveness and a new start in your grace. Let them leave their lives of sin, and enter into your eternal kingdom of love. Amen.”

The Three Faces of Faith

Week 38

In the south of France, as the sun gently rises to midday, many a 'boule' playing man will cut short his game to indulge in the daily ritual of 'apéro'. A green, glass bottle will appear, pouring doses into glasses that are then filled with water according to the taste of each one.

Everyone gets their daily dose of 'pastis'.

Well, I'm sorry to tell you that pastis is not on the menu today. It has been replaced by an even more vital dose of 'pistis' – 'faith' in Greek.

We live to get 'pistis'. Be careful how you read that. It could mean the difference between getting drunk on wine or being filled with the Spirit!

There is one God, expressing himself in three persons, and there is one faith, expressing itself in three faces. Let's take a look at these different expressions of faith.

1. Confident Faith in the Father's Provision – Faith for living and praying.

This is an underlying trust that God will indeed provide and work things out for us. The verses in Matthew 6:25-34 encapsulate this kind of faith - a faith which takes us beyond the worries of this world and places us, as trusting children, into the loving arms of the Father.

"Your heavenly Father knows." Matthew 6:32

A greater revelation of the 'Spirit of sonship', who causes us to cry out 'Abba, Father', will strengthen us in this confident faith. Romans 8:15-17

Such confident faith comes from a deeper grasp of the Old Testament concept of 'hesed' – loyalty, unfailing love. This 'hesed' alliance that God made with Israel is fulfilled in the new covenant of Christ's atoning death on the cross. 'Hesed' is released upon us in grace. David's psalms are full of 'hesed'. Psalm 13 laments the difficulties of being forgotten, abandoned, sorrowful, worried and vanquished, and yet finishes with the wonderful proclamation:

"But I trust in your unfailing love." v.5

This phrase perfectly captures the idea of confident faith in the midst of life's storms. This is the serene, childlike faith which energises our prayer and gives us confidence to ask for our bread and fish.

"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" Matthew 7:11

2. Theological Faith - Faith for sharing.

Since its very beginning, the church has needed to defend itself from all sorts of heresies and lies. Today, she is buffeted by the destructive currents of 'new age' and liberal, post-modern teachings. It is important that we enter the arena of mission with a strong theological faith.

We need to develop this resistant faith by cultivating our understanding of the fundamental facts of Christianity. The Apostles creed gives us a solid foundation for such ‘theological faith’.

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again; He ascended into heaven, He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Universal Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

Strong, theological faith is a fundamental part of our armoury in the spiritual warfare that rages around us. It is as much that belt of truth, as the shield we brandish and the sword we wield.

This faith gives power to ‘*kerygma*’ – our proclaiming and preaching of the gospel.

3. The Gift of Faith - Faith for ministry and miracles.

In the famous passage on spiritual gifts, in 1 Corinthians 12:9, Paul mentions the gift of faith:

“...to another faith by the same Spirit.”

Like all faith, it is a gift from God. However, this specific spiritual capacity seems to be a particular ability to ‘*hang on in there*’, believing for the impossible. It is the kind of pioneer faith that sees churches planted amongst resistant people, projects developed and miracles of healing manifested. It is the kind of faith, sowed small as a mustard seed, yet moving mountains.

“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” Mark 11:22-25

The opening phrase is in the genitive case in Greek and hints at the translation:

“Have the faith of God.”

Step into another dimension. The ‘immovable’ mountain of communism was thrown into the sea as Christians prayed and suffered over the years. Have ‘God's faith’ that other unflinching strongholds will also end up in ‘the sea’ as Christians step out of the boat in faith and ‘walk on the water’.

Have God's faith to overcome your personal strongholds and mountains. Speak out words of faith and live in the fullness of forgiveness.

Well, you can go and get your ‘*pastis*’ now!

To Do –

Read and meditate the Apostles creed:

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended into hell. On the third day He rose again; He ascended into heaven, He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Universal Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

Allow it to build up a strong ‘theological faith’ in your heart this week.

Ask – Do I trust in God’s unfailing love?

Receive –

1. Faith in the Father’s provision.
2. A gift of faith to *‘hang on in there, believing for the impossible’*.
3. Courage to share your faith.

Envision – Mountains of false ideologies, redemption denying religions and personal challenges being thrown into the sea.

Pray – “Lord, increase my faith.” Luke 17:5

Words, Works and Wonders

Week 39

*“I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have **said** – **logos**, and **done** – **ergon**, by the power of **signs and miracles** – **teras**, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.”* Romans 15:18-20

How do you practically go about building the kingdom of God? Paul shares some of the secrets with us when he ventures to speak about what the Lord accomplished through him.

Logos – Every true beginning needs a word.

“In the beginning was the word.” John 1:1

Many of man's efforts are conceived in the furnace of human ingenuity, motivated by all sorts of carnal ambitions. Even Christian initiatives can be born orphaned, rocked in the cradle of professional techniques, starved of living word and dressed in the shoddy rags of redundant revelation. There was a tragic time in Israel when *“the word of the Lord was rare”* - 1 Samuel 3:1, which led to a *“help yourself”* attitude and the devastating loss of the Lord's presence.

If our lives are to remain fresh we must know what it is to feed regularly on the revelation of God's word. His word to us is so much more than paper and ink. His word becomes our dream, our burden and passion. His word is a living personality, a divine expression. This is the living bread that we can share with others.

“He received living words to pass on to us.” Acts 7:38

A life lived in the word will be a light pushing back darkness, a truth overcoming lie and a sword of spiritual victory. The ‘S’ word, the Spirit word, will arm us in our battles with the forces of this dark world.

Ergon – Righteous acts are still in fashion.

“His bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)” Revelation 19:8

Our Bridegroom does not want to meet a naked bride going up the aisle! Sometimes, we can get so carried away with naked grace that we forget to clothe ourselves with works of justice. The world around us needs to see our works as well as hear our words.

We are *“created in Christ Jesus to do good works”* - Ephesians 2:10, and such works of justice possess spiritual power to overcome Satan's darkness. They are ‘bright’ works.

A number of years ago, people celebrated ‘Freedom Day’ - a day to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. William Wilberforce, along with other faithful members of the ‘Clapham Sect’, worked hard to clothe the bride with the abolition of slavery act. Righteous works can transform a society. Our missionary call is as much to transformation as it is to evangelization. Today, there are more slaves than in Wilberforce's

day. Human trafficking is a multi-billion dollar business, lining up behind the drugs and arms trade. Young children are sold into the sex trade while others wind up toiling in sweat shops. A lot of the chocolate we enjoy finds its origins in the exploitation of children in the Ivory Coast. In war-torn areas, others are forced to enlist as child soldiers to fight adult wars. Even the rich Arab world recruits their share of exploited young boys who are forced to take part in camel racing as jockeys.

All of this happens today in the world we live in. The present Covid-19 crisis should not make us blind to it all. Instead of being trapped in indifference, we should long to make a difference. True mission still needs the Wilberforce spirit.

Over several years, in Central African Republic, I helped initiate seminars with grass-roots movements and government bodies on how to bring a sense of vocation and transformation to the nation. Much of this effort fell on stony ground, but a few ready 'soils' received the seed and are now bearing fruit.

I made many visits to Eastern Africa as well, encouraging works that are contributing to the resurrection of Rwanda as a nation. One of my friends, the Reverend David Nahayo, is enabling several widows and orphans to make a new beginning through educational and self-help projects.

Teras – Are miracles for today or did they go out with the apostles?

"He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well...Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it." Mark 16:15-20

Do I need to become bold and boisterous, claiming my daily miracle and ignoring the reality of illness and suffering? Some have been asking questions about 'signs and wonders' for many years. I prefer testimony to debate, and look to judge a tree by its fruit rather than the bark. I've been deeply challenged by my many visits to Ethiopia where the testimony of the 'Full Gospel – Mulu Wongel, church' is stunning. The movement began just over forty years ago when students in the Awasa region began to see miraculous healings and deliverances. Today, they are a movement of over four million believers in many hundreds of churches. Along with others, I have humbly partnered with them to help train and send many missionaries to unreached people groups.

I believe that secular Europe needs to be challenged by miracles. A missionary from Mozambique said that mission work needs a new paradigm of the supernatural. Perhaps she meant we need to discover the old paradigm from the book of Acts?

I feel very uneasy about 'wonders', as they shock my worldview and challenge my experience. However, I feel more encouraged to step out in faith when I know that they are only part of the story. Living word and works of justice provide the environment in which they become healthy and able to flourish.

Over the years, different streams of church life have been strong on one of these elements and weak on the others. Is it possible to flow together in all three and present a truly 'holistic' Gospel to a waiting world?

May you know words, works and wonders this week!

To Do –

Take a piece of paper – or whatever app you use on your phone, and write down three columns – Words, Works and Wonders.

Under each heading, write down significant revelation you may have received from the Bible, specific projects or helps you may have been involved with, and any miraculous signs you have encountered over the last years.

When you have finished, use it as a tool for thanks, praise and worship to God as well as a springboard of faith for future ministry.

Ask – Is my experience of God holistic?

Receive –

1. Words – *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...”* Colossians 3:16
2. Works – *“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* Ephesians 2:10
3. Wonders – *“He gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”* Luke 9:1-2

Envision – Imagine all the words, works and wonders you would love to see released into the world today.

Pray – “Lord Jesus, beautify the world with your words, works and wonders today. Amen.”

Autumn - Maturing



Life after Fifty

Week 40

“A man to fulfil my purpose.” Isaiah 46:11

God is looking for people like you to get His work done on earth. In the Old Testament, He set apart the Levites as a committed band to serve in the temple.

“Of all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the Tent of Meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary.” Numbers 8:19

The above phrase uses the Hebrew word ‘*nathan*’ – ‘*gift*’, twice, to emphasise the fact that the Levites were gifts to the community. Ministry begins when we offer our lives generously to our families, friends and the people around us.

The word ‘*nathan*’ reminds us of the classic verse in Ephesians 4:8 which describes the five-fold ministry functions as gifts to the Body of Christ.

“When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.”

The Jewish Law stipulated a specific time span for the beginning and end of the Levitical ministry.

“This applies to the Levites: Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the Tent of Meeting, but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work.” Numbers 8:24-26

This is a wonderful encouragement to all the twenty-five year olds amongst us. Imagine the awesome possibilities of pioneering and establishing a work of God for a twenty-five year period. Not just a short-term stint, but two and a half decades of adventure, living on the edge of faith with the all-providing Holy Spirit. Nothing could be a greater pleasure or privilege.

Twenty-five is the year for taking responsibility and going for your Holy Spirit inspired dreams. Before twenty-five, we can be mightily touched by God but are still in a period of training and preparation.

However, on reading the above passage, the fifty plus contingent may be getting slightly discouraged?

“What about me?”

“Is it time to retire lamely to the old age Levites’ home?”

Why did God in his wisdom set a fifty year cut off point?

I can think of at least two reasons.

a) Necessary Kenosis

At fifty years old, one is at a spiritual, mental and experiential peak. You've built a work, you've made a name, and you've paid the price. What next? There is an African proverb which says:

“A tree born in the shadow of a great Baobab dies a small bush.”

The smaller, growing trees need space and sunlight to fulfil their growth potential. You need to make space! Sometimes, you take all the air. Other personalities need to emerge to fashion new forms in the works of God. God encouraged such a necessary kenosis - emptying, diminishing, space making, in His Levitical model. This Old Testament principle, transformed by grace and applied in a non dogmatic form, is still relevant to us today.

b) To Avoid Cultural and Generational Distancing in the Temple

It is hard for older people, who are naturally and wonderfully limited to their established paradigm of life and thinking, to understand the new ways of the younger generation and the rapidly changing emerging cultures. Jesus is seen walking through the lampstands in Revelation 2:1, showing how God straddles time and culture with ease, constantly applying His eternal truth to the necessary paradigms and world views of each generation and culture. His church is not a one-size-fits-all cheese cutter, but an oasis of supple diversity. He set up the Levitical model to avoid a cultural and generational bottleneck in which the old hegemonies owned all the power. Again, this truth can be applied sensitively to our situations today.

So, is all this bad news for the over fifties? By the way, if you get wonderfully saved at fifty you may have a special dispensation to carry on till seventy-five!

There will no doubt be pain and crisis, but these can also be the necessary birth pains to thrust you into a new season of life.

Let's take a look at an older minister, Simeon - our personal model, in Luke 2:25-35 to discover seven life and ministry options that open up to this chosen and precious generation.

1) Immense Spiritual and Personal Capital

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.” v.25

Simeon, as an example for many mature men and women, had learnt to walk in righteousness. ‘Devout’, has negative, passive overtones in today's language, but the original Greek – ‘eulabes’, means to grab hold of something good with a strong passion. While so many others aggressively grabbed for the useless idols of this world, Simeon had learned to hold on to the life of worship, prayer and meditation.

He had learned the patient wait of expectant faith. Younger men and women are vitally impatient in their need to build. A deeper waiting can be found in the soul of the mature.

He was anointed with the Holy Spirit and sensitive to the heart of God. This 'old covenant man' possessed spiritual fullness and understanding. The text mentions how he had daily 'revelation' and 'guidance' from the Holy Spirit.

2) Consolation

"Waiting for Consolation..."

Many mature ministries have been wounded by their years of building and battling. We are not like Beckett's lonely tramps who were vainly '*Waiting for Godot*', but we are royal priests holding on victoriously to the clear promise of Jesus. Even as you read now, hear his personal promise from John 14:18:

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

Jesus, ever-living to intercede for us, asks the Father to give us the '*Paraklete*' – the comforter and counsellor, to be with us forever. He gives us the Holy Spirit of truth.

3) Seeing Jesus Beyond Death and Failure - a Vision of Resurrection

"It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ." v.26

Never die without a clear vision of Christ!

Although I grope for my glasses as my aged physical eyes can no longer read the Bible alone, my inner eyes see ever more clearly the victory of the '*man child*' - Revelation 12:5 - KJV

4) Sensitivity to the Crucial Next Step

"Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required..." v.27

I have a question for you to think about.

"Where is the Holy Spirit moving you to?"

There is always a new beginning for the old Baobabs!

Do not let anything quench the Holy Spirit's fire in you. Awaken the dream and respond in renewed youth to the heavenly Bridegroom's touch.

Simeon was led to an anonymous, poor couple, presenting their fragile newborn. Despise not the 'kenosis' and dare to embrace the seemingly insignificant people who may, after all, contain the seeds of future hope.

5) Recognise, Receive and Bless the 'Little Christ'

"Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying..." v.28

You have your own ‘sayings’ and authority to bless the emerging generation.

Open your arms to encourage every new beginning that you encounter on this over 50’s journey. There is nothing sadder than the withheld embrace of a ‘rejected Simeon’.

Overcome the pain of the past by embracing the future.

That future may come to you in ragged clothes and anonymous opportunities, framed in the face of the refugee, the prisoner, the sick and the marginalised.

6) Nunc Dimittis - Be at Peace through a Vision of God’s Mission

“...now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” v.29-32

Maturity brings growing insight into God's triumphant purpose of winning a world of people to Himself. Find a fresh place in the mission of sharing the light of Jesus to the nations. This may well include giving more time to intercessory prayer. Add your rich, spiritual capital to the ever-increasing global community of missionary pioneers.

We have peace, not simply to be ‘dismissed’ to heaven, but peace to be ‘sent’ into a new season of ministry – the Greek word used for ‘dismiss’ in the above passage is ‘*apoluo*’ which can also mean ‘to fully release’ in an apostolic sense of sending.

7) Be the Person who carries Cross-Centred Truth and a Prophetic Blessing

“Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” v.34-35

The interpretation of people’s ‘*destiny*’ is another awesome attribute of those over 50s who have walked long years with the Master of all our destinies.

Having learnt to embrace the truth of His Word, they have freedom to apply it sensitively to the future.

Simeon could painfully discern the shadow of a cruel cross over the promised Messiah and, in the midst of all the exciting promises, he was not afraid to speak plainly of the sword - the cost of ministry.

May these seven life and ministry options encourage you to set out towards new horizons.

New seasons of growth await the passage of autumn. As old leaves nourish the soil, the wisdom of age feeds the soul of a new generation. Hear the call to be ‘a Simeon’ and be eager to embrace every new opportunity that crosses your path in the weeks to come.

The best wine is yet to come!

To Do –

Under fifties: Reflect on the opportunities you have to learn more and grow your work.

Over fifties: In this ‘Autumn Season’, list the qualities that you possess which might encourage future growth points.

All: Read and meditate the promises of Isaiah 46.

Ask – Am I a Baobab tree? Is it time to make some space for others?

Receive –

1. The grace to let go where necessary.
2. The ‘old wine’ anointing of the Holy Spirit.
3. Vision for a new season.

Envision – Yourself speaking words of prophetic wisdom into the lives of your friends.

Pray – “Lord, give me life after fifty. Amen.”

From Rejection to Intercession

Week 41

“If someone asks him, ‘What are these wounds on your body?’ he will answer, ‘The wounds I was given at the house of my friends.’” Zechariah 13:6

One of the deepest wounds that people carry is that of rejection. The contexts that inflict such emotional pain are often those that involve relationships. Who has not been wounded in the ‘house of their friends’?

That ‘house’ may be a marriage, a family, a place of work, a church, a mission or any other relational context. For this article, I’d like to look at our church family, but the principles discovered may well help in handling rejection in all the contexts mentioned.

We are so very much a body of friends in our churches and mission agencies. Our very nature is forged in fellowship – *koinonia*. Yet this very ‘koinonia’ has the potential to wound if we do not handle it with care. Changing seasons and circumstances mean that we have to put a high priority on maintaining and adapting our relationships.

The happy few, the ‘*Band of Brothers*’ on a mission, has the potential to inadvertently exclude those who are not part of the original pioneer experience. On the other side, old lamps may be exchanged for the new. No time is given to learn from tradition and the pioneer personality gives way to organisational maintenance. A new generation grows up with a desire to forge ahead under its own steam, rather than interpret the future through their history. This rejection of the forerunners disconnects the youth from their roots while, at the same time, the older pioneers feel rejected from the new expressions.

This seems to be the case when we look at Israel's biblical history.

After the inspiring leadership of the Patriarchs, Moses and Joshua:

“Another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.”
Judges 2:10

The Lord tested the heart of the new generation by leaving the problem of taking the land of promise.

“These are the nations the LORD left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars in Canaan, (he did this only to teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience.)” Judges 3:1

Each generation must prove its character by engaging in battle - the inner, spiritual conflict for today’s context.

Decline inevitably set in and, instead of taking full possession of the promise, the people were mainly oppressed by their enemies with occasional bursts of revival through various ‘judges’ who brought the people back to the Lord and their mission.

The great prophet Samuel seems to be one of the last in a long line of judges. He gave himself to the people wholeheartedly and set them back on track with God. However, like every ministry, he had a sell-by date. He grew old and wanted to appoint his sons as judges, but they lacked the moral fibre of their father, seeking gain rather than God.

“So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” 1 Samuel 8:4-5

‘You are old’ - For the more silvery haired amongst us, the challenge of adapting to a new season, and surviving the rejection of those you have led, can be devastating.

We read in the text that Samuel was *‘displeased’*.

He prayed and the Lord led him to come to terms with the wound of rejection that was eating him up.

“And the LORD told him: Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.” 1 Samuel 8:7

In the end, all the exclusion that we encounter, all of the wounds of rejection that we endure, fall on the ultimate rejected one, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The naked man lifted up on a cross, the rejected God, sucked into himself all our pain of being left out and marginalised.

How did Samuel survive this closing chapter of his life and find strength to move on and anoint a new ‘messianic’ season? How was he able to motivate himself to discern and nurture the gift in the young David? How can we move beyond our own painful rejection to become a blessing?

The key is found a few chapters later in 1 Samuel 12:22-25. It seems that, after the initial shock, Samuel has come to terms with the fact that nothing is going to prevent this new season emerging. He has found a place of peace. How?

He has chosen to pray for those who rejected him.

“As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.” v.23

When we feel rejected, we speak from the wounded overflow of our heart, harshly criticising and judging others. We need to move away from this tree of good and evil and feed on the tree of life. Begin to pray and not sin! Then, stand and proclaim what is *‘good and right’*.

No easy task, but ultimately the only way to move on and enter a new season. It seems that the very wound of rejection may even in itself be the catalyst to new beginnings.

At the end of the Gospel of John, on that post-resurrection evening, we find Jesus launching His disciples into a new season. He begins by making it very clear that ministry - all living and loving, will involve wounds.

“...he showed them his hands and side.” John 20:20

In an unmistakable visual, He is saying:

“This is how the Father sent me - to be wounded.”

And, as Jesus may be speaking to you, His own disciple today, He continues:

“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” v.21

The wounding is a new sending!

We need so much help to own this. This is why Jesus breathes on us intimately, allowing us to receive the Comforter - the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit puts the very character of Christ within our flesh. He brings healing and the potential to forgive, move on and pray for the *‘house of my friends’*.

“And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” John 20:22-23

To Do –

Read John 20:19-23. Think about the various relational contexts – *‘the house of friends’*, that you function in. Write a few of them down and note the plus and minus points of each one.

Ask – Am I feeling the wound of rejection?

Receive –

1. Greater sensitivity to understand the seasons of fellowship.
2. A deep healing from any rejection.

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.” Isaiah 49:15-16

3. A desire to pray for those who wounded you.

Envision – Imagine Jesus showing his disciples the Calvary wounds and sending them out with the consoling power of the Holy Spirit. See yourself being sent for a new season.

Pray – “Father, forgive me my sins as I forgive those who sin against me. Far be it from me that I should sin against you LORD by failing to pray for my friends who wounded me in their house. Fill me with fresh grace and power that I may do what is good and right. I ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.”

New Oil for a New Season

Week 42

"Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out."
Matthew 25:8

Chapter twenty-five of the Gospel of Matthew opens with the challenging parable concerning ten virgins going out to meet the Bridegroom. The foolish have only their shining lamps with a first deposit of oil while the wise have brought along jars in which to carry fresh oil.

I fear that we may be like the foolish maidens. We prefer the instant satisfaction of ministry and meetings to the lengthy cultivation of a deep relationship with the Lord. In an ideal world, we would balance both the fruit of the tree and its sustaining root system. Sadly, the 'visible shine' is not always sustainable. As the Bride of Christ – the church, makes herself ready for the Bridegrooms' return, the coming emphasis of the Holy Spirit may be more on the 'jars' than on the 'lamps'.

In Matthew 7:21-23, we are presented with the stark reality of a ministry in action without the corresponding intimacy of relationship. 'Lamps' may have burned in casting out demons, or shone brightly in prophetic revelation, but the terrible final verdict is:

"I never knew you." v.23

A midnight hour awaits this world when, like the disciples at Gethsemane, the church will become drowsy and even fall asleep. Let's make the most of our ease and happiness while it lasts, as difficult times may well be ahead.

There is a critical moment in time just before the return of the Bridegroom. The virgins stir from their slumber and 'revival' seems to be in the air. A wonderful time of opportunity presents itself as light pierces the darkness to illuminate a path for the Beloved's return. But is it sustainable? It is easier to light a lamp than to sustain its burning. Early enthusiasm can wane in the lonely darkness of the midnight hour. The love of most can grow cold as wickedness increases.

Burn out or burn on? That is the question!

Whatever the eschatological time frame you use, many of us, here and now, are confronted with this question. As John the Baptist sought to prepare a way for the Lord and rejoiced at the sound of the Bridegroom - John 3:29, so churches and missions throughout history have trimmed their lamps in active ministry.

The oil may be running out of some of our present structures and ministries. Excellent books have been written about the various paradigm shifts in history and the need for a different approach to an ever-changing world. *'Transforming Mission'*, by David Bosch and *'The Shaping of Things to Come'*, by Frost and Hirsch are just two examples.

The lamp of our intellectual ability and physical prowess can also ebb and flow in the natural rhythms of life. Rather than drift into the inevitable entropy of old age, regretting our burnt-out dreams, we can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, shine on into a new season of usefulness.

How?

Well, like the virgins in the Gospel story, we seek wisdom. We must draw on the stored resources of fresh oil. We need new oil for a new season.

The bad news for the foolish church - nourished on the instant 'junk food' of a capitalist gospel which says that you can just go and buy such oil, is this:

"You can't buy it!"

Don't miss out on the King's return by losing your way on the consumerist religion road.

In fact, it would be better to wait in the acknowledged bankruptcy and darkness of our oil-less life, trusting in the ultimate grace of the Beloved, rather than lose the whole thing by trying to buy our way out of the situation.

So where do we get this oil?

We need to take another road, the one that leads to the oil press, Gethsemane. Gethsemane means oil-press in the Hebrew language.

Gethsemane is the place of suffering, stress and prayer. It is the ultimate place of obedience.

"My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." Matthew 26:42

We store up this new oil in our jars as we follow Jesus into costly obedience. We take responsibility for the lot in life that has fallen to us and push through the pain barrier in vulnerable prayer, finding our strength at the cross. This is the oil of intimacy that will burn in the 'end-time church and which has always burned in the faithful throughout history.

Do you know the Jewish 'Hanukkah' story which is inspired by the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha?

Under the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Jewish temple had been destroyed and desecrated by the invaders. The Maccabee – the name translates as 'hammer', family struck back and regained the temple, only to find that everything had been polluted. They longed to light the lamps, but only enough oil was found to burn for one day. It would take eight days to make and consecrate new oil. Then, the slow-burning miracle happened. The lamp, instead of burning out, burned on into the eighth day.

It burned on into a new beginning.

My prayer, as I write these lines in the midst of so many sad endings due to the Covid 19 pandemic, is for the costly oil of Gethsemane and the miraculous 'Hanukkah oil' of new beginnings to be stored up in your life. May none of us become 'burn-out' and foolish, losing our way in fear. Even though the midnight darkness closes in and our brows are damp with pain, may we continue to say 'yes' to God. Even though we feel desecrated, broken and oil less, may we know the miracle of burning on to the transcendent eighth day of new start.

Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, writing many years ago about Gethsemane in his book, *'Sinai and Palestine: In Connection with Their History'* mentions eight olive trees. Eight is the number of a new beginning. These trees are a fitting image of the Hanukkah 'new season' and the Gethsemane 'oil of obedience' being stored together in the jar of our hearts.

"In spite of all the doubts that can be raised against their antiquity, the eight aged olive-trees, if only by their manifest difference from all others on the mountain, have always struck the most indifferent observers. They will remain, so long as their already protracted life is spared, the most venerable of their race on the surface of the earth. Their gnarled trunks and scanty foliage will always be regarded as the most affecting of the sacred memorials in or about Jerusalem."

The time to fill your jars is now!

To Do –

Carefully read the Bible passage – Matthew 25:1-13, and write down what the Lord is saying to you from it.

Ask – Am I wise or foolish?

Receive –

1. Repentance from superficial foolishness.
2. The desire for intimacy and obedience. Fresh reserves of grace to move away from burning out.
3. New oil for a new season.

Envision – The 'Hanukkah' event. See the faces, etched with the worry of 'burn-out' and no more oil, slowly transformed to joy as the oil miraculously burns on. See your own life burning on to glory and not burning out.

Pray – "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning. Give me oil in my lamp I pray. Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning - keep me burning till the break of day. Amen."

Sacrificing the “Old Goat”

Week 43

New beginnings, new years, are always very special as we transition through the various seasons of our lives. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah - Head of the Year, which is observed for two days, has always been a significant encouragement to me. For most Jews, this time refers to the forming of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, on the sixth day of creation. The celebration also makes reference to Abraham's journey up to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac. On these days, faithful Jews pray that they will step into the benefit of the good action of Abraham who received, on oath, a promise of great prosperity.

When we read this passage, in Genesis 22: 1-19, we usually focus on the prophetic pointing of Isaac's sacrifice - and resurrection, to the person of Christ. However, in rereading this text, I was struck with the person of Abraham himself. It was a major life transition for him.

He had been walking under the desert stars for many years, struggling to come to terms with the greatness of this God who had called him out. He had fought his battles, believed for fecundity in the face of sterility, and was now walking proudly with his '*son of promise*', his only son - it seems that Ishmael is not counted in here, Isaac, the one he loved.

God requests the outrageous sacrifice of this beloved son. Kierkegaard, in '*Fear and Trembling*' suggests that God was undertaking a '*teleological suspension of the ethical*' - the final good outcome somehow allowing for such a morally ambiguous order.

While you are working that one out, let's get back to Abraham. He simply stepped out and obeyed in faith. He told his servants:

“We will come back to you.” v.5

I think Abraham came back changed. Isaac asked:

“Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” v.7

Abraham, holding back the emotion, gritting his teeth and striving once again to see beyond his present reality with the tear-stained eyes of faith, answered:

“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” v.8

Both of them went on together, two generations, side by side. Was the older really going to sacrifice the younger generation?

Our God doesn't kill the new generation. He sacrifices the 'old man' so that we may live in newness of life.

God did not in fact provide a lamb - something young and fresh, He set aside an old ram, caught by its horns in the thicket. Isaac was unbound and the knife was put to the old ram. It was almost as if Abraham was sacrificing his own troubled past in that ram. Something of his powerful, patristic presence was also falling under that generous knife.

The old was sacrificed so that the new generation could be released and empowered. Isaac went from the altar of sacrifice to the altar of marriage. His future was full of prayer-induced fecundity.

Something in Abraham died on that day – all fathers learn to die. However, it was also a new beginning, as this event marked a new season of fecundity for Abraham. From a man struggling to have one son, he was able to go on and father many more children through a new wife, Keturah – Genesis 25: 1-5. In a figurative way, Keturah may be a symbol of the new partnerships and networks God may be calling the old fathers to develop. She is a new, fruitful context.

Abraham released God's passionate, oath-backed promise to bless the nations – a promise which impacts our faith even today.

So, don't be afraid to put the knife to the old. Many family struggles might be resolved more easily if the 'entrenched patriarchs' could make some space for the rising sons.

If you are finding yourself at the end of a season, ask that your 'horns' may be disengaged from the thicket of past reputation, and that your 'absence' might release a new generation to fruitful life and ministry.

Rosh Hashanah is followed by ten days of repentance, leading up to the holy day of Yom Kippur. Take ten days to pour the healing blood of Christ into your past:

"The old has gone, the new has come!" 2 Corinthians 5:17

To Do –

Carefully read Genesis 22:1-19 – Put yourself in Isaac's position. What would he be thinking and feeling? Then do the same with Abraham. Think of two different generations in your family and church who you might pray for this week. Think of Christ, the ultimate sacrifice, bringing forgiveness, reconciliation and life.

Ask – What do I need to take to the altar of sacrifice?

Receive –

1. Faith to rise beyond the present circumstances and sacrifice.
2. A fresh context – find your Keturah.
3. Freedom to disengage from the thickets of life, and a willingness to be pruned.

Envision – The fearful awe that accompanied Isaac and Abraham's return journey. See that awesome cross once more – pain and gain, judgement and acquittal, death and life.

Pray – "Father, thank you for providing the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Amen."

Growth of Godly Character in the Life of the Leader

Week 44

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Galatians 5:22

Everything in me wanted to give up. I could hear the blood pumping through my veins in a pained discourse as I plodded my final, heavy steps around New York.

“Why on earth did I sign up for this?” I thought.

My mind went back to the initial, innocent enthusiasm I had felt when I signed up for the marathon run. The training and preparation had been good and I had run off with joy and gusto as the gun sounded, joining thousands of other not yet pained heroes on their first energy-filled steps. However, after 40 kilometres, the dark macadam had sucked out my last ounces of strength and conviction. I had absolutely nothing left, except the reality of my suffering, and my will to hang on and finish.

The above story, apart from being an expression of my love of running, is also a condensed parable of my thirty-five year season of serving the Lord in the mission, *‘World Horizons’*. Leadership is not a short-term project. It is not a quick, euphoric, miracle-filled sprint, but a slow, plodding marathon. When people asked the famous pioneer missionary, William Carey, the secret of his success, he answered:

“I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything.”

The *‘iPlod’* is a far more important piece of equipment than the old *‘iPod’* or even the latest version of *‘iPad’*.

The passage from Galatians gives a list of God-given qualities necessary for godly character. I would like to make an appeal to one of these *‘fruits’* as being a fundamental attribute for leadership success. Patience - *makrothumia* in the Greek. My own journey through life and leadership has been underpinned by this grace-given fruit.

The New International Version translation of *‘patience’* risks hiding the sense of *‘longsuffering’* which the King James’s version offers us. A leader incarnates longsuffering.

The original Greek is constructed from two words: *makro* – long, and *thumia* – passion.

Serious leadership is marked by its ability to engage in the long term - the years of language learning, the years of investing into people and the years of persevering in prayer. It engages the geographical and cultural *‘long’*; those far away, inhospitable, desert areas, those mega cities, those unreached people groups, but also that long distance from loved ones.

Leadership is about manifesting passion.

Passion is what makes people want to follow you. It is not the worldly passion of human energy, but the Christlike sacrifice which is *‘sold out’* to God’s purpose. It is the *‘heavy breathed’* prayer for the lost, the impassioned Gospel on our lips and the daily dying of serving others.

In some countries, the Lord has been working powerfully and many vigorous churches have been established. Growth can be rapid, and baptisms of new converts a common experience. It

can be very hard for leaders, sent out from these places into areas more resistant to the Gospel, to come to terms with a much slower pace of progress. Persevering through the barren times is also part of the gift of *makrothumia*. You may be confronted with a ‘dark night of the soul’, when the heavens seem shut, the word and prayer barren, and sin so present. This is when you need the sheer will to not give up, but to push through and finish the race.

There are eight remaining attributes of the ‘love fruit’ of Galatians. I can sum these up with one phrase from the famous parable of the sower.

“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” Luke 8:1-15

A leader must have a noble – *kalos*, and good – *agathos*, heart. This heart attitude is linked to a deep love of the word of God. When I first became a Christian, I committed to read through the whole of the Bible every year. The initial training I received at the first mission base of ‘World Horizons’ in Llanelli, also encouraged deep, personal meditation on the word of God.

This heart for Christ in the parable, filled with good seed, is called to persevere to produce fruit. We have already spoken about this ‘persevering patience’, this ‘*hypomone*’ - the endurance that ‘*stays under*’ the yoke, not giving up, but pushing through to fruitfulness.

As a final encouragement, let me leave you with a couple of key principles from 2 Timothy 1:8-9

*“So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life - not because of anything we have done but because of his own **purpose and grace**.”*

Every leader needs a ‘called character’ - a deep sense of calling and purpose. Jeremiah knew that he had been given a prophetic vocation even before the day he was born, and the apostle Paul, in the New Testament, was gripped with a conviction of his own destiny:

“But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace...” Galatians 1:15

Paul’s testimony underlines the second key principle of ‘grace’. Grace is the leader’s energy! Paul’s entire character was consumed by a deep revelation of grace. Even when he got overwhelmed with his ‘work’, he knew that it was the power of grace – and not perspiration, which really kept him going.

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” 1 Corinthians 15:10

Keep your cutting edge of grace, so that you can scythe off every bitter root that attempts to establish itself in your heart and set you against precious brothers and sisters.

“See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” Hebrews 12:15

Be encouraged in your long-distance, noble-hearted, grace-empowered leadership!

My leadership refrain over these past thirty five years has been:

“Not I...but the grace with me!”

Plod on my friends, accompanied by grace.

To Do –

Read and meditate on the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22. Give yourself marks out of ten for each fruit.

Ask – Am I a leader? Who follows me? Am I growing in Christlike character?

Receive –

1. A second wind to get to the end.
2. Patience and Passion.
3. A deep love of God's word.

Envision – Different ways you may serve others through leadership.

Pray – “Lord, give me a good and noble heart, in Jesus' name. Amen.”

Finding Ruth

Week 45

Why not read the book of Ruth when you are looking for some encouragement? It speaks about the transition from *'bitterness'* to *'blessedness'* in Bethlehem. It looks beyond the times of barrenness towards a new *'kingdom'* generation.

Let's look at Naomi. Fleeing from famine and in a place of great loss, she can be a potent symbol of whatever crisis we may be experiencing. She might also be an allegory of the tired, Western church. Tragedy strikes and she finds herself under death, bereaved of sons and husband. How many sons have we lost through the cruel conflicts of history, with so many millions cut down in the prime of life on the killing fields of Flanders during the First World War?

Countless other sons and daughters drift into spiritual death without a shot being fired, seduced by sin, devoid of the Holy Spirit, with no divine dream to guide their path. Naomi has lost all hope of fecundity. She is hopelessly, tragically barren. Was she always destined for such sad sterility? On the contrary, her original Hebrew name means *'tenderness'*, *'charming'* and *'pleasant'* - love, grace and joy. She was meant to incarnate these holy attributes of Christ's Body, called to fill a world with light and life, but she finds herself tragically wounded and old before her time. It seems that Naomi has changed her name!

"Don't call me Naomi" she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."
Ruth 1:20-21

'Mara' means bitter. When we think of the joyful celebration that Christ's birth brought to the world, it is a total contrast seeing the desolate Naomi journeying back to that sacred place to be *'bitter in Bethlehem'*.

Is there hope for her? Is there hope for my own weary heart? Can the Western church know a new beginning? The answer for Naomi, and hopefully for us as well, came in two things.

- i. She Found a Fresh Revelation of Christ as her Redeemer - redeem your dreams!

Naomi had a friend in Boaz and, as the old song puts it, we have a friend in Jesus.

"That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers." Ruth 2:20

Jesus is our redeemer, the one who can heal history and hearts. May we know a fresh hunger for His presence.

There was also a more strategic answer for Naomi which was the second requirement for healing.

- ii. She Found Ruth – *"Ruth Clung to Her."* Ruth 1:14

Ruth, from the foreign race of the Moabites, was the answer for Naomi. Ruth represents another two things for us.

1) Youth

We must be investing in, and praying for, the next generation. I'm convinced that, despite the destructive onslaught on young people, God wants to bring a powerful missionary revival amongst a new generation of '*Joshuas*' – Moses' apprentice and future warrior prince who hungered after the presence of the Lord:

"The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young assistant Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent."
Exodus 33:11

The Jews would have found Ruth's Moabite background difficult to accept and, in the same way, our own entrenched, religious structures may need to discover new ways to welcome the energy and culture of young people.

2) New Nations - Emerging Mission Movements

The strategic centre for missions has changed over the last few years from the West to what is collectively known as the '*Global South*'. Nations such as South Korea, Brazil, Nigeria, Ethiopia, China and Indonesia will be leading the way over the next few years.

As Naomi received Ruth, we will find our future in creating discipleship environments for such as these. We will be learners as much as teachers, receivers as much as givers. Again, structures and personal comfort zones will need to change to stand alongside the colourful, potent, raw energy of God expressing Himself in many cultures and skins. One of the redeemers in the story - Ruth 4:1-15, had an eye on the material blessing of the land, but he had no motivation for a relationship with Ruth. He feared that this '*foreign influence*' might endanger his own property. Is this same fear stopping us from building relational bridges to others? Boaz, however, was more than willing to take on the covenant relation which came with the land.

The first gave only his shoe, while Boaz was willing to give his heart!

My prayer is to find Ruth.

And there in Bethlehem, where Mary was to hold Jesus to her breast, old Naomi finds new life and nurses a son of promise in David's line:

"She took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him." Ruth 4:16

She rediscovers her name – Naomi, and is "*blessed in Bethlehem*".

May you be blessed in Bethlehem, may you be '*better*' rather than '*bitter*' and may the opportunity Ruth offers – youth and new nations, be accepted as a gift to a waiting church.

“Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.” Ruth 4:14-15

To Do –

Read the book of Ruth this week and think about the lessons it teaches on Christ, His work of redemption and his relation to the church.

Ask – Am I bitter or better? How can I be better?

Receive –

1. A fresh experience of Christ as your personal redeemer.
2. A prayer and opportunity to disciple young people.
3. A prayer and opportunity to meet new nations.

Envision – Ruth at Boaz’s feet, opening her shawl and receiving grain. See yourself at Jesus’ feet, being generously fed with grace, word and love. Ruth 3:14-15

Pray – “Jesus, my Kinsman Redeemer, I will not leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Let me love the church - your people. Take away any bitterness from my heart and may it become a ‘Naomi’ - tender and pleasant, renewed and fruitful, for your glory. Amen.”

Jedidiah

Week 46

The divine gardener prunes back the vines he loves so that they may become more fruitful. Beloved branches may be lost, but – as we saw in ‘Week 3’, a tender bud will always be left, promising a new beginning. Is your identity in the bud or the branch? The bud is our dream - our intimate story with Christ, our hope for fruitfulness.

During the pruning, the vine weeps and then dries back. This ‘drying back’, if prolonged, can end up destroying the precious bud. Like the vine, we experience our own times of pruning and dryness. The desert times are dangerous as they have the potential to kill our dreams. We pray, fast and implore the Lord as we see the bud dying.

How do you survive this ‘dark night of the soul’, this ‘dehydration’ of a dream – your moribund bud?

Well, we can learn a lesson from good vine dressers.

They always leave a second bud!

Know that God has left you a second bud. There is always the possibility of a new beginning. As your tears dry and you come to terms with the loss and the barrenness, you gently discover that there still remains the possibility of a new dream.

The story of King David, in 2 Samuel 12:13-25, illustrates this concept in a moving metaphor of a second chance.

David’s first ‘bud’ is dying, slain in innocence by the sin of its environment.

“The Lord struck the child...” v.15

David hangs on, pleading with God, fasting, weeping and spending his nights *“lying on the ground”*. He cannot bear to see his dream die.

“On the seventh day the child died.” v.18

For David, it was seven days, for others, the time zone of their struggle may be different. Only God knows the perfect time to end a season. David’s reaction, at this critical moment of finality, carries the future seed of miraculous grace, faith and courage.

He *“got up from the ground”*. v.20

He refused to stay crushed under the weight of sin and failure. He defied the natural gravity of depression and chose to move on. Is God asking you to get up from the ground?

He *“washed”*. v.20

Seasons of loss impregnate our spirits with sadness, unbelief and bitterness. It is important to allow the cleansing blood of Christ to wash us clean.

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God,

cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"
Hebrews 9:13-14

He "*put on lotions*". v.20

Be perfumed with the Holy Spirit. When a woman broke her jar at Jesus' feet, perfume was released. Your very brokenness and loss releases more of God's fragrance onto your life.

He "*changed his clothes*". v.20

Allow the Lord to move you to a new context. Like garments that have become old fashioned and too small, we must discard our religious rags and clothe ourselves afresh in Christ.

He "*worshiped*". v.20

This was his beautiful victory. Like Job of old, he looked beyond his problem and lost himself in the contemplation of the divine.

"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." In all this Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing." Job 1:21-22

May we have this same, worshipful victory of keeping our hearts from any bitter slur against the loving character of God.

He "*comforted*". v.24

The ultimate Comforter, the Holy Spirit, restored David and, with the comfort he received, he was able to pass on comfort to his wife.

Take time to be comforted and restored. If necessary, take some time out to heal and renew the close relational links you may have.

As he came to terms with his loss, he discovered that God had left a second bud!

He found 'Jedidiah'.

His wife gave birth to a new son. The people knew the son as Solomon, who was to become a great and reigning king, but the hidden, prophetic name was Jedidiah – *'loved by the Lord'*.

After the *'man of blood'* there was *'the man of peace'* who would build the temple. After the cross there is always the second bud of resurrection. After the guilt there is always a second chance of innocence.

I'm hoping that you will find your second bud.

May you discover a new beginning in Jedidiah, may you be truly *'loved by the Lord'*.

To Do –

Carefully read 2 Samuel 12:13-25. Write down what you feel the Lord is saying to you through these verses.

Ask – What buds have I lost? How do I feel about it?

Receive –

1. Empowerment to get up from the ground and move on.
2. Cleansing, anointing, comfort and joy from the Holy Spirit.
3. Jedidiah – a new beginning and a fresh revelation of how much you are loved by the Lord.

Envision – See David's new clothes, but also try to smell the perfume on him. See yourself clothed in Christ, anointed with joy.

Pray – “Oh Lord, you give and Lord you take away; may your name, Lord, be praised. Amen.”

Innocence and Perspective - Seeing Heaven beyond Hell

Week 47

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." Matthew 10:17

Why do the innocent suffer?

God's answer to this, like the 'wisdom' of old, cries out in the dusty streets of life's destiny.

I'll attempt to put a few stumbling words to wisdom's cry.

We are born for battle. The conflict began when an arrogant angel rebelled. The war spilled into creation and man, like the story of Job illustrates, became a battle ground. The event of sin cut a great gash of misery, bringing decay and death to the world, but God, in His great love for us all, committed Himself to a remedy. He sent His one and only Son, Jesus the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, so that we should not perish but have eternal life. Ultimate victory is in Him, but the suffering and battle is still part of our experience. Two words, from wisdom's cry, help me to negotiate my way through this maze of pain - innocence and perspective.

Innocence

Most people have no problem in being '*as shrewd as a snake*'. It's second nature to us. This 'shrewdness' forms the foundation of our life as we seek to advance in our work, earn money, show good sense and maintain self-preservation. God calls us to a higher nature. He sends us to be '*as innocent as doves*'.

Can you hear the call to innocence?

The world tempts us to shrewdness but the word calls us to innocence. Innocence is painful purity, vulnerable victory and battered beauty.

Innocence pays the price for sin and overcomes evil.

Let me introduce you to the '*Trickle down Factor*'. Imagine innocence being at the lowest point beneath a gigantic waterfall of sin. All the evil grime trickles down to land at the lowest, most vulnerable point. Christ took this place on the cross. It was not so much his physical suffering, but the horrific, scandalous reality of his ultimate innocence becoming the supreme victim of injustice. In this event, God committed himself to the innocent victims of the world, drawing the pain of history into himself and redeeming it. The punishment which brought us peace fell on him.

This 'trickle down' factor is a tragic rule throughout this fallen world. The innocent ones continue to pay - and yet God works a mysterious transformation of their suffering into glory. His heart beats in harmony with such broken innocence. His lamblike heart is revealed in the book of Revelation 5:5-6.

John, the faithful apostle, sees the scroll of human history opened before him. He contemplates the pain, the judgment, the sorrow, the lukewarm churches and his own weakness. He is driven to tears.

“Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” v.5

Do not weep. A lion has won! This reminds us of the angels’ and Jesus’ words to Mary Magdalene in the garden of resurrection.

“Woman, why are you crying?” John 20:13,15

Bob Marley may well have translated the encounter, *“No woman, no cry”*.

John’s teary eyes look hopefully to heaven, expecting to see a powerful lion. Instead, he sees crucified innocence.

“Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” v.6

Wounded innocence is enthroned in the very heart of God. It is His compassionate commitment to a world of ‘trickle down’ suffering. The seven horns stand for perfect strength, the seven eyes, perfect compassion and the seven spirits, perfect anointing. Innocence overcomes and initiates a celebration of the nations.

“And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” v.9

The Lamb’s wounds do not fester with the memory of evil, but are transfigured to become triumphant emblems of global redemption.

Innocents are sent.

Their humble footsteps are made pure in purpose as they follow the Lamb. The weak say they are strong. Power is harnessed in compassion, while perfect love and full anointing cast out all fear.

Let our ‘shrewd’ hearts soften, embracing the glorifying power of Christ’s love.

“Crown Him the Lord of love: behold His hands and side. Those wounds yet visible above in beauty glorified: no angel in the sky can fully bear that sight, but downward bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright.”

Is wisdom’s cry teaching us that, despite the evil consequences of the war against innocence, there is a measure of victory in the pain as Christ, in becoming flesh, sucks all of suffering humanity and history into his death and takes it to be transfigured into the very heart of God.

Jurgen Moltmann offers another accent to wisdom’s cry in his book, *‘The Crucified God’*.

“How is faith in God, how is being human, possible after Auschwitz? I don't know. But it helps me to remember the story that Elie Wiesel reports in his book on Auschwitz called *“Night.”* Two Jewish men and a child were hanged. The prisoners were forced to watch. The men died quickly. The boy lived on in torture for a long while. “Then someone behind me said: *“Where is God?”* and I was silent. After half an hour he cried out again: *“Where is God? Where is he?”* And a voice in me answered:

“Where is God? He hangs there from the gallows.”

A theology after Auschwitz would be impossible, were not the *“Sch'ma Israel”* and the *“Lord's Prayer”* prayed in Auschwitz itself, were not God himself in Auschwitz, suffering with the martyred and the murdered. Every other answer would be blasphemy. An absolute God would make us indifferent. The God of action and success would let us forget the dead, which we still cannot forget. God as Nothingness would make the entire world into a concentration camp. Let me break off here, and now try, step by step, to penetrate into the mystery of God's suffering, attempting to show how the horizon of humanity exists in the situation of the crucified God.”

Ask the Lord to give you the grace to abandon yourself to innocence, sharing the suffering of commitment and glowing with the bright mystery of transfigured wounds. If we learn to suffer with God, perhaps, one day, we will also learn to laugh with him.

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:17

Let's keep going and look at wisdom's second word to help us to come to terms with unjust suffering:

Perspective

Here's a quotation from *“Curiosités Esthétiques”* by the French poet, Baudelaire, to stimulate your thinking.

“Le mal se fait sans effort, naturellement, par fatalité; le bien est toujours le produit d'un art.”

“Evil is committed, without effort, naturally, fatally; goodness is always the product of some art.”

It is easy to cut down a tree compared to the effort of many seasons to produce a strong trunk. A mother, after spending many long years nurturing and rearing a child, can see him lost in seconds to a madman's bullet. The bullet is cheap and easy, the love worthy and costly.

Heaven is always found in the costly. Learning to look on life with the right perspective will strengthen faith and increase joy.

Effortless evil seems so powerful in this present world. It hangs heavy in the air, polluting our hearts and minds. Suffering and death carry an authority, etching a lie of fear into even the bravest of hearts. Evil seems so real and tangible.

Sin leads us to hell, both present and future. The world's godless ideology also paves the way to destruction. We need to get the 'L' out of our world and feed on the truth of Jesus' word. Hell is the cheap giveaway, offered freely to man like a loaf of stale bread.

Christ invites us to a more costly banquet. He offers His life and living word to nourish us. His truth tells us that our 'troubles' are light and momentary. Compared to costly love, and the faith-filled life that has the quality of eternity, such troubles are as nothing. In fact, the difficulties themselves somehow work to unveil the coming of a glorious, unseen, eternal reality.

Have you learnt to fix your eyes on this reality?

At the end of his book, *'The Great Divorce'*, CS Lewis proclaims this mysterious truth:

"Hell always seems so big when you are in it.

And yet all loneliness, angers, hatreds, envies and itchings that it contains, if rolled into one single experience and put into the scale against the least moment of joy that is felt by the least in Heaven, would have no weight that could be registered at all. Bad cannot succeed even in being bad as truly as good is good. If all Hell's miseries together entered the consciousness of even a little heavenly bird on a bough, they would be swallowed up without trace, as if one drop of ink had been dropped into that Great Ocean to which your terrestrial Pacific itself is only a molecule."

The sufferings of this world will never veto heaven nor cast a stain on eternal glory.

Look beyond today's trials, casting a glance into heaven.

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." Romans 8: 18-20

Just think of this:

What incredible power evil would have if once you had wronged someone, you, the person you had wronged, and God would remain permanently marked by it!

Would there not in the eternal memory of wrongs suffered resound a hellish laughter of the seemingly defeated and yet strangely triumphant underworld, triumphant because it has succeeded in casting eternally its dark shadow over the world to come?

To be fully overcome, evil-doing must be consigned to its proper place – nothingness. Non-remembrance does precisely that, as Kierkegaard insisted.

"To forget is to take back into nothing."

Karl Barth, writing in *'Church Dogmatics'* 111/3, p.352, follows the same thread of thought, introducing his theological concept of 'Das Nichtige'.

“To the past and to oblivion”, is where God’s word consigns ‘das Nichtige’, that great destructive ‘something’ that is most properly nothing. And Psalm 34:16 proclaims:

“The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.”

Miroslav Volf in ‘Exclusion and Embrace’ continues:

“Even in God’s new world, we will either have to look back and see ‘sense’ by making the impossible claim that all suffering was justified, or be deeply troubled by the ‘non-sense’ of evil...If both ‘non-sense’ and ‘sense’ are unacceptable as noetic stances, could then the only way to ‘solve’ the problem of past suffering be the non-theoretical act of non-remembering, just as the only way to overcome the present experience of suffering is the non-theoretical act of re-creation.

Possibly, the age to come – a very present reality in a re-created earth, will link non-remembering with active undoing and transformation. Since no final redemption is possible without the redemption of the past, and since every attempt to redeem the past through mere intellectual reflection, must fail because no theodicy - argument for a loving God in a cruel world, can succeed, the final redemption is unthinkable without a certain kind of cosmic forgetting and renewing. Dante’s hero has to drink the painful amnesic waters of *Lethe* and the redeeming *Eunoe* to enter heaven.

Redemption will be complete when the creation of ‘all things new’ is coupled with the passage of:

“‘all things old’ into the double ‘nihil’ of non-existence and non-remembrance.” Volf

Let ‘innocence’ and ‘perspective’ feed your soul this week.

To Do –

Read all or part of CS Lewis’ book, ‘The Great Divorce’.

Ask – How do I cope with seeing innocent people suffer?

Receive –

1. Healing from injustice.
2. Innocence.
3. A fresh perspective of good and evil.

Envision – Heaven and the power of goodness.

Pray – “Lord, make me an artist of the good, a craftsman of love, shaping the image of Jesus into the world. Amen.”

Holiness is Happiness

Week 48

*“In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed,
In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.” Exodus 15:13*

If you pursue happiness you may find it eludes you. However, if you seek out meaning you will inevitably stumble upon happiness on the journey. God led His people to meaning, to His ‘holy dwelling’.

The journey to holiness is a call to happiness.

True holiness is experienced in four essential encounters.

1. An encounter with *‘living force’*

There is nothing dead about holiness. It is a call to life, a call to the awesome. Great works of God have been accomplished through men and women who had an encounter with this revelation of powerful life force. Wild nature, transcendent worship, incarnate silence, living word and covenant fellowship energise our inner space and woo us to immaculate connection.

2. An encounter with *‘separateness’*

The Hebrew word for ‘holy’ - *qadosh*, means ‘to set apart’. We are called to be different, a chosen people, a holy nation, belonging to God. The Levitical law declares:

“You are to distinguish between the holy and the common.” Leviticus 10:10

Never be condemned by commandments. Do not live a nitpicking nightmare of introspection, analysing, like a zealous Pharisee, a million and one things you can and can’t do during the day. Don’t be dogged by a persistent sense of a lack of holiness. Leviticus 10:10 has to be put aside Hebrews 10:10 which gives us the fantastic news that our holiness is already won for us through faith in the redemptive work and will of Jesus Christ.

“And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Hebrews 10:10

Rather than be worried about being polluted by the world, let us instead infest the world with our holiness.

3. An encounter with *‘Godlikeness’*

Holiness has a God-reflecting quality. The Lord says:

“Be holy, for I am holy.” Leviticus 11:44

He summons us to enter into His character. Godlikeness is *‘wholeness’*. A day by day walking with the Lord brings healing as the Holy Spirit quests to bring wholeness to every area of our lives. The idea of wholeness links very much to the word *‘shalom’*. This Jewish greeting was

much more than a simple 'hello'. It was a desire for completeness, for right relations between men and creation.

The Orthodox theologian, Paul Evdokimov, wrote the following:

"The power of divine holiness is a devouring flame that consumes all impurity; when it touches a man it purifies him and makes him holy; it brings him into harmony with the holiness of God - even into his likeness."

Another Paul, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, wrote:

"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

4. An encounter with '**dynamism**'

Holiness is on the move.

There can be nothing 'static' about the 'ecstatic'.

It gives us a sense of destiny and purpose. Holiness shows itself in action. It is the fuel of the kingdom of God. Holiness is courageous in proclaiming truth and working with others for good. John Wesley recognised that there, '*was no holiness but social holiness*'. Holiness is a group event to be lived out in the rigours of the real world.

In the face of holiness, we can respond in three ways.

Worship – With our brothers and sisters, we sing, glorify and elevate the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

Repentance – We are not afraid, like the penitent tax collector, to confess our weaknesses before the Lord and move on to a new beginning, justified by faith.

Mission – We will move with God's holy tide, caught up in the current of love which takes us to the world.

May every day be a holiday - a holy day, impregnated by these grace-inspired responses.

Isaiah had an incredible revelation of holiness when he saw the Lord upon His throne. Like many of us, he found himself '**unholy**' yet '**infinitely loved**'. He worshiped, changed and boldly responded to the Lord.

"Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah 6:8

Endnote:

This devotional owes much to Alan Kreider's book, '*Journey Towards Holiness*'.

To Do –

Read Leviticus 19:1-37. Make this week a quest for holiness. Look at the four attributes of holiness and write down how they are experienced in your own life. Where can you grow?

Ask – Am I happy? Am I whole?

Receive –

1. Life force.
2. Greater Christlikeness.
3. Movement and mission.

Envision – Jesus walking the dusty streets of Galilee, an ordinary man, yet carrying His divinity in total Holiness. See yourself walking your own streets with the hidden power of holiness.

Pray – “Breathe in me O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy. Act in me O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy. Draw my heart O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy. Strengthen me O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy. Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy. Amen.” St Augustine of Hippo

Losing my Religion

Week 49

Leaves die in autumn and faith can be mortally wounded by the tragedies of this world. We have already quoted from Elie Wiesel's book, *'Night'*, in this autumnal season of our devotionals. He writes about his experiences in Auschwitz.

Because of the genocidal killing, Elie found himself losing his cherished faith in God. At Rosh Hashanah - the Jewish New Year, he was unable to bless the Lord, finding only words of execration.

"Blessed be God's name? Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fibre in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces?...But now, I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy."

This isn't the intellectual atheism that comes from science and psychology – inevitably relying on its own fiduciary framework, but the bitter cry of the believer trying to salvage a faith that is being shipwrecked on the rocks of incalculable suffering.

Christ battled with the same agony when he cried out:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew 27:46

This strident cry, owned by millions over the years, still questions the goodness of God in a world where there is both personal and universal suffering. Some noble fellows, like Elie, prefer to choose atheism – or agnosticism, in a brave effort to exonerate God from the responsibility of being a despot!

Every generation is confronted with the basic question of why a good God permits the manifestation of evil – a question which the thinker Leibnitz framed in the term *'Theodicy'*. Is it possible to answer both of the following questions in the affirmative?

Is God good?

Is God all powerful?

For Wiesel, an affirmation of God's power was in contradiction to an affirmation of His goodness. Why didn't the all-powerful God step in and change things if he really is good?

I remember hearing a young Rwandan lady testifying. She hid behind a large chair while Hutu rebels invaded her home and began to massacre her Tutsi family. She watched them raise the blade of a machete over her beloved father and brother. She said how hard she had prayed at that moment, asking God for help and divine intervention. In spite of her prayer, the deadly blade still drew blood and killed.

“It was at that moment that I lost my faith,” she continued.

Is it still possible to affirm God’s goodness in the face such apparent contradictions?

The biblical patriarch Job faced such apparent contradictions in his own life. Why had he, a just man, been so painfully afflicted and suffered such unbearable loss? In his struggle for understanding – and it always is a struggle, he refuses to compromise on God’s goodness.

“Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised. In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.” Job 1:21-22

Never sin by compromising God’s essential character of love! Always begin your answer to the theodicy question with a relationship, with intimacy, with total affirmation of God’s goodness. Begin with the person before the power. This is the tragedy of Wiesel. Having begun with the affirmation God’s omnipotence he finds his faith overcome by the inability to equally affirm His goodness in the midst of such horror.

Convinced of God’s immutable love, we can now dare to consider the question of his power. Let God Himself answer the question. The apostle Paul was faced with dreadful suffering from a satanic messenger. In spite of his earnest prayers and upright life, he found no relief. In despair, he cried to God and heard the Lord answer him.

“But he said to me. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12:9

We need to reframe our idea of power. True omnipotence has vulnerability at its heart. The apostle John, weeping at the tragedy of world history, received a paradigm shift on power when he had a vision of the Sovereign throne in heaven.

“Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” Revelation 5:5-6

Lions and thrones – the things of power, and yet at the heart of all that is a little, suffering lamb –

“Slain from the foundation of the world.” Revelation 13:8

We cannot simply affirm a pagan, totalitarian power to God. His power sometimes seems totally defeated by evil, only to rise again in the perfect strength of resurrection.

Paul, still painfully pierced by his thorn, understood the radical concept of God’s power passing through a cross.

“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Many have asked the very legitimate questions of why it is necessary to “rejoice in weakness”. No easy answers here. Suffering is shrouded in a certain mystery. However, here are some thoughts?

My first advice is to always resist suffering in all its forms. Paul prayed three times! Don't seek suffering. There are basically three approaches.

Resist – A huge amount of suffering is a direct result of Satan's attack on the human race. God has sown good seed but evil seeds are also sown in the middle of the night.

"An enemy did this!" Matthew 13:28

Before having the knee-jerk reaction of blaming God, it might be worthwhile considering that there may well be an evil adversary at the origin of such suffering.

Linked to this, is the notion of suffering as a consequence of our own wrong decisions, sins and errors. The Apostle Peter speaks about this.

"But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God." 1 Peter 2:20

"If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." 1 Peter 4:15-16

Don't blame God for the consequences of your own bad choices. Resist the enemy and he will flee from you. Turn away from your sins so that times of refreshing may come upon you.

Grow – St Irenaeus saw suffering as a necessary part of 'soul making'. The simple, sin-stained clay of Adam is destined to sit with Christ on a throne alongside the Father. Suffering purges us of carnal dross and transforms us into Christ's image.

"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed." 1 Peter 1:6-7

"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." Romans 5:3-5

Purpose – Corrie Ten Boon, the famous Dutch author of 'The Hiding Place' – which recounts her ordeal in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, saw suffering in life as two sides of a tapestry. Sometimes, we only see the ragged, incomprehensible, disordered strands from our side. However, on the other side there is a beautiful tapestry woven in heaven. There is a sense of some divine plan, some redemptive suffering and some purpose behind it all.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

Suffering will cause various emotions to rise up in our hearts. Let's call them the three 'Rs'.

Rebellion – This is the most natural emotion. It is important to give it space to come out, but do not let it take root.

Resignation – When you realise that you can't actually change some things, a certain stoic fatalism can set in. This is better than rebellion, but must never be our final destination.

Resurrection Hope – This is the place of glorious victory, the place where the dry bones live again - Ezekiel 37:1-10, where a devastated Marie Magdalene hears her name - John 20:16, and where the world finds hope.

“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”
1 Corinthians 15:19-20

As we saw in our earlier devotional, God was not entirely lost to Elie Wiesel. During a cruel hanging of a child, he heard someone ask:

“Where is God? Where is he?”

Not heavy enough for the weight of his body to break his neck, the boy died slowly. Wiesel filed past him, seeing his tongue still pink and his eyes clear.

“Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

Where is God now?

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows.”

We end with a paradox. Is God hanging dead in the Nietzschean sense – overcome, vanquished by horror? Or is he hanging with us in our deepest sufferings, identifying fully with our pain?

The little slain lamb, the ultimate power at the centre of the throne, leads us to the hope of resurrection. Choose life.

To Do –

Read Deuteronomy 32:1-5. Research the lives and writings of Elie Wiesel and Corrie Ten Boon. What truths do you learn from both of their lives?

Ask – How do I respond to suffering?

Receive –

1. Power to resist evil.
2. Growth in the troubled time.
3. A sense of purpose being worked out in the tapestry of life.

Envision – The world to come with no more death or mourning or crying or pain.
Revelation 21:4

Pray – “Lord God, give me the faith to know that you are good all the time. Give me the strength to carry your power in my weakness, and the joy to celebrate your victory over suffering and death in the resurrection. I ask this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.”

Glorify and Finish

Week 50

"I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." John 17:4

What might be the most fulfilling prayer you could pray today?

We can learn a lot from Jesus' prayers. Why not begin with these simple words?

"Let me bring you glory on earth today."

In what ways might you bring God glory on earth?

Here's the beginning of a list that could stretch on to many pages. Begin the day in prayer and worship. Use words of grace and wisdom to others. Walk in the holiness of the Holy Spirit. Share the Gospel with boldness. Do acts of generosity and kindness.

It would be great if that list was our everyday experience. Life is not as simple as that. Unfortunately, some days we wake up with a runny nose, feeling miserable and totally uninspired to live up to our heavenly calling. Events seem to work against the very 'glory' we want to see shine out.

It is in these 'real' moments of a 'troubled heart' that we have the greatest opportunity of bringing genuine glory to God.

Look at Jesus' words in John 12:27

"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"

What do you say when your heart is troubled?

Our words and choices at these difficult hours are crucial. We can choose to rebel, accuse, groan and get depressed, or simply keep a stoic silence. In the above passage, Jesus suggests that there is another prayer alternative.

"Save me from it all!"

It is perfectly normal to want out of pain and problems. 'Help', or 'Save me', are the most ubiquitous prayers on the market. Didn't Jesus come to destroy the works of the devil and give His people an abundant life? Of course, we can pray to escape oppression but we need the wisdom to know when we should battle against it and when we might even embrace it. Perhaps the two might even be intricately entwined in the Divine economy.

In fact, a whole Christian industry has grown up around this knee-jerk 'save me' option! A crossless Gospel promises a life of benefits without any pain. Make me rich, beautiful and healthy, Amen! Pain is to be avoided at all costs. We close our eyes in the gentle flow of music, praying for escape. Such prayers borrow more from 'Star Trek' than the Bible, as we pray like some pseudo Captain Kirk:

“Beam me up Goddie!”

Jesus didn't pray to be *'beamed up'*, but recognized the coming of His hour.

He went beyond the simple *'save me'* option, boldly embracing His purpose to *'save others'*.

It is when we move beyond self that we can truly glorify the Lord. Jesus knew that the cross was His destiny and He cleaved to it with a passion.

So, what do you say when your heart is troubled?

“Father, glorify your name!” v.27

And what is the work the Lord has given you to do?

Ephesians 2:10, speaks about the different works that have been allotted to His servants.

“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Everyday life events provide ample opportunity for our heavenly vocation. We can be extraordinary in the ordinary. Being loving spouses, caring parents, diligent workers and loyal friends are ways of expressing the works the Lord has given us.

We will also be called to *'greater works'* for the kingdom of God, which will give weight to our testimony in the world.

“I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.” John 5:36

God is glorified by finished works. Make an extra effort with even the most mundane tasks, like washing up or cleaning a room. It is easy to begin something. It is much harder to see it through to the end. We need to grit our teeth and push on to completion.

Have you finished your work?

It is important to discern the time to move on to another season once we have finished.

However, beyond all the little tasks the Lord gives us, there is one overarching work that each one of us is called to. It is the work of ongoing sacrifice, the work that changes our hearts and character - the work of the cross.

Jesus modelled this work as, *'knowing that all was now completed'* - John 19:28, He trod the road of obedience to meet His destiny on a hill outside Jerusalem. His final, triumphant cry resonates through history, wakes our wearied hearts and sets the seal of love's accomplishment on history.

“It is finished” – Paid in full! John 19:30

May we finish well and complete this Calvary road the Lord has set before us.

To Do –

Read Hebrews 12:1-15. Make a list of all the ‘works’ the Lord has given you to accomplish. Whatever its length, pray over it this week to understand what may be finished and what new works you may be called to embrace.

Ask – Am I running away from any responsibility?

Receive –

1. Courage to stay and stick with the task.
2. Finishing faith.
3. A deep desire to please the Lord.

Envision – All the unfinished things in your life and environment, material and spiritual, being finished. See Jesus coming alongside to encourage you and give you strength to finish well.

Pray – “Father, glorify your name. Amen.”

Surpassing Greatness – My Hyper Echo!

Week 51

A man, carrying the weight of his years, steadily climbs the mountain path. The rocky inclines lead him through peaks and valleys as his journey winds on. His thoughts fly, like lonely sparrows, across his mind as he reflects on his life. His inner ears hear a phrase from the famous Al Pacino movie, *'Any Given Sunday'*:

"When you get old in life, things get taken from you."

He sighs deeply, grasping the words like a painful nettle of truth, sobbing tears from his saddened soul. The effort of the climb brings a sense of release. He reaches an expanse of desolation, haloed by majestic cliff faces.

He finds words to clothe his inner turmoil and shouts them, sling like, into the air.

Are you on a journey? You might be carrying the pain of loss. Life is full of losses. The parables speak of lost sheep, sons, and coins. This world is full of lost hope, health and happiness. People lose purpose and innocence.

"What is your loss?"

What would you shout out into the desolate wind if you were on the same mountain as our friend?

The man's words fly out into the wild, received into the womb of time. Aged rocks, green with wisdom, bear silent witness to human brevity. Then, from the other side of emptiness, comes a new sound. His sadness finds an answer as an eternal echo of truth replies to his pain.

"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things." Philippians 3:7-8

"Can you hear the same echo?"

Whatever loss may gnaw away at your substance, know that there is something that surpasses pain. Whatever *'hyper'* loss you name, know that there is an even greater *'hyperecho'* - the Greek for *'surpassing greatness'*. The literal meaning is, *'to hold above everything'*.

Knowledge of the holy, friendship with the generous heart, fellowship with the humble servant from heaven - all this intimacy, is part of such surpassing greatness.

Jesus knows all about loss. He lost heaven as He bowed into flesh, lost status as He bent to wash feet and lost life as He embraced human tragedy on a cruel cross.

He went low but overcame, climbing to the heights of glory and taking us with Him to enjoy the rainbow after the rain. Wounds are transfigured into emblems of glory and pain is forgotten when life's great resurrection mystery shines forth.

Allow the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ to beautify your wounds in glory. Flame-eyed angels will bow the head in wonder when they witness the bride sharing the intimate suffering of her Bridegroom's life.

Our friend Paul never lost the wonder of such a glorious mystery. His life became one long quest for the knowledge of his beloved Jesus. He had acquired so much social, intellectual and religious standing. After his new birth, he had accomplished so many exploits and composed so much theology - and yet he considered it nothing.

“I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” Philippians 3:8-9

May your faith be quickened as you stand, safe and strong, in the life of Christ.

Let's go back to our friend in the mountains. His face finds fresh light and youthfulness. He is overwhelmed by the *'hyperecho'* of heaven.

He looks towards the distant peaks with a renewed sense of purpose, his hopes and dreams empowered by Presence. The inner weeping has given way to inner laughter. He throws out a new prayer to the waiting wind.

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Philippians 3:10-11

To Do –

Read Philippians 3:7-14. If you find the grace to do it, think about your losses in life this week. Hold them gently in the presence of the Lord, seeking solace, closure and meaning.

Ask – Is my gain greater than my loss?

Receive –

1. Healing of the heart – *“The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”* Psalm 34:18
2. Surpassing greatness – *“Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.”* Psalm 34:5
3. A renewed sense of purpose – *“Turn from evil and do good; seek peace – shalom, and pursue it.”* Psalm 34:14

Envision – Being like Christ in His loss, and like Him in His living.

Pray – “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Amen.”

Stand Up, Lift Up

Week 52

We live in a world that bombards us with information. Social media feeds us a continual ‘all inclusive’ menu of facts and stories. It is reckoned that we receive the equivalent of 174 newspaper’s worth of data every day.

I’m writing this in October 2020, an historic moment in history. The world is facing up to the mass challenge of Covid-19. Thousands have already died in Asia, America and Europe while the African nations hold their breath, hoping for their own mortality curves to dip in the coming weeks and months. The news is full of fear and death. We are faced with a day and night barrage of bad news.

How can we cope?

I find solace in seven words from Jesus in Luke 21:5-37

1. *“Watch out you are not deceived.”* v.8

Fake news and false ideologies poison our minds with lies. Strive for wisdom and truth. In the Old Testament, it was important for the priests to have just weights and measures. Ask for the gift of discernment, so that you can correctly ‘weigh up’ the information received.

2. *“Do not be frightened.”* v.9

If lies battle to win our minds, fear seeks to own our hearts. Faith needs to overcome fear. Faith comes from hearing Jesus’ words. He spoke to ‘friends’ when he said:

“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” Luke 12:4-5

Be prudent and humble, but don’t fear ‘Coronavirus’ – it is limited and can only kill the body; fear displeasing God through catching ‘Hamartavirus’ – the sin virus, which locks you into the rubbish tip of destruction and is one hundred percent fatal without the remedy of grace. Jesus uses the word ‘Gehenna’ for ‘hell’ which was the name of a valley filled with trash.

3. *“They will lay hands on you and persecute you.”* v.12

Jesus tells us straight. There is no easy journey through life for those *“who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”* Revelation 12:17

4. *“This will result in you being witnesses to them.”* v.13

Mission is the dynamic aspect of troubled times and persecution. This tragic season of a world pandemic gives the opportunity for witness through words of hope and acts of kindness. In the midst of bad news, we can bring good news. This echoes Jesus’ parallel statement in Matthew 24:14, when He says that:

“The good news of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.”

5. *“But not a hair of your head will perish.”* v.18

Stand firm in love and you will gain life.

“Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able stand before the son of man.” v.36

6. *“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”* v.28

In the midst of being overwhelmed by the tragic, downward spiral of life, step into a new paradigm. Switch on the inner light as the darkness deepens. Find elevation. Hope resurrection. Even the darkness predicts the approach of a new dawn.

7. *“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life.”* v.34

There is an appropriate place for grief and burden – especially as we confront the immense human suffering of the present ‘*pestilence*’, but don’t own a heavy heart. Refuse the dark weight of daily depression and anxiety. Jesus says that:

“Nations will be in anguish and perplexity...” v.25

He explains how:

“Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world.” v.26

Don’t get caught up in the net of negative news broadcasts and social media feeds which overwhelm us with suffering, but have no substance to hold the depth of their message. Calvary is the only context able to own the wound of the world. Let us humbly approach the innocent, suffering God, hanging naked, shamed and pained on the wooden cross.

Jesus said that we risked becoming ‘*intoxicated*’ – addicted to trouble without remedy. The word ‘*dissipation*’ he uses, in the context of being weighed down, means a nauseous ‘*hang-over*’ in the original text. He tells us to avoid being caught up in the sickening swoon of information overload.

Worries about life and survival can become a daily crown of thorns. Exchange the crown of pain for the crown of life. Loosen your grip on the ‘world system’ and embrace Jesus’ ‘word system’?

Get the ‘L’ out of your world.

“Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.” Psalm 30:5

To Do –

Troubled times can teach us new priorities. Read Luke 21:5-37 and take time out to think about the essentials of life?

Ask - What material, social, psychological and spiritual reserves do I have to help me cope in a crisis?

Receive –

1. Faith instead of fear.
2. Elevation – a perspective of future, heavenly hope.
3. Power to share the Gospel

Envision – A world healed of suffering. The earth rebuilt and transformed for the better after the 2020 Covid-19 tragedy. See yourself '*standing tall*' through all of this, deeply loved by Jesus.

Pray – “Heavenly Father, may not a hair of my head – or indeed my entire soul, perish. I believe you died on the cross, bearing my sin and bringing forgiveness. I believe you rose up from the dead to destroy death and live forevermore. I welcome you into my heart as my Lord and lover. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.”

Gleanings – Gifts for the Humble



Prophetic Praying

Leaf 1

"Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience." 1 Timothy 1:18-19

Are you still fighting in prayer? If so, what are you struggling and holding on to? Can you put it into simple words?

In the above passage, Paul is instructing Timothy in prophetic praying. He brings him back to the living, prophetic word that had gripped Timothy's life. At the beginning of the chapter, Paul had spoken about conserving sound doctrine in the church, but it is probable that Paul is thinking of the wider encouragements spoken over his young disciple's life. What are the words that have inspired you, your family and your church?

There is a growing trend in the church towards intimacy, producing meetings which contain hours of contemplative prayer and charismatic worship. Ephesians 6:18 speaks of *'all kinds of prayers'*, so the various expressions of prayer all have their own particular validity.

However, there is a danger that we may be losing the clear underpinning of living, prophetic word which leads us into the fighting spirit of prayer. At some point, we must be able to interpret a clear word of revelation - most probably the fruit of careful meditation on God's word in the secret place. Leaders need to be able to clearly communicate the God-given goals they have overheard. Indeed, *'by following'* such revelation we hold on to faith, stand united and fight the good fight in prayer.

If we lose the tendency to seek living word, we will lose our tendency to fight. If you are not following fresh revelation, what are you following?

The greatest asset to a work of God is the creative hub of persevering, prophetic prayer. This grace of corporate praying from revelation is a vital aspect of our Christian identity.

The enemy fears such prayer and will do anything to silence it. Mysticism, dead liturgy, laziness and unbelief will sap away at the strength of a clear, proclaimed word.

Romans 4:17 mentions a God who,

"...calls things that are not as though they were."

Made in His image, we can rise to the creativity of prophetic prayer and partner with the Holy Spirit in calling into being the nuts and bolts of God's kingdom amongst the nations.

A group that perseveres in this creative calling is unstoppable. This is where mission is energised. Don't be afraid to be inventive. Learn to pray around maps of towns, regions and nations. Lives are changed in such prayer events and ministry foundations are laid for the future. It is time to beckon a new season of creative, prophetic prayer into our churches around the world.

*“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but **believes that what he says will happen**, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Mark 11:22-24*

Jesus didn't just pray at the mountain. He didn't just worship at the mountain, light a candle, dance or remain silent. He spoke a clear, faith-filled, understandable command. Like David, who longed to drink at the well in Bethlehem, I long to be part of a prayer that is inspired, authoritative and born in heaven.

What are you saying? Believe that it will happen!

It is a gift to be able to ‘say’ with others, creating and interpreting prophetic word together. It is one of the most satisfying experiences available to Christians - a million miles away from the erroneous conception of a boring prayer meeting.

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” Matthew 18:19-20

The art of team building is to gather a group of people in prayer who can be in tune with one another, flowing together in divine agreement. This ‘agreement’ is not just a superficial nod of the head. It is more like the mature fruit of months of prayer, interpreting the word of the Lord. It is the agreement of loyalty one to another and the common commitment to follow Christ. As world is becoming more global and our churches more diverse, we are confronted with a greater challenge to ‘agreement’. We must make space for different languages, cultures and various church traditions. In the face of such diversity, it is vital to conserve the DNA of prophetic prayer, so that it can be expressed within the arena of a multicultural world.

If we can find the ‘agreement’ in prophetic prayer, then the work of mission ‘*will be done for us*’ by ‘*our Father in heaven*’.

To Do –

List the ‘prophetic words’ which have formed – and are still forming, your walk with God.

Ask – Who am I praying with?

Receive –

1. Prophetic word.
2. A context to pray, share and build on that word.
3. Faith to speak a clear word to the mountain.

Envision – Prayer groups being birthed and built across the world.

Pray – “Lord, teach me to pray and help me to speak to the mountain. Amen.”

Prophetic Preaching

Leaf 2

“You are the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you forever.” Psalm 45:2

“But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.” 1 Corinthians 14:3

The Bible gives us several examples of prophetic preaching - the kind of dynamic utterance which defies the dead letter of legalism, bringing life and transformation to those who hear it.

Here are a few examples. Don't hesitate to do your own research and find more. I've brought the '*paras*' in to give us a bit of Greek support!

Boldness - parrhēsia

There is full confidence as the living word rings out. Acts 2:29, shows the apostle Peter frankly and freely interpreting Israel's history, while the Pharisees are amazed at the disciples' fearless proclamation in Acts 4:13.

Exhortation, a word in season - parakaleo

This word literally means, 'called near' – sometimes summoned too close for comfort! It is similar to the word 'comfort'. In this sense, it is not the comfort of the sick bed, but the comfort of seeing chains fall off when conviction of sin is met with the solution of grace. The 'sword-word' strikes with precision. See Acts 13:15 and Titus 2:15.

Consolation, to empathise - paramutheomai

Here is an appeal to the emotions – a call to love. Like the disciples on the Emmaus road, our hearts may burn within us when we hear this utterance. It incarnates the ability to empathise, to relate, not just in words and reason, but in 'feeling' and identification with the audience. See 1 Thessalonians 2:11 and 1 Corinthians 14:3.

After the '*paras*', we need to move on.

Edify, to build up the house - epoikodomeo

Jeremiah 23:29 says:

“Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”

A fire can burn a house down and a hammer can smash things. In times of extreme corruption, demolition may be the only solution. However, in the New Testament, prophetic word was meant to 'edify' and build up the house - the church.

Listen to Paul's words in Acts 20:32:

“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

True prophetic words and preaching are mostly edifying - they put up a ‘decent roof’, bringing healthy growth to the body. The French poet, Charles Péguy, understood the importance of feeding on such living word:

“Jesus did not give us dead words for us to salt away in little tins, for us to preserve in rancid oil...No, he gave us living words...The words of life...On us, weak creatures of flesh, it depends to keep these words uttered in time alive, to feed them and keep them alive in time.”

Bear Witness, to charge - martureo

The book of Acts begins with a powerful anointing to be ‘witnesses’ to the end of the earth. The word ‘witness’ has the same root as the word ‘martyr’. Living testimony is validated by the living sacrifices that carry it to a watching world. Let us be worthy witnesses.

*“For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and **urging you to live lives worthy of God**, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.”* 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12

I’ll leave the last word to Jeremiah who was so troubled by the superficial words of the lying prophets of his time. He gives us the key to successful prophetic preaching in chapter 23:18.

“But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?”

Are you standing in the council of the Lord? Do you see His word? Who has listened and heard His word? May you be enlightened as you listen, and may your lips be anointed to speak ‘living words’.

To Do –

Read Psalm 45. Try and compose a short sermon that you might share with others.

Ask – Am I standing in the council of the Lord?

Receive –

1. Boldness.
2. The gift of encouragement.
3. Empathy

Envision – A strong house with a beautiful roof protecting it from the wind and rain. See the church of God edified by faithful preaching.

Pray – “Lord, anoint my lips with grace that they may strengthen, encourage and comfort those around me. In Jesus name I ask. Amen.”

Crushed or Transformed?

Leaf 3

*“Simon, Simon, **Satan has asked** to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”*

Luke 22:31-32

Why do bad things happen to the nicest of people? Why is there suffering in the world? Philosophers and theologians have sweated over these questions for years, trying to come up with some convincing theodicy – ‘justification of God’. A theodicy is an attempt to answer the question:

“How could an all-loving and all-powerful God have permitted such evil and human suffering to be part of His creation?”

We’ve looked at this question in the previous seasonal devotionals. It would indeed be presumptuous to think there is an easy answer, but I would venture to contribute a simple observation to the debate.

Bad things happen because ‘*Satan asks*’.

The generous faculty of prayer, which God has offered and built into His creation, has been usurped by the prince of darkness.

One of the earliest writings of the Bible is the book of Job. In the very first chapter, Job 1:6-11, we see a kind of angelic prayer meeting as the ‘*sons of God*’ come to present themselves to the Lord. Satan joins in the gathering and tries to undermine the divine eulogy of Job by saying that his integrity is based merely on self-interest.

“Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has and he will surely curse you to your face.” v.11

Satan has an evil logic in his asking that demands a response from the Lord. Simply destroying Satan would leave his perverted prayer unanswered, raising a question mark in eternity.

So, the Lord chooses to answer, through the suffering of His servant Job – a suffering which prefigures the ultimate answer to Satan’s jibe, the suffering Christ at Calvary.

Satan asks about Job, but he is continually asking about the servants of the Lord. In the title passage, it is Simon Peter’s turn to become the unfortunate object of Satan’s prayer. How many leaders may have underestimated the terrible power of this ‘demonic asking’ and found themselves in compromising circumstances? How many tragic events in world history may also find their origin in this shadowy orison?

Satan has been asking throughout history. When the Father affirmed His pleasure in His Son Jesus by declaring in Luke 3:22:

“You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Satan counterattacked with the twice twisted prayer question in Luke 4:3,9:

“If you are the Son of God...”

His final prayer proposition was to usurp the very position of God.

"...if you worship me..." v.7

The world suffers under this satanic onslaught of damning prayer. Many never rise above the dark tide. However, good news is on the way. For those who believe, there is a greater asking.

"But I have prayed for you." Luke 22:32

God incarnated Himself into intercessory prayer, satisfying and overcoming the enemies' demands. He bled out a greater cry of victory in a perfect prayer of total goodness that straddles the history of mankind and redeems us from the claims of the evil one.

Jesus prayed for Simon, and He is praying for you. He ever lives to intercede for His people - Hebrews 7:25. If God gives Satan the freedom to ask, how much more should we take up our own authority to *"ask anything in Jesus' name."* John 14:14

Jesus' prayer means that your faith will not fail. Don't ever give up. Abide in this perpetual prayer of Christ on your behalf and, as an active participant, find words to take your living place within it. The only possibility for a failure of prayer is in its ceasing! Jesus always lives to pray, so never stop living in His prayer. Enter more fully into this 'slow burn' prayer of victory.

What else might Jesus have prayed?

The great intercession of John 17 gives us some direction.

"Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you." v.3

Jesus' quest was to get glory for the Father through his own glory. This can be our prayer in the midst of suffering.

"What shall I say? Save me? No. Glorify your name." John 12:27-28

This prayer for glory opens heaven –*'it thundered'*, and annuls the supplications of the enemy.

"Now is the time for judgement on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out." John 12:31

Jesus also prayed for the protection of His chosen ones.

"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name...protect them from the evil one." v.11, and v.15

In Zechariah 3:2, we overhear the Lord's stinging rebuke of the evil one's prayerful accusation.

"The Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you!"

Satan's prayer meets total rebuke.

You can always come home!

"And when you have turned back..." Luke 22:32

This was the lesson the prodigal son learned. In the heat of the battle - and even in dismal failure, we overhear the victorious prayer of grace echoing down from the cross through the ages. There is always a way home to the Heavenly Father.

The school of hard knocks teaches wisdom. When we return, like Peter in the opening passage, we can be used to strengthen our brothers and sisters. The Body of Christ needs to be encouraged by grace-filled servants who carry the word of God on their lips and the intercession of Christ in their hearts, servants who strengthen their brothers and sisters, overcoming the enemy's asking.

Relax into the overcoming asking of Christ.

"I have prayed for you." v.32

The way to become a disciple is to survive in the testing times.

Running away at the first sign of difficulty is not a credible witness for others. Never give up, but push through into tested faith. This will be the foundation upon which future ministry is built.

"If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?" Jeremiah 12:5

Jesus is praying for the gold in us to become the gold in others. When you have gotten through this present trial, go and be an encouragement to others.

Many years ago, I used to read cartoons about 'Superman'. In one story, he was fighting an evil gorilla with awesome power. They decided to have a test of strength. This cartoon battle between good and evil proves a useful image to describe our present situation of being caught between two prayers. The gorilla showed how strong he was by taking a piece of coal and crushing it to dust in his mammoth grip. Then, Superman took the same size piece of coal and began to squeeze it in his own hand. He exercised amazing force, but instead of crushing it to dust, his grip changed it into a diamond!

Jesus' prayer overcomes the power of the satanic asking and transforms us into precious stones, fit to embellish the foundations of His future dwelling.

Don't let yourself be crushed.

Be transformed into something precious.

Don't despair over the seeming lack of prayer in the world. Never allow the lonely lie of being neglected in prayer to reach your heart. Even if few are indeed praying, know that Christ is ever interceding for all His precious Peters.

"He always lives to intercede for them." Hebrews 7:25

To Do –

Take time to expose the lies and condemnation that the enemy has 'asked' over you. Where your soul feels 'sifted' find healing in the prayer of Christ.

Ask – Is my faith failing?

Receive –

1. A total deliverance from the enemy's attack.
2. Jesus' prayer on your behalf.
3. Unfailing faith.

Envision – All the people you can strengthen through your victorious life.

Pray – “Glorify me so that I may glorify you. Amen”

Swiss Cheese with Love

Leaf 4

To explain the rare event of an aeroplane crash someone developed the ‘Swiss cheese’ theory. Take four slices of Gruyere and line them up together. It would be unlikely that you would get four holes lined up exactly.

However, a plane crash occurs when all the fail-safe procedures break down, causing an uncanny alignment of negative circumstances, which allow the plane to fly through the ‘Gruyere holes’ to disaster. Modern ‘chaos theory’ contends that the flap of a butterfly wing in one part of the globe can constitute the crucial variable that produces a hurricane in another part of the globe. Our lives are filled with infinite future possibilities.

My own life had its share of ‘possibilities’ when my nineteen-year-old son flew through a few holes of his own.

“A basket ball pass was a few centimetres too short, causing an ankle to twist and ligaments to stretch. The doctor then decided on a prolonged convalescence of ten days. This gave the opportunity to take a break to visit friends back in France. The employer allowed the leave. A last minute place on a fully-booked train appeared. A text message with an invitation for a night out arrived. Advice not to go was ignored. A driver had too much drink. Sleep and accident came. A passenger's neck was fractured. Three lives were changed. A visit to Rwanda and Ethiopia cancelled.”

Flying through holes creates stress! Here are a few musings to encourage any of you who have memories of, or are negotiating, your own holes.

Allow the pain to produce prayer

It is unlikely that natural strength will be able to sustain the prayer intensity that locks into deep communion with God. A ‘lump of agony in the inner man’ finds release through constant sighing in the presence of God.

Accept the ploughing up of the fallow ground of the heart. Allow the waves of compassion to bring a fresh softening and sensitivity.

Never doubt the absolute goodness and integrity of God

“Ascribe greatness to our God the Rock, His work is perfect and all His ways are just...A God of faithfulness and without injustice, good and upright is He.” Deuteronomy 32:3-4

Continually rebuke the enemy and his dark forces

“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the evil one.” 1 John 3:8

Remember Joshua, the high priest, overhearing God speaking on his behalf:

“The Lord rebuke you Satan.” Zechariah 3:2

Embrace suffering love

Someone once shared a prayer he carried:

“I went very deep down in prayer until I reached the very depths of my being. It was there that I found and touched a heart – it was the heart of Jesus.”

At some point, we need to touch a heart. The Holy Spirit, our Comforter, leads us to the ‘suffering love’ of Christ. Suffering love is the most precious thing that we can possess. It is the quality of love that overcomes death and casts out fear. Our walk here on earth is an apprenticeship where we learn suffering love. Every day brings little opportunities to experience it, but it is in the moments of trial that we find a greater intensity to this love. The gold is refined in the purifying fire.

It is this suffering love which became flesh and dwelt amongst us. Jesus is our ‘Emmanuel’, God's heart with us.

May you never fly alone through the holes, but be made whole in Christ's suffering love.

Here is a short testimony concerning the holes we flew through with my son. He was involved in a serious car accident and was rushed to a hospital in Belgium with three fractured cervical bones - the ones that control breathing and movement from below the shoulders. He was also badly concussed with two big gashes on his head.

He risked death and paralysis. One doctor told us that he might suffocate if he sneezed. A specialist examined him in Belgium, saying that he needed to be transferred to Lille where he would be fitted with a ‘halo’ - a metal support which entails an operation as it is screwed into the skull. This was one of our most challenging moments. People from all over the world were praying for him. We were willing to follow medical advice but, as we prayed, we felt uneasy about the operation. After the transfer to Lille, we visited our son. This was an amazing turning point for us. The doctors had re-examined his dossier and decided the operation was not necessary. They felt that a strong ‘Minerva’ neck brace would be sufficient. They applied this brace to him and then, after 4 days of lying on his back in Belgium, they asked him to try and stand with help. It was fantastic to see him getting slowly to his feet and begin moving.

He had made so much progress by the next day that they were prepared to let him leave the hospital and come home to us!

My own love deepened for my son during this time. ‘Suffering love’ is the greatest asset we possess.

As the cheese holes line up, there is one final hole that doesn't line up. It saves us from destruction. It is the ‘fail-safe’ grace of God's unconditional love. Suffering love is unconditional love. We can never fall lower than the ‘everlasting arms’ of Deuteronomy 33:27:

“The Eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms”

To Do –

Read Job 42:10-17. If it is not too painful, think back to some of the difficult times you have gone through in your own life.

Ask – Did I find anything through the pain?

Receive –

1. Healing of loss through His eternal presence.
2. Prayers of compassion.
3. Suffering love.

Envision – Total restoration. The epilogue, in Job 42:7-17, is a life metaphor for restoration. It speaks of getting everything back one day. Double the number of animals lost etc. But how do you replace the loss of children? I spent some time in Rwanda after the genocide. I was confronted with the loss of parents and children on a grand scale. People would come to me with their pain and their questions. One lady came with a battered black and white photo of her young son, asking:

“How can the irreplaceable be replaced?”

That question still prods me painfully but, as I searched for answer beyond man’s reason, I found some solace in Job. God doesn’t just ‘clone back’ a double number of children - He simply replaces what was lost. He replaces the lost years and possibilities as well as the people. The epilogue is a ‘last word’ on history. Everything is kept safe in God’s suffering love.

“The irreplaceable will be replaced.”

Pray – “Lord, give me hope and give me faith that my own irreplaceable losses will be replaced. Let the infant fulfil his destiny and may the old man live out his years – Isaiah 65:20, and may the sound of weeping and crying be heard no more. I ask in the name of Jesus, in the name of suffering love. Amen.”

Little Gidding

Leaf 5

On a beautiful, frosty winter morning, I had the joy of making my own personal pilgrimage to Little Gidding, the place that inspired the famous poem by T.S. Eliot. A scintillating sun, framed in the perfect blue heaven, reflected beams of dazzling brilliance on the white frost in the same Pentecostal glow that Eliot's words create.

*"When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
In windless cold that is the heart's heat,
Reflecting in a watery mirror
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon."*

It is not an easy place to find, nestled anonymously amongst the rolling, wild fields of the Huntingdonshire countryside. As I drove up a neglected narrow road, ridged with a grassy band in the middle, I wondered where I might end up.

*"There are other places
Which also are the world's end, some at the sea jaws,
Or over a dark lake, in a desert or a city -
But this is the nearest, in place and time,
Now and in England."*

I arrived, a lone pilgrim, into a beautiful clearing and a well cared for garden which surrounded a little church which was established by Nicolas Ferrar in the late 16th century. I pushed the door of the church, but it appeared locked so I continued on a contemplative walk into the countryside. I eventually arrived at another wonderful old church in Steeple Gidding. It stood, a proud, stoned silhouette in the blue azure, testifying to centuries of worship. As I made my way back to Little Gidding, I took a shortcut and needed to cross a small stream. Without thinking, I took a long run and launched myself into the air, like Icarus soaring sunwards, hoping to clear the water. I had the distance over the water, but was not expecting to land up to my ankles in the bog beyond!

*"Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic."*

I was not just 'sodden', but profusely imbued with thick, brown mud which my enthusiastic momentum had awoken from its docile passivity in the boggy grass. I felt so stupid, yet glad that only a few singing birds were witness to my fall. I waded afresh to the church door which now, like the wardrobe of Narnia, opened to my touch.

A soiled man, I entered and knelt down on a cushion at the end of the chapel.

"I still want to serve you Lord," I mumbled.

*"You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more*

*Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying."*

I thought of the 'valid', centuries old prayers of the Ferrar community and those of many other kneeling men. Would my mud-soaked offering also be heard? I entered 'the timeless moment', the never-dying intercession of the slow burn prayer.

*"And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always."*

Somehow, I felt that my quest to find a new meaning for this old existence had begun. I found hope to believe that a new song would sing fresh notes into the music of my coming years. Eliot, in the same poetic quest, puts it beautifully.

*"For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice."*

'Ash Wednesday', another of Eliot's poems, crowned my longing for a deeper dream.

*"The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time. Redeem
The unread vision in the higher dream..."*

To Do –

Find a writer, poet, artist or musician you like and let their work speak to you this week.

Ask – Do I have special places?

Receive –

1. Time and motivation to visit a 'special place'.
2. 'Another voice'.
3. A new dream.

Envision – Places in history 'where prayer has been valid'.

Pray – "I still want to serve you Lord. Amen."

From the Womb of the Dawn

Leaf 6

Let's take a look at Psalm 110 together. This 'messianic missive' from the old alliance is quoted by Jesus and mentioned in many passages of the New Testament. Its emphasis on the victorious 'Lord' encourages us to turn our eyes towards Christ, contemplating His eternal, priestly ministry. These inspired words from David, the warrior king, forge five principles which encourage us to embrace a life of spiritual warfare.

1. Are you sitting comfortably?

"The LORD says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." v.1

Then I'll begin! God tells a new story of victory in our lives with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the divine 'Benjamin' – the Son of the right hand, to whom the whole world must one day bow the knee. Ephesians 1:20-23 speaks of God's incomparably great power which He exerted in Christ:

"When he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

The miracle is that He also raised us up to sit with Him.

"And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 2:6

God is calling us to 'sit' with Him in victorious authority. This is a renewed place of faith – a 'Benjamin' place. Genesis 35:18 teaches us that before being named 'Benjamin', Jacob's son bore the name 'Ben-Oni' – son of my suffering. Resurrection to the 'right hand' follows the troubled 'deaths' we go through.

2. A growing sphere of influence

"The LORD will extend your mighty sceptre from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle." v.2

"Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Matthew 6:10

Generations have hung their hopes on this prayer. It is time to wield the same sceptre of prayer and mission! The Lord asked Moses what he held in his hand – Exodus 4:2. What humble tool have you been holding over your years of service? This may be the moment for it to be used for greater influence.

Could Moses ever have dreamt that his personal 'walking stick' would become the means to liberate a whole nation from bondage?

3. A willingness born from a new day

“Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn your young men will come to you like the dew.” It is also translated: *“You will receive the dew of your youth.”* v.3

The labour pains of our intercession will birth a new day, a new generation of holy, willing workers, thrust out into the harvest fields of the world. Like dew covering a field, God is gently moistening the earth with the gift of global workers from the previously neglected countries. This divine initiative will empower a loving ‘army’ of young men and women. Ezekiel’s season of speaking to the dry bones is coming to an end and a new mandate of prophesying to the Spirit is beginning.

“Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they might live...and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.” Ezekiel 37:9

The other translation, which speaks of our own youth being revived, hints that this ‘new dawn’ will bring personal renewal, fresh anointing and the restoration of our ‘first love’.

4. The power of an indestructible life

“The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. The Lord is at your right hand; he will crush kings on the day of his wrath. He will judge nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.” v.4-6

The ‘thief’ comes to steal, kill and destroy. The new day of mission will be contested and the power of evil will be let loose against these vulnerable troops. Our human ingenuity alone cannot prevail. We must carry a cross, denying self, yet embracing the beautiful ‘Melchizedek ministry’ to succeed. Only this Christ-impacted, sanctified ministry will stand the onslaught of battle. Be like Melchizedek who:

“Become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.” Hebrews 7:16

Such a ‘band of brothers’ will carry the oath of God’s intention with them as they forge an eternal place in history. You may not feel like a conqueror. It may even feel like something is dying within you at the moment. Hang on, you will emerge in true Melchizedek ministry with the *“Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead”* living in you and giving *“life to your mortal body”*. Romans 8:11

5. Don’t outrun the water!

“He will drink from a brook beside the way; therefore he will lift up his head.”

We will be seeing more shaking and crushing of nations as God’s purposes advance. In the exhilaration of serving God in such exciting and demanding times, we may well be tempted to run further ahead in ministry than the strength of our intimacy with Christ, *‘our brook’*, will allow. In ancient times, great battles were lost because the soldiers, in their enthusiasm, ran ahead of their water supplies and ended up weak with thirst. Make drinking deep of Christ a priority in your life. May you always be able to *‘lift up your head’* in victory, refreshed in the word and the Spirit, as you run on into your ultimate destiny.

Samson, after a wonderful victory with a dry donkey bone, found himself dying of thirst because he had not cultivated the art of holy intimacy in his life. God had mercy on Samson when he cried out to the Lord. On ‘Jawbone hill’ he opened up a spring to save Samson. The spring was called *‘En Hakkore’* which literally means ‘caller’s spring’. It is time for us to ‘call out’ for renewed intimacy with Christ. Jesus became our *‘En Hakkore’* when He cried out:

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.” John 7:37-39

To Do –

Meditate Psalm 110 and use it as your foundation for prayer this week.

Ask – Where am I sitting?

Receive –

1. The empowered ‘staff’ of new gifting.
2. The power of an indestructible life.
3. An inner thirst for intimacy with Jesus.

Envision – Young people from the world over coming to serve the Lord enthusiastically. Let your soul find refreshment in this vision.

Pray – “Lord, thank you for calling me to reign with you at your right hand. Open the eyes of my heart so that I may indeed see this hope and authority. Empower me with the indestructible life of your Holy Spirit within me. I choose to rule in the midst of my enemies and drink daily from your river of delights. Amen.”

The World Exists

Leaf 7

“The world exists only by virtue of the breath of little children studying Torah.”

These wonderful words are accredited to Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, who lived around 200 AD. For such a great lover of the divine, he had a very colourful life. He was once a bandit, skilled in the use of knives and swords. He also performed in a circus, showing off feats of strength. When sleeping on a hard floor, because of his large body, he was heard to say: *“My fat is my cushion”*.

However, his life knew a deep transformation, and this big, bad bandit, became a giant of a scholar from whose lips such sensitive inspirations came. He understood the promise of Deuteronomy 8:3, which became Christ’s word in Matthew 4:4:

“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

What do you live on?

The Jews had such a high view of the Torah, that they would introduce the word to the pure mouths of young lips as soon as possible. The first book to be appreciated was ‘Leviticus’ as, with all its blood and rituals, it is considered the book of purity. They would coat the scroll with honey to encourage the not yet literate young mouth to find succulence in the living word.

I think back to the aging prophet Ezekiel who, having received a mandate to ‘*speak God’s words*’ to a rebellious people, saw a vision.

“Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.” Ezekiel 2:9

If someone is going to speak with authority into this beautiful, troubled, bittersweet world, he would need to know tears as well as honey.

“Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted sweet as honey in my mouth.” Ezekiel 3:3

I love the sweetness of friends, fellowship, celebration and word – written in all the three ‘books’ of Bible, Humanity and Creation. I am just a child, licking the honey and learning to go deeper into the depths of life. One man who went deep was the apostle - and best friend of Jesus, John. While a prisoner on the island of Patmos, he received a tremendous vision, filled with prophetic words to speak into the world’s strife. He saw a mighty angel astride the sea and the land, a finger pointing heavenward, holding out a scroll. The ‘triangular’ pose of the angelic messenger - linking heaven, earth and sea via a mighty scroll, is an awesome encouragement to seek those words which bridge history, fulfil destiny and bring harmony to humanity.

“Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land. So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll.” Revelation 10:8

There are many messengers speaking to us today. Under which angel’s feet do we dare to sit?

“Take it...” Revelation 10:9

‘Taking’ is the easy bit. It is not hard to have narratives on our lips. The historian, Walter Benjamin, described the destructive saturation of our world with empty theories as:

“More wreckage at the feet of the angel of history.”

“Eat it...” Revelation 10:9

This is the hard bit. Can my heart own the words I so glibly speak? Can I grow from a child to a man and still keep the sweet breath of a child?

John had a go:

“I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour.” Revelation 10:10

The world needs a new generation of ‘prophets’ willing to - not just chew, but deeply swallow the weight of the word; anointed men and women who, loving the taste of honey, are also willing to own the sour pain of the world.

Such a generation will speak to kings and nations and keep the world spinning!

“Then I was told, “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.” Revelation 10:11

To Do –

Meditate Psalms 34:8 and 119:103. Think on your sweetest Bible verses this week.

Ask – Is God’s word like honey on my lips?

Receive –

1. Fresh love for the word of God.
2. Deeper authority as you own a greater weight of responsibility for your words.
3. Prophetic gifting to speak for ‘peoples and nations’ in your prayers and ministry.

Envision – Little children licking a sweet scroll. See yourself feeding with new enthusiasm on the ‘honey’ of the Bible.

Pray – “Lord, how sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Let me gain understanding and insight, that I might share your truth with the world. Amen.”

I've Seen Delight!

Leaf 8

“Do you know when Christmas is?”

For three hundred years, the early Christians never celebrated the 25th December which was a popular pagan celebration. How do messianic Jews celebrate Christmas? John 1:14 speaks about the Word ‘becoming flesh’ and ‘dwelling’ amongst us – *‘pitching His tent amongst us’*, making His *‘tabernacle’* with us.

Jewish scholars have calculated Jesus' birth by analysing the ‘priestly’ time sheets of Zechariah and linking that with Mary's visit to Elizabeth. They come to the conclusion that Jesus was born on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles - around the beginning of October.

So, now we've dealt with Christmas, we can move on to that ‘New Year’s’ resolution of reading the Bible. Why not try and read through the entire Bible in one year? Begin at Genesis and be inspired to make Genesis 3:16 a prayer for your life.

“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

Eve is the first bride, taken from the side of the first Adam. A greater Bride - the Bride of Christ was created from the blood and water that poured from Christ's side on the cross. Let your desire for Christ grow and may His kingdom rule thrill your heart.

Move onto the Psalms in your daily reading, starting from the beginning.

“His delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” Psalm 1:2-3

Do you want a prosperous life? Delight is the key to prosperity!

Learn to savour the Lord's presence. Enjoy Christ. Delight in Him.

*“**Delight** yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”* Psalm 37:4

*“They feast on the abundance of your house you give them to drink from your river of **delights**.”* Psalm 36:8

Whenever a relation begins to break down, we lose our ‘delight’ in the other. Never let empty religion take the place of delight in your walk with the Lord.

When was the last time you took real delight in reading the Bible? Or praying? Or in meeting other people?

The devil hates delight! He tries to steal our happiness in the Lord. Being renewed in purity will bring us back to a fresh delight in the Lord. Delighting in the Lord is the way to satisfaction in our lives.

Delight encourages us to spend more time praying.

I sometimes wonder what has ever been achieved by so many hours spent ‘praying for people and nations’. I can well remember whole 40 day periods of continuous prayer and fasting during my early days of ministry in France at the ‘*Château Blanc*’ mission base. Does being shut in with the Lord really achieve anything? Why not just get on with the essential action of evangelism and church planting?

My answer came as I read a book about some of the great praying personalities of French history. It said that such praying people were exercising:

“Une secrète fécondité apostolique – a secret, apostolic fecundity.”

Without this ‘secret fruitfulness’, a life loses its ability to sparkle and bless the world. Learn to live by the S.A.F principle – Secret Apostolic Fecundity!

May you see the light in delight.

*“I **delight** to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”* Psalm 40:8

To Do –

Read Psalm 1:1-6. Resolve to read the Bible through in a year.

Ask – Where have I lost delight in my life?

Receive –

1. Desire for God’s reign in your life. Genesis 3:16
2. The transformation of a ‘hard’ obedience into delighting to do God’s will.
3. A secret, apostolic fecundity.

Envision – Drinking from God’s river of delights. Imagine all the happiness you might gulp down. See the thirsty people of the world drinking.

Pray – “Heavenly Father, I no longer want to live like an orphan. I believe the words of your Son, Jesus, who said He would not leave us as orphans, but send your Holy Spirit to us. Blow your Spirit over me now like a mighty river. Let me drink deep from the waters of delight, feasting on the abundance of your house. I return to your house like the rebellious son and his resistant brother. I delight to do your will. Amen.” John 14:18, Luke 15:31-32

Friendship Blessed my House – Random Thoughts on Job

Leaf 9

Are you a miserable comforter or a friend?

Let's take a closer look at chapter sixteen of the book of Job to find an answer. Most people have had enough of 'long-winded' preachers! Like Job's friends, we are tempted to argue, making 'fine speeches *against*' a whole host of issues, without ever having suffered in someone else's shoes.

Superficial, moralistic mumblings, in the face of sensitive subjects, do not help the suffering and make those ministering such empty gruel, "*miserable comforters!*" Job 6:2

Job, echoing the refrain of a more perfect sufferer, offers another remedy:

"But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief." Job 16:5

He is predicting Paul's words to the Corinthian church centuries later:

"But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." 1 Corinthians 14:3

So, wait a SEC before speaking!

Ask yourself: "*Will these words Strengthen, will they Encourage, will they Comfort?*"

Effective words are carried on the wings of love and friendship. Job, like Jesus, earned 'his wings' the hard way. No slick, superficial theory, just the blood and guts of tested integrity.

He knew warfare and hardship – "*God has turned me over to evil men, and thrown me into the clutches of the wicked.*" Job 16:11

He was broken – "*All was well with me but he shattered me.*" Job 16:12

He bore deep wounds – "*He has made me his target; his archers surround me. Without pity, he pierces my kidneys and spills my gall on the ground.*" Job 16:13

He knew repentance and tears – "*I have sewed sackcloth over my skin, and buried my brow in the dust. My face is red with weeping.*" Job 16:15-16

When Job opened his mouth, he didn't just have an argument, a personal ambition or a theory; he had a tested testimony, a true spirit and a purified prayer.

"...my prayer is pure." Job 16:17

It is from this place of naked truth that Job points us, once again, to the person of Christ.

"O earth, do not cover my blood; may my cry never be laid to rest! Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend, as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend." Job 16:18-21

Jesus cried out: "*It is finished!*" John 19:30

He shed His blood on the earth, ever living to make intercession. What a friend we have in Jesus. Are you a miserable comforter or a friend?

The world hungers for genuine friendship. Less words, more pleading, less bluff, more bleeding! Don't just 'say' garrulous prayers in the cold isolation of formal meetings which, with their dutiful distance, ensure no-one ever truly 'meets' the other. Intercession is birthed in active friendship, in the informal fellowship of the warmly broken. Intercession needs a body. Intercession is friendship.

My Intercessor is my friend.

Friendship blessed my house!

Chapter twenty-nine of Job shows God's deep desire to bless His people. Meditate and proclaim these blessings over your own life.

Protection: *"God watched over me...his lamp shone on my head and by his light I walked through darkness!"* Job 29:3

Intimacy: *"God's intimate friendship blessed my house...and my children were around me."* Job 29:4-5

Prosperity: *"...my path was drenched with cream and the rock poured out for me streams of olive oil."* Job 29:6

Influence in society: *"I went to the gate and took my seat in the public square."* Job 29:7

Health and renewal: *"My roots will reach to the water, and the dew will lie all night on my branches. My glory will remain fresh in me, the bow ever new in my hand."* Job 19:19-20

Pray for your 'friends'

Chapter forty-two shows how Job, through his holding on to faith and integrity, gets a deeper insight into God and His unfathomable greatness.

"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted." Job 42:2

Confronted with the immensity of creation and the mystery of heavenly warfare, he humbly accepts the limitations of his own sphere of human existence:

"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know." Job 42:3

He abandons himself to God once more, burying his flawed flesh into the death of the 'seen friend' to come.

"My ears had heard of you but know my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." Job 42:5-6

Job rises from the ashes with a newborn authority to pray for those who had offended him.

"I will accept his prayer..." Job 42:8

He prays for his friends. He has become an intercessor who, in the image of Christ,

“...is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” Hebrews 7:25

“After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before.” Job 42:10

Genuine prosperity comes from the journey into intercession.

Many taste, like Job, the dust of life and the ashes of ministry. We need to hang on, believing that we will come out as gold:

“But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.” Job 23:10

A new beginning is just around the corner. Don't curse the darkness, light a candle.

“The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first.” Job 42:12

To Do –

Try and read through the book of Job this week. Write down what speaks to you.

Ask – Does God's friendship bless my house?

Receive –

1. Protection and Intimacy.
2. Prosperity and Favour.
3. Health and Renewal.

Envision – Suffering transforming the faithful into a golden Bride. See an end to, and discern a meaning in, your own tribulation.

Pray – “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. I'm still standing, and by your grace Lord, I'll stand through it all to stand with you. May I come out golden, in Jesus' name. Amen.”

From Apathy to Sympathy

Leaf 10

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses...”
Hebrews 5:15

The ancient Greeks valued the quality of being beyond the reach of pain. ‘Patheo’ - suffering, was an earthly, ignoble thing. They worshipped a god beyond ‘patheo’, an apathetic god.

It is said that we are what we worship. A god with no ‘passion’, no vulnerability, produces a people immune to genuine human experience. On the one hand, we see hard-faced hordes, addicted to decadence, too busy to contemplate the true meaning of life, while on the other, prostrate practitioners, bereft of feeling, are willing to cause untold misery in the name of religion.

Some argue that without an ‘apathetic’ god we have no sense of sovereignty. Indeed, God does not change and no-one can force God to suffer or impose suffering upon Him from outside of His own being.

However, it may be worth considering two other possibilities.

1. God is free to change Himself.
2. He is free to allow Himself to be changed by others and to allow them to make Him suffer.

God's suffering is not a suffering imposed on Him from the outside because of some weakness in Himself, but the suffering of love, an active, chosen, dynamic suffering.

Jesus' words in John 10:18 speak of such a sovereign choice of suffering.

“No one takes it from me, but I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

In Revelation 5:6, expecting to see the triumphant Lion of Judah, we see instead a:

“Lamb looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne.”

At the very heart of God's sovereign rule we find vulnerability and chosen suffering.

The very foundation of creation is hallmarked with God's intentional, suffering love, manifested in the *Agnus Dei*:

“The Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” Revelation 13:8

The early Rabbis translated Psalm 18:35:

“You stoop down to make me great,” as:

“You show to me your greatness through your self-humiliation.”

God's true greatness lies in His chosen, self-humiliation in Christ.

Rabbi Hershel saw in the Old Testament prophets a theology of 'pathos'. Their cries reflected the wounded heart of God for His people. Their anger showed His wrath – the fiery, curative expression of God's passion. Wrath and apathy never mix.

Far from being distantly apathetic, God is passionately caught up in human existence. He sympathises with us. He shares our very sufferings.

In trinitarian redemption, we see a sacrificing Father, an offered Son, sustained in the power of holy sacrifice called Spirit. This event explodes into the world, bringing healing, hope, reconciliation and resurrection.

Handel's 'Messiah' begins with the description, from Isaiah 40:11, of a shepherd God, gently leading His people.

"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

Let the Lord carry you close to His heart.

Being close to God's heart is the very opposite of apathy. It may well lead us into suffering, echoing the Lord's words to His 'chosen instrument', Paul, in Acts 9:16.

"I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

The theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, liberates us from a purely negative, fearful view of suffering.

"How is this to be understood? The person who suffers does not only protest against his fate. Indeed, he suffers because he lives, and he is full of life because he has an interest in life and because he loves. He who no longer loves becomes apathetic and no longer even suffers. Life and death are for him a matter of indifference. The more one loves, however, the more vulnerable one becomes."

The more one becomes capable of suffering, the more one becomes capable of happiness. The reverse is also true. The more one is capable of joy, the greater one's capacity for sorrow. This could be called the dialectic of human life. Love gives vitality to living, but it also makes man mortal. The vitality of life and the deadliness of death are experienced at one and the same time through that interest in life we call love."

Such love shines from the face of Jesus, Almighty God, veiled in humble flesh.

Pure Sovereignty stooped down into the mess of this world to make us great. In making Himself small, He displayed the mystery of His infinite greatness. In sharing pain, He showed His ultimate, sympathetic divinity.

May you experience that 'interest in life' we call love.

To Do –

Meditate the verse from 1 John 4:16 – “God is love.” What does this phrase mean to you? How is God love?

Ask – Do I risk being vulnerable?

Receive –

1. A softer, more sympathetic heart.
2. The will to give yourself to others again.
3. Greatness from His humility:

“God became man so that men might become gods.” St. Athanasius.

“Total participation in Jesus Christ. All that God is, except for an identity in being, one becomes when one is deified by grace.” St. Maximos.

“Be ye perfect” is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were “gods” and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him - for we can prevent Him, if we choose - He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to Him perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said.”
C. S. Lewis.

Envision – Imagine the ‘dazzling, radiant creature’, pulsating with joy, that you are called to become.

Pray – “Father, take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh so that I may grow in holiness, being transformed into the image of your beloved Son. Amen.”

Ezekiel 11:19

Planet of the A.P.E s - What on Earth is Mission?

Leaf 11

Ecclesiastes 4:12 speaks of a cord of three strands which is not easily broken. I'd like to suggest the following three elements which constitute a mission cord for today's world.

1. Preaching the good news of the kingdom – Matthew 24:14

We have a *message* of Christ's victory over death, sin and Satan, the *mission* of reaching every people and the *motivation* of working for Christ's return. According to the testimony of the apostle Paul in Romans 15:18, we work this out through *words, works and wonders*.

You could sum this up with the words, '*Apostolic Action*', pointing us to the vital ministry of the Apostle.

2. Intimacy – Knowing God. Pressing on in prayer and worship

Relation – A deep desire to know Christ is the key to all that we do. So often, we limit our judgements to our perceptions on our work and performance. Try this for a definition of success.

"I am successful because I am deeply loved by God and I can live to worship Him."

Isaiah 62:4 gives us the precious name of '*Hephzibah*', which emphasizes how much the Lord doesn't simply '*tolerate*' us, but '*delights*' in us.

Revelation – It is so important to work from a revelation of God's plans. Make space for the '*Issachar*' ministry - 1 Chronicles 12:32, which understands the '*times*' and has an intuitive sense of what is right to do. This kind of activity functions in the '*kairos*' of the opportunity to be seized.

This *Relation/Revelation* strand is best modelled by the **Prophetic** ministry.

3. Business as Mission

Business as Mission is '*an act of co-creation*' in imitation of God and hence a response to the 'Creation Mandate'. It is good news in itself and hence an inseparable part of the 'Great Commission'. '*Kingdom building is about wealth generation and spiritual transformation*'. As such, business as mission should be viewed not only within the narrow church-mission-business perspective, but also within the wider perspective of sustainable, transformational development, consisting of abundance, empowerment, character and service in which people break loose from the shackles of a world bound by abject poverty.

Here are some more insights on Business as Mission from Landa Cope, Dean of the College of Communication for '*Youth with a Mission's*' University of the Nations:

"Poverty is holistic in nature and consists of not only economic poverty but social, political and spiritual poverty as well. The solution to holistic poverty must be the holistic and transforming message of shalom. Business as mission is a response both to the mandate of

stewardship over creation as well as the mandate of the great commission to all nations. It is a response to the immense spiritual and physical needs of the world and its application is displayed on many levels...

God's promises to Israel as they left slavery in Egypt were not isolated to blessings of an unseen nature. He promised He would bless them in every area of life including their crops, livestock and business...

What the Bible emphasises for the poor is opportunity versus aid. Aid is reserved for those who have absolutely no way of providing for themselves and will die without assistance. Israel is certainly in this kind of circumstance in the wilderness. And God provides for the Israelites, however, the day they had the feasibility to provide for themselves the manna was withdrawn...

God did not want to create a dependent people but a people who drew on the gifts, talents and resources He had given to see them provide for themselves."

90% of the unreached peoples = 80% of the world's poor!

In the next few years, millions of people will enter societies where there are few churches and few jobs.

BAM is a key strand in mission. It exists in its own right to glorify God by bringing 'wealth to the world'. It embodies the concept of 'shalom' – 'nothing missing, nothing broken', to nations in need of repair. Deuteronomy 8:18 is God's covenant for wealth creation:

"But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today."

This 'Wealth to the World' ministry is best incarnated by the Entrepreneur.

The **A**postolic, the **P**rophetic and the **E**ntrepreneurial need to be linked together - **A.P.E**

These strands, flowing together, empower the Body of Christ to fresh creativity.

Romans 4:17 talks about a God who:

"Calls things that are not as though they were."

We are 'called to create' through living word.

These ministries bring fatherhood - protection and authority, to places and people. We are called to 'believe and become' such carriers of promise.

Let us make every effort to stir up the various gifts that lie within us.

Encourage each other to apostolic action and revelatory relation, bringing wealth to the world!

Take up your call to create. Believe and become!

But humbly remember:

“We're all just a bunch of monkeys in the end!”

To Do –

Read Deuteronomy 8:1-20. Learn all that you can about the concept of Business as Mission this week.

Ask – Which ministry gifting describes me best – Apostolic, Prophetic or Entrepreneurial?

Receive –

1. Your gift identity. *“Fan into flame the gift of God which is in you.”* 2 Timothy 1:6
2. A desire to transform the world.
3. A calling to create.

Envision – Nations being changed by the Apostolic, Prophetic and Entrepreneurial ministries flowing together. Imagine how these could be channelled into your own local situation.

Pray – “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy; O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.”

More!

Leaf 12

The bowls of gruel clunk together on the rickety table as hungry youngsters tuck in greedily to their deceptive, soon finished, feast. One young boy stares into his empty bowl and, daring to break a time-honoured code, leaves his place and makes his way forward to the obese cook who is dishing out the light broth with his heavy ladle. Frail hands lift up an empty bowl and a thin voice is heard.

“Can I have some more please?”

An accusing mouth, spits out a reply:

“More! You want more?”

Now, before you get carried away and launch into a vibrant chorus of ‘*Food glorious Food*’ from the musical ‘*Oliver Twist*’, I need to ask you a couple of questions.

“Are you content with your gruel or are you hungry for more?”

“Do you think God wants ‘more’ from us His church?”

Let's take a look at Matthew 5:43-48

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, **what are you doing more than others?** Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

Can I ask you to meditate on yet another question?

*“What are you doing **more** than others?”*

It is only too easy for our greetings - our ‘shaloms’, to remain within the comfort zone of our own tribe. It is a rare love that dares to venture beyond the ‘give – give’ equation and embrace the divine extravagance of ‘give – rejection/persecution’. God is looking for a ‘supernatural more’ in our lives. This ‘more’ is the only valid expression of true Christianity.

The Greek translation for the word ‘more’ in this passage is ‘*perissos*’.

It carries the sense of ‘going beyond’, crossing boundaries. It means reaching out to the different and unloved, being ‘superabundant’ in quantity and ‘superior’ in quality. It can also be defined as being excessive, expressing something violently shocking. Another signification is ‘pre-eminence’, being exceedingly, abundantly above, beyond measure and superfluous.

What an amazing word!

I was a witness to this kind of 'perissos' Christianity in Rwanda. I was due to speak at a prison fellowship conference in Kigali. Before the preaching, a lady stood to give her testimony. She was a dignified, simple woman of the earth whose strong arms and features spoke of a life given in labour for others. She bore deep scars on her neck, the tragic reminders of the brutality of the cruel genocide her nation had known. She went on to deliver a heartrending, yet chilling account of all the violence and injustice she had suffered, including the murder of her children.

She then looked across the hall at the long lines of pink-shirted prisoners who were also at the meeting. She pointed out one man, beckoning him to step forward. As he came to her, a supernatural light seemed to shine out from her dark features. In a heart stopping moment of extravagant grace, she gave a kind of whoop of joy and began to hug this man in a rhythmic embrace of reconciliation.

"This man was part of the group that did so much hurt to me. I should hate him, but as Christ has forgiven me, so I too have found the strength and joy to forgive him!"

It was a scandalously sincere moment when something 'more' was happening. I was meant to be speaking afterwards but all I could do was get on my knees in front of them all and offer my homage to a true 'perissos' nation that was expressing the reality of Christ's life.

In the light of this testimony, I was challenged and slightly ashamed of my own inability to let go of petty divisions, crippling traditions and paralysing fears. We all need grace. Like John Newton, the repentant slave trader, we need to remember two great truths:

"I'm a great sinner but Christ is a great Saviour!"

*"But where sin increased, grace increased all the **more** – hyperperissos."* Romans 5:21

We can always trust in the 'hyper-perissos' of God's grace, expressed in the nail-pierced hands of Christ's love.

What is your 'perissos' opportunity at the moment?

Don't run away from it or curse it, but receive the grace to fully enter into it. Christ gives us 'more' power for perissos.

*"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably **more** than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."* Ephesians 3:20-21

To Do –

Read Luke 6:27-38. Listen to Godfrey Birtill's song, 'Outrageous Grace'. Find it on 'You Tube', sung by Godfrey or Robin Mark.

"There's a lot of pain but a lot more healing. There's a lot of trouble but a lot more peace. There's a lot of hate but a lot more loving. There's a lot of sin but a lot more grace."

As you listen, find your own measure of healing, peace and reconciliation.

Ask – What am I doing more than others?

Receive –

1. The miracle of ‘more’.
2. Freedom from sin through the hyper-overflow of God’s grace.
3. The ‘outrageous grace’ to forgive.

Envision – Grace overflowing into relational conflicts, whether they be in families, society, church or the nations.

Pray – “Heavenly Father, you are able to do immeasurably more than all I ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work within me. To you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Empty Pockets

Leaf 13

I once discovered an old overcoat and began to go through the pockets. It's amazing how much stuff you can accumulate and stash away. I pulled out some old tissues, a few bits of paper covered with some old, scribbled messages, a used train ticket and a very smelly bobble hat which hadn't been worn for years.

What do you keep, or lose, in your pockets?

I sometimes wondered how much *'excess baggage'* slows down my progress into a new season. Annually, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the orthodox Jew would symbolically empty his pockets – representing a getting rid of sin, at a running stream, casting them into the water while reading the following verses from Micah 7:18-19:

“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

Make sure you begin each new day and enter every new season with *'empty pockets'*.

The apostle Paul knew the *'lightness'* and enthusiasm of the empty pocket journey when he wrote in Philippians 3:13-14:

“Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Press on to what is ahead. You may have many goals for the future but make the knowledge of the Holy One a priority.

How easy is it to *'forget what is behind'*?

Depending on our circumstances, we may have to come to terms with all sorts of tragedies and incoherencies. Some events cast too profound a shadow into our future to be easily forgotten. Some theologians talk about the ultimate *'attrition'* of memory in heaven as a fulfilment of redemption. Let me requote Miroslav Volf from *'Exclusion and Embrace'*.

“Redemption will be complete only when the creation of ‘all things new’ is coupled with the passage of ‘all things old’ into the double ‘nihil’ of non existence and non remembrance.”

Human efforts will ultimately fail to forgive and forget. It is only the love of God, incarnated in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, flowing out into the world that has the power to clean out the pockets of sin and death.

Our challenge is to embrace this love in humble faith, submitting to its crucifying overflow into our own life experience. We need to learn to love.

The famous passage on love, in 1 Corinthians 13:5, makes an amazing statement about one of love's qualities saying that:

"It keeps no record of wrongs."

Love doesn't take an inventory – *logizomai*, in the original Greek. It wipes the slate clean. For there to be 'closure' on tragic events, the important issues of truth and justice must also be dealt with. This may well take a long time to unpack, but on the journey, we can sustain ourselves with the heart of Christ. He was willing to reach out to us, "*while we were still sinners*". Romans 5:8. Can we cultivate '*a will to embrace*' the other even when we are still far off, seeing beyond the offence to a place of reconciliation?

"Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Colossians 3:13

A new season is like a new birth. This 'new birth' is named in many cultures where the year is given a name. What will you christen your years?

Miroslav Volk recounts the story of a Muslim woman who, during the war in Bosnia, suffered terrible abuse. When she became a mother, she named her newborn son '*Jihad*', seeing in him the means to enact revenge on her former enemies.

Another birth is recounted in Genesis 41:51. This time Joseph, the dreamer, the one who knew such cruel rejection from his brothers, the one who suffered unjust accusation and prison, is welcoming his firstborn son into the world. What does he name his child – revenge, bitterness? No!

*"Joseph named his firstborn **Manasseh** - derived from the Hebrew 'to forget', and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household."*

Manasseh points us to a far greater firstborn son, Christ Himself who, as a suffering lamb, carried the sin of the world on His shoulders and bore away our troubles and community strife.

Why not christen your years '*Manasseh*'?

At the beginning of every new season, leave behind your troubles. A '*father's household*' speaks of family, or church. Some of the deepest wounds can be inflicted in the "*house of our friends*". Zechariah 13:6

Allow the Lord to ease you into a '*generous amnesia*' concerning such communal hostilities so that you may speak kindly to your brothers - Genesis 50:21, amazing yourself with grace and bringing healing words of redemption.

To Do –

Draw a big pocket on a piece of paper. Then, write on that pocket, with the help of the Holy Spirit, all the negative habits and incidents you are still holding on to. Give it time, but when

you are ready, get some red paint, ink or crayon and completely cover over all that is written. As you cover over, read the passage from Micah 7:18-19.

Ask – Is my slate wiped clean?

Receive –

1. The will to embrace.
2. Power to press on.
3. An inner incarnation of ‘Manasseh’.

Envision – The tree of life, full of luscious, multicoloured leaves. See those leaves gently falling, softly floating down from the cross of Christ, bringing healing to the nations. See some leaves falling onto your own heart and history, transforming past pain into present praise.

Pray – “Father in heaven, forgive me my sins, as I forgive others. Deliver me from evil and reign forever in glory. Amen.”

Temporal Kenosis

Leaf 14

Does the fact of millions of years of just stone, tectonic movements, fire and lava, preceding man's brief existence, somehow put into perspective our lives, wars and sufferings?

Where was God, what was He doing as the tectonic plates slowly moved, made mountains and created continents? Was all this movement His slow, long work of creation – His day? Was He communing and delighting with His Son, the Holy Spirit and the angels?

We see such a patient, longsuffering creation of the context to hold the brief breath of mankind – a context into which God sent His one and only Son to suffer for such creatures as ourselves. Jewish theologians speak of God needing to contract and 'make space' in order to create, as He already totally filled the universal everything. They called this process of divine self-withdrawal '*Tzim Tzum*'.

Some people point to a place of ultimate density, resulting from this contraction, which might even be considered the possible beginnings of that 'Big Bang'. A greater emptying happened when the same ultimate everything of God emptied himself – '*kenosis*' in Greek, and became a man. Time bows to mercy - temporal kenosis.

"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour." Psalm 8:3-5

Before all the millions of years, before the 'Big Bang' – divine density speaking, before time itself, there was love, identity and redemption. There was a Lamb, there was a wounded God.

There was:

Wisdom

"The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. When there were no oceans, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the earth or its fields or any of the dust of the world." Proverbs 8:22-26

"No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began." 1 Corinthians 2:7

"Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God...It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." I Corinthians 1:24,30

Love

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.” John 17:24

Glory

“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” John 17:5

Grace

“God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.” 2 Timothy 1:9

Election – Being Chosen

“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.” 1 Peter 1:18-20,

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” Ephesians 1:4

The Promise of Eternal Life

“A faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time.” Titus 1:2

A Slain Lamb

“All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” Revelation 13:8

The countless years of the universe, the fossils of the earth and the mystery of time and space bow to Love, Wisdom, Grace and Glory. All things bow to the little Lamb at the centre of it all, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

To Do –

Read Genesis 1:1-31. Meditate the seven beginnings in this devotional - wisdom, love, glory, grace, election, promise and redemption. Let them spur you to worship.

Ask – What came first - the chicken or the egg?

It wasn't a chicken, it was a Lamb!

Receive –

1. Love
2. Grace
3. Wisdom

Envision – ‘Tzim Tzum’. Imagine a great black hole, shrinking back into infinite density. Imagine a supernova birthing new galaxies. God is so much more. He goes beyond the material and explodes into redemptive love. Think of His love exploding over the universe in Christ.

Pray – “Praised are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, creating light and fashioning darkness, ordaining the order of all creation. You illumine the world and its creatures with mercy; in your goodness, day after day you renew Creation. How manifold your works, O Lord; with wisdom you fashioned them all. The earth abounds with your creations. Uniquely exalted since earliest time, enthroned on praise and prominence since the world began, eternal God, with your praise and prominence since the world began, eternal God, with your manifold mercies continue to love us, our pillar of strength, protective rock, sheltering shield, sustaining stronghold. Our praiseworthy God with vast understanding fashioned the rays of the sun. The good light He created reflects His splendour; radiant lights surround His throne. His heavenly servants in holiness exalt the Almighty, constantly recounting His sacred glory. Praise shall be yours, Lord our God, for your wondrous works, for the lights you have fashioned, the sun and the moon which reflect your glory. Our rock, our redeemer, our King, Creator of holy beings, you shall be praised forever. You fashion angelic spirits to serve you; beyond the heavens, they all await your command. In chorus they proclaim with reverence words of the living God, eternal King. Adoring, beloved, and choice are they all, in awe fulfilling their Creator’s will. In purity and sanctity they raise their voices in song and psalm, extolling and exalting, declaring the power, praise, holiness, and majesty of God, the great, mighty, awesome King, the Holy One. One to another they vow loyalty to God’s kingship, one to another they join to hallow their Creator with serenity, pure speech, and sacred song, in unison chanting with reverence:

Holy, holy, holy, *Adonai tzeva’ot*; the whole world is filled with His glory.

As in the prophet’s vision, soaring celestial creatures roar, responding with a chorus of adoration:

Praised be the glory of the Lord throughout the universe.

To praiseworthy God they sweetly sing: the living, enduring God they celebrate in song. For He is unique, doing mighty deeds, creating new life, championing justice, sowing righteousness, reaping victory, bringing healing. Awesome in praise, Sovereign of wonders, day after day in His goodness He renews Creation. So sang the Psalmist: “Praise the Creator of great lights, for His love endures forever.” Cause a new light to illumine Zion. May we all soon share a portion of its radiance. Praised are You, Lord, Creator of lights. Amen”

The prayer of creation – ‘Yotzer Or’, from the ‘Shema’

Belonging, Purpose, Sparks and Milk

Leaf 15

“And I had a feeling that I belonged, and I had a feeling that I could be someone, be someone.”

This line from the beautiful song ‘Fast Car’ by Tracy Chapman, sums up the longing of our hearts – a longing for belonging and purpose in our lives.

This legitimate desire is often frustrated by the difficulties of life. We fall short of our ideals and, unable to forgive and forget, we find ourselves destroying the very relationships that should empower us.

Psychiatrist William Glasser said the following:

“We are driven by five genetic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun.”

If we can get beyond the basic need for survival, it is the effort we put into building relationships that will launch us into an environment of belonging. Social media helps to contact people, but true belonging will come when we give ourselves sacrificially to the arduous task of opening up to one another, learning to build bridges, and moving from exclusion to embrace.

The ability to forgive and be forgiven is essential to all this. How do you negotiate the forgiveness equation?

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” Colossians 3:13-14

Let’s push on into some more of Glasser.

‘Power, freedom and fun’

What is the power that truly enables us to step into purpose? Where is your power? Jesus said:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8

The philosopher Rousseau said that:

“Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains.”

What are your chains? Are you really born as free as you think?

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Galatians 5:1

In our quest for fun, we can never be fully free from suffering.

The Wodaabe Fulani of Niger talk about two life events:

“Sometimes you are sitting around the fire under the stars when the wind gathers up a few sparks which fall from the fire onto your vulnerable skin and burn you. Sometimes you are happily milking a cow when suddenly a few droplets spill over and fall on your arm. The sparks are suffering and the droplets joy!”

Life can be a hazardous mixture of sparks and droplets!

German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, who is not a Fulani, explains the same principle from a different perspective.

“God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with him.”

It is in seeking truth rather than fun that we might actually end up with some joy. Happiness is a by product of our pursuit of meaning.

I wish you a long and safe ride in your own ‘Fast Car’, more milk than sparks and a divine chuckle with heaven.

To Do –

Read Romans 8:28-39. Think about the ‘milk and sparks’ of your life.

Ask – What is the power that directs my life?

Receive –

1. Love – *“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”* 1 John 3:1
2. Freedom – *“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”* 2 Corinthians 3:17
3. Meaning – *“Go and make disciples of all nations.”* Matthew 28:19

Envision – Love winning. *“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Romans 8:37-39

Pray – “The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” I hear and say “Come!” Amen. Come Lord Jesus.”

Some Things to Think about Doing

If you have enjoyed going through these devotionals why not make a contribution to World Mission by supporting Robert Reeve's ministry to France and the Nations.

You can do this by clicking [HERE](#)

Share the book and [video link](#) with your friends and others who might benefit from reading it.

Consider using the teachings as a basis for a weekly home group or Bible study you might want to start in your home or local church.

Well done for getting through the whole year and may the Lord encourage you with this final blessing.

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face towards you and give you peace.”

Numbers 6:24-26