

Lent Reflections

The Struggle

In the living of our Christian life we will meet some opposition. Christian life does involve struggle. For our daily Lent Reflections this year I've picked texts that highlight the struggle as well as some to encourage us on our way. We may prefer to avoid the uncomfortable bits in the Bible, but running through it is a golden (or is it blood-red?) strand - the prospect that when we take up the challenge to follow Christ we may encounter suffering through oppression and persecution. So let's face up to it.

Each reflection will as usual have a Bible passage, some thoughts, a question or two and a prayer. The questions are for thinking about – they may not have a single answer. There'll be some internet links – just click on the link and it should take you to YouTube or another web address.

If any of my thoughts leave you baffled or more baffled than you were before then please do get in touch by replying to the email and I'll try to ease the bafflement if I can. You might also like to ask others! That way, you'll get a wider discussion going.

Open Doors

Each day's reflection this year includes a web link from the charity *Open Doors* (opendoorsuk.org). You may have heard of its origins with Brother Andrew and his attempts to take Bibles into countries where it was banned. Each link will bring up information on one of the forty most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian, starting at No. 40 and finishing with the world's most dangerous place. A new list has just been published, so this will be very much up-to-date. Please take some time to hold brother and sister Christians in these places in prayer, and consider how much they have given up as they confess and proclaim Jesus in their lives.

Challenge yourself, encourage others

These reflections work best using email (we can supply paper copies) because the links can be clicked directly. We have a number of people from outside the Benefice on the mailing list, however, there are still people in our own benefice who are not signed up. I encourage you to do this. Pass on your email address through a churchwarden or by email to me (paul@wtandw.org.uk). We can easily include people outside the benefice as well, so why not encourage family or friends?

Remember that Sundays are not included in the 40 days of Lent.

With Blessings

Paul

Lent Reflections

Dear Brothers and Sisters

The Struggle

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<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/about/how-we-help/>

Encourage others

We have a number of people from outside the Benefice on the mailing list, however, there are still people in our own benefice who are not signed up, and I'd ask you to introduce this to them. I can easily add email addresses to the mailing list.

The emails do come from me!

I am sending this email directly from my personal mailbox. The following ones will come through an online scheduling system – you may be warned that these emails may not have come from me, which is technically true, but they will be from me via the scheduling system.

With Blessings

Day 1

Luke 4.16-30

Jesus went back to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and as usual he went to the meeting place on the Sabbath. When he stood up to read from the Scriptures, he was given the book of Isaiah the prophet.

He opened it and read, "The Lord's Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, 'This is the year the Lord has chosen.'"

Jesus closed the book, then handed it back to the man in charge and sat down. Everyone in the meeting place looked straight at Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, "What you have just heard me read has come true today." All the people started talking about Jesus and were amazed at the wonderful things he said. They kept on asking, "Isn't he Joseph's son?"

Jesus answered: You will certainly want to tell me this saying, "Doctor, first make yourself well." You will tell me to do the same things here in my own hometown that you heard I did in Capernaum. But you can be sure that no prophets are liked by the people of their own hometown. Once during the time of Elijah there was no rain for three and a half years, and people everywhere were starving. There were many widows in Israel, but Elijah was sent only to a widow in the town of Zarephath near the city of Sidon. During the time of the prophet Elisha, many men in Israel had leprosy. But no one was healed, except Naaman who lived in Syria.

When the people in the meeting place heard Jesus say this, they became so angry that they got up and threw him out of town. They dragged him to the edge of the cliff on which the town was built, because they wanted to throw him down from there. But Jesus slipped through the crowd and got away.

Let's start our forty days by looking at Jesus and how people responded to his message. It clearly must have been quite a shock for the local people in the meeting place when this young man whom they all knew told them that the words he'd just read from the sacred scrolls were about him. That's blasphemy, unless it's true. They'd heard this passage before and may have grown accustomed to its lilting poetic words, but now they have been blown out of the scroll and have taken on a new meaning. Jesus has claimed the text for himself.

As argument ensues, Jesus, like many other prophets, does not apologise for what he's just said or even try to smooth it down in any way but instead lays into the people around him with the truth of their failings, failings as the people of God. Because of the deaf ears of God's people, God's prophets were unable to do things except in out-of-the-way places because people would not recognise their calling.

At the point of Jesus publishing his manifesto there were some who attempted to kill Jesus. Who'd be a prophet?

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/united-arab-emirates>

<https://youtu.be/sAoxTHxwjTU>

Did Jesus know that it was the book of Isaiah that was going to be handed to him?

Why could they not accept Jesus for who he said he was?

Are there people you consider a bit arrogant or boastful about their faith?

Have you ever condemned someone who spoke the truth?

Are there younger people under our noses in our churches who are being held down or ignored for ministry and leadership?

Father God, at the start of Lent I pray that you will open my eyes to the calling you have placed on me. As I grow in you prepare me for the task ahead. Amen

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Day 2

Matthew 5.2-12

And he taught them:

God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven!

God blesses those people who grieve. They will find comfort!

God blesses those people who are humble. The earth will belong to them!

God blesses those people who want to obey him more than to eat or drink. They will be given what they want!

God blesses those people who are merciful. They will be treated with mercy!

God blesses those people whose hearts are pure. They will see him!

God blesses those people who make peace. They will be called his children!

God blesses those people who are treated badly for doing right. They belong to the kingdom of heaven.

God will bless you when people insult you, mistreat you, and tell all kinds of evil lies about you because of me. Be happy and excited! You will have a great reward in heaven. People did these same things to the prophets who lived long ago.

This passage is traditionally known to us as the Beatitudes. Beatitude means blessedness. Jesus never used the term – he just preached. The Blessednesses are a wonderful source of warmth and comfort. They adorn walls in churches and are perhaps framed for hanging in homes. Trouble is, we tend or would prefer to go blind on the last two in the list. We all want a quiet, blessed life, and we'd really appreciate it if the *trials* and *tribulations* of this world (poetic terms like these take the edge off the unpleasantness) to pass us by. But this is not what Jesus is offering us. He is aware that we do need comfort in grief, that humility brings us the earth, that mercy deserves mercy, but the Christian life is not comfort and niceness.

The Christian life is to walk in the steps of Jesus, not a few paces behind, but alongside him, and as we grow in faith and life, to walk for him. Those last two Blessednesses come with real joys that Jesus offers, but the way to receive them is through suffering. Jesus' mission in coming to save us was all about encountering opposition, pain, persecution and lies. You have to take the kingdom of heaven seriously in order to be ready for what is to come in the normal Christian life..

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/mexico>

https://youtu.be/ZB8w9E_4XRY (gotta love that young sister chewing gum), or

<https://youtu.be/3vkflYje8wI>

Is the work of peace-making blessed?

What does Jesus mean when he says the earth will belong to the humble?

Have you been ill-treated for doing right? Are you still aggrieved, or do you accept the joy Jesus brings?

Father God, how can I thank you for Jesus, the author and finisher of my faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now set down at the right hand of your throne? Show me his offering as I offer my life to him. Amen

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Day 3

Matthew 6.9-13

You should pray like this:

Our Father in heaven, help us to honour your name. Come and set up your kingdom, so that everyone on earth will obey you, as you are obeyed in heaven. Give us our food for today. Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others. Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil.

If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

I expect you know the Lord's Prayer off by heart, at least in some version, and you may find you're saying the right one when everyone else around you in a service is saying the wrong one. Of course there is only one Lord's Prayer (putting Matthew's and Luke's texts together), and what's important is the accuracy of the translation, not which traditional set of words you prefer.

Jesus covers many things in this prayer, and again, at the end, there is a sting in the tail. We are to pray to be protected from evil. The Greek word is more about rescue than protection, so perhaps *deliver us from evil* has a better ring to it, and that is important, because Jesus expects that we will face evil in this life. We cannot pray that evil will never come our way, only that when it comes God might rescue us from it.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/indonesia>

<https://youtu.be/DDG6XJrCXrU>

Should I be annoyed when the leader of prayers uses the wrong version of the Lord's Prayer?

Whose prayer is it anyway?

Is the Lord's Prayer a script or a model?

What evil are we asking Father God to deliver us from?

Father God, Holy God in heaven, I honour your name. Let me see you reign on earth as you reign in heaven. Feed me, forgive me, deter me, deliver me. You are King Eternal. Amen.

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Day 4

Luke 8.4-9

When a large crowd from several towns had gathered around Jesus, he told them this story: A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field. While the farmer was doing it, some of the seeds fell along the road and were stepped on or eaten by birds. Other seeds fell on rocky ground and started growing. But the plants did not have enough water and soon dried up. Some other seeds fell where thorn bushes grew up and choked the plants.

The rest of the seeds fell on good ground where they grew and produced a hundred times as many seeds.

When Jesus had finished speaking, he said, "If you have ears, pay attention!" Jesus' disciples asked him what the story meant.

The traditional interpretation of this little story of Jesus' is to take the seed as the Gospel message. The different places into which the seed fell produced a range of outcomes, as might the Gospel message when it is presented to people (it is most definitely not thrown randomly!).

The places the seed fell represents some of the types of people who hear the Gospel message and the way they react to it. Only where the seed fell on good ground did it germinate, grow and produce seeds of its own. I'm not totally satisfied about the fate of the seed that fell on rocky ground. I could consider the argument that it could have struggled for a very long time and may or may not have died off completely.

Let's imagine that we are sowing seed by sharing the Gospel-message with others. Wouldn't it be nice if our seeds all fell on good ground? That's not going to happen, if Jesus' parable is telling it as it is. We know that many people are simply not going to be in the right soil when we encounter them. Our task is to work the soil, to labour on, tending, weeding, watering and nourishing until it is good and suitable for germination, sprouting, growing and producing. In the world of the parable this all happens in a season. In reality it could take years before we see ears.

We might stretch the parable a little and consider another view. How about if it describes the state of your church. Is it all good ground – how could you tell? Who is looking after the ground, checking on its condition? It may be that your fellowship as a whole is not planted in the best soil, and you have seen seasons of slow or no growth. Who is responsible for your own Christian life? We know that we grow and develop in stages, and for some there may be years of plateauing or even sliding back. Perhaps we have been content to stay in soil that keeps us contained and stunted. But if cannot sustain or nourish us any further it may now be time to challenge the gardener or even to seek new soil. Or are you even now still in the nursery garden, content to be looked after? It's time to move out and plant your feet on higher ground.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/mali>

<https://youtu.be/F2emsPPCH4c>

How do we look after those who are struggling in our churches?

Who are the gardeners in your church?

What fertilizer does your church need?

What are you doing to reach those along the road?

How do thorns get in?

Father God, take me to the new pasture. Amen

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Day 5

Matthew 18.7-10

The world is in for trouble because of the way it causes people to sin. There will always be something to cause people to sin, but anyone who does this will be in for trouble.

If your hand or foot causes you to sin, chop it off and throw it away! You would be better off to go into life crippled or lame than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the fire that never goes out. If your eye causes you to sin, poke it out and get rid of it. You would be better off to go into life with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fires of hell.

Jesus accuses the world of leading people to sin. The world is a sinful place. We are reminded that, though we are in the world, we are not of it. However, whether it is the world that causes us to sin or it is by our own sinfulness, Jesus proposes a true, tested and terrifying remedy.

Speak to the hand - there are so many areas of sin that involve hands – violence, fighting, writing (texting, Facebook), etc. Look into your eye. It's a truth, though it tends not to be addressed in many churches, that the eye can lead to sin. It is an open portal for temptation far more than, say, the nose. The eye can linger on things that are not good for the soul, and lust (other sins are also possible) is a particularly unpleasant sin. It's easy to find stuff on the television or through the internet, stuff that once viewed is difficult to fling off. Real life situations can assault the eye, too, but relationships with the virtual or the real that are based on fantasy or lust are bound to diminish us as well as others.

To gouge my eyes out would certainly remove any temptation to view and linger as I wouldn't be able to do it. Sin can only be dealt with by removing that which causes us to sin. If I hack off a foot I'd no longer be able to kick someone or engage in mugging people (if this were something I am drawn to). My mind-power, my will alone is a poor weapon in the fight. Jesus' words remind us that we must understand and acknowledge how awful sin is. Sin is awful. Sin is not a joke. Sin is not something to be passed over.

If my Christian life is to be effective then I cannot be hampered by the weight of sin that leads me in another direction. Jesus died to take away my sin, and he did. I have to let go of it, and turn away from it, not in my own strength, but seeking His as I place my life in Him.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/palestinian-territories>

Palestinians suffer somewhat at the hands of the Israelis, but Palestinian Christians have a tougher life.

<https://youtu.be/nVIItGX2ZMnc> Say it, sister!

How should Christians respond to the situation in Israel?

Which of your senses is prone to sin?

Are there any films or programmes on TV or internet that you know you shouldn't be watching?

What is your internet browsing history like?

How can we fight temptation to sin? What truths do you hold on to in your fight?

Father God, I will surely enter heaven in a new and complete body but I want to preserve my members in this life. Instil in me a hatred of sin that is only outweighed by my love for Jesus. Amen.

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Day 6

Matthew 10.16-23

I am sending you like lambs into a pack of wolves. So be as wise as snakes and as innocent as doves.

Watch out for people who will take you to court and have you beaten in their meeting places. Because of me, you will be dragged before rulers and kings to tell them and the Gentiles about your faith. But when someone arrests you, don't worry about what you will say or how you will say it. At that time you will be given the words to say. But you will not really be the one speaking. The Spirit from your Father will tell you what to say.

Brothers and sisters will betray one another and have each other put to death. Parents will betray their own children, and children will turn against their parents and have them killed. Everyone will hate you because of me. But if you remain faithful until the end, you will be saved. When people mistreat you in one town, hurry to another one. I promise you that before you have gone to all the towns of Israel, the Son of Man will come.

Jesus is briefing his disciples before he sends them off on a mission. There may be trouble ahead, and little opportunity for dancing. Jesus calls for wisdom and innocence. Such wisdom is that which God gives for the situation, not our own. I don't know how wise a snake is. Dove-like innocence is about being unsullied and open.

We might not see Christians being beaten in the market-place, at least in our country. It's something you might see in [certain parts of the world right now](#). While Christianity is largely safe in our country we need to remember and pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ for whom this faith we take for granted is dangerous.

There may be times when we are up against some opposition and we are called to account for our faith. Do you think that a well-rehearsed set of words will work under these circumstances? They will not. Jesus does not require us to be smart speakers, rather listening ears. Who knows best, me or Jesus? By the way, the word for witness in Greek is *marturia*. Looks familiar?

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/central-african-republic>

https://youtu.be/9H_hmNqls7A

Are you a lamb, snake or dove?

Where are the wolves in your neighbourhood?

What is the greatest extent to which your faith has been challenged by others?

Father God, Your Son Jesus wrote suffering into the call to follow him. Give me the wisdom and innocence I need to witness

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Day 7

Luke 9.57-62

Along the way someone said to Jesus, "I'll go anywhere with you!" Jesus said, "Foxes have dens, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man doesn't have a place to call his own."

Jesus told someone else to come with him. But the man said, "Lord, let me wait until I bury my father." Jesus answered, "Let the dead take care of the dead, while you go and tell about God's kingdom."

Then someone said to Jesus, "I want to go with you, Lord, but first let me go back and take care of things at home." Jesus answered, "Anyone who starts ploughing and keeps looking back isn't worth a thing to God's kingdom!"

Three instances of discipleship without total conviction. The first is a promise that may have been a bit rash. It looks as if it might not be honoured – you may disagree. The next is a call which is answered with a condition. It sounds a reasonable and decent thing to do, to bury your father, and Jesus' reply is harsh.

The third case may be that of so many of us. So much to do, too many loose ends to tie up. Might it be that the man goes home and doesn't actually come back (not unlike the seeds that fell where thorn bushes grew up and choked the new plants – see Jesus' explanation later in Luke 8)?

God's call on our lives was never prefaced with "I wonder, if you've got the time, whether...". God's call to live a life in the light was never finished with "...if you think you can do that". Think of all the times you've started out but never finished for lack of planning or commitment. Think of the excuses you use when you say you're too busy, or have other commitments. Think about the times you've not come forward to respond to a call because it's open-ended and doesn't last for a series of four weeks.

When Jesus calls us, he knows already that we are available, whatever we might think otherwise, and that the task he calls us to has been tailor-made for us, and not something third-hand that others have rejected. There is only one response to Jesus. Just as I am, without one plea or we come forward, under total commitment and trust.

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
Of our life's wild, restless sea;
Day by day His sweet voice soundeth,
Saying, "Christian, follow me."
Jesus calls us from the worship
Of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us,
Saying, "Christian, love me more."

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/kuwait>

<https://youtu.be/gjk3GdmByXU>

Are you mildly offended by Jesus' reply to the grieving man?

Does family come before Christ's call?

Do you have any conditions (lines in the sand?) under the terms of your commitment to Christ?

O Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end. Is that promise still valid?

Father God, the fishermen dropped their nets when Jesus promised to make them fishers of men. Let me, like them, without a word rise up and follow Jesus. Amen

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Day 8

Luke 14.25-29

Large crowds were walking along with Jesus, when he turned and said: You cannot be my disciple, unless you love me more than you love your father and mother, your wife and children, and your brothers and sisters.

You cannot come with me unless you love me more than you love your own life. You cannot be my disciple unless you carry your own cross and come with me.

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. What is the first thing you will do? Won't you sit down and figure out how much it will cost and if you have enough money to pay for it? Otherwise, you will start building the tower, but not be able to finish. Then everyone who sees what is happening will laugh at you.

Here is the answer to the question about family yesterday. Actually, the commitment to Jesus goes one step further than family: it calls for me to love Jesus more than I love my own life. That's a tough call. And then he lays it on thick when he calls me to carry my cross (be ready to suffer and die).

What's in it for me?!

Jesus' parable about building a tower seems to be about having everything ready for the task. In the same way Jesus expects us to be in the right state when we take up his call on our lives. If you go out with Jesus and you have not settled issues of family responsibilities and personal finance then these will come to bite you.

I don't want to lessen the impact of what Jesus is saying here by suggesting that not everyone is called in the same way as the disciples were called as that easily leads to us thinking that all this does not apply to us. It does – we are all disciples.

In our joys and in our sorrows,
Days of toil and hours of ease,
Still He calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."
Jesus calls us-- by Thy mercies,
Saviour, may we hear Thy call;
Give our hearts to Thine obedience,
serve and love Thee best of all.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/bhutan>

<https://youtu.be/1OYzoA8Kbw0>

What's in it for me, then?

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee. Who is calling whom here?

What happens if I look instead at the love Jesus has for me? How much does this draw me to follow?

Father God, Your love for this world and this individual is greater than I can comprehend. Turn my eyes towards the realisation of that love in the Word Incarnate, my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Day 9

John 10.9-18

I am the gate. All who come in through me will be saved. Through me they will come and go and find pasture. A thief comes only to rob, kill, and destroy. I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullest.

I am the good shepherd, and the good shepherd gives up his life for his sheep. Hired workers are not like the shepherd. They don't own the sheep, and when they see a wolf coming, they run off and leave the sheep. Then the wolf attacks and scatters the flock. Hired workers run away because they don't care about the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep, and they know me. Just as the Father knows me, I know the Father, and I give up my life for my sheep. I have other sheep that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them together too, when they hear my voice. Then there will be one flock of sheep and one shepherd.

The Father loves me, because I give up my life, so that I may receive it back again. No one takes my life from me. I give it up willingly! I have the power to give it up and the power to receive it back again, just as my Father commanded me to do.

The sheep pen of Jesus' time would probably have been a solid structure that was in communal use, holding sheep for several shepherds. Imagine a circular stone wall with an entrance gap but no door. A shepherd or the keeper of the pen would lie across the gap.

Jesus is not saying that he guards the doorway, but that he is the door itself, a permanent door. To get in we have to go through him, not round him. When the disciple Philip asked Jesus the way to Father God, Jesus' reply was "I am the way" (and the truth and the life).

God without Jesus is not Father God. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, the first two words speak of God's fatherhood. Without Jesus our access to Father God is sealed from us, and all we can know is the God of holiness to whose expectations we cannot attain. The way to Father God, the throne room, the presence is through Jesus, and him alone. Do you intone the Lord's Prayer or do you speak it to Father God?

Our whole Christian life operates from here, in Jesus. Though we may be called out of our comfort zones we are never called out of Jesus.

The message of salvation in Jesus cannot be shut down, not even in Kenya. Pray that people caught up in Al-Shabaab will come to know Jesus Christ as Lord.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/kenya>

https://youtu.be/Coq_grSFINs Enjoy it slowly.

How known are you, and how does this affect your Christian life?

Who are the "other sheep"?

I heard the voice of Jesus say.. How do you hear the voice of Jesus?

Through Jesus, or into Jesus?

What is needed for "one flock of sheep and one shepherd" to be a reality?

Father God, I come to You through Jesus or I do not come at all. I want to know Jesus more so that I may know you more. Open my heart, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Day 10

John 16.25-33

I have used examples to explain to you what I have been talking about. But the time will come when I will speak to you plainly about the Father and will no longer use examples like these. You will ask the Father in my name, and I won't have to ask him for you. God the Father loves you because you love me, and you believe that I have come from him. I came from the Father into the world, but I am leaving the world and returning to the Father.

The disciples said, "Now you are speaking plainly to us! You are not using examples. At last we know that you understand everything, and we don't have any more questions. Now we believe that you truly have come from God."

Jesus replied: Do you really believe me? The time will come and is already here when all of you will be scattered. Each of you will go back home and leave me by myself. But the Father will be with me, and I won't be alone. I have told you this, so that you might have peace in your hearts because of me.

While you are in the world, you will have to suffer. But cheer up! I have defeated the world.

Jesus is talking with his disciples at his last Passover supper with them. His time on earth is nearly up, and Jesus had taught and trained his disciples as well as they could ever be taught and trained. Jesus had taken them to places they'd never have visited, and shown them things they'd never seen before and revealed truths that would have overwhelmed their take on Life, The Universe and Everything. Chapters 14 to 16 of John's Gospel cover Jesus' final words to the disciples. It's only here at this late stage that Jesus reveals to them that he is The Way to Father God, or perhaps it's only now that the disciples have asked the right questions. Perhaps it's now that they are at last ready to receive Jesus' teaching.

They are being hardened off for the task ahead of them, and of course they have no idea just what an amazing commission that is going to be. He is preparing them in order that they may take up responsibilities for themselves. He is even now not convinced that they fully understand him, revealing that they will fall away, and explaining that there will be suffering. His exhortation to cheer up may feel a little hollow, as there was no sign that Jesus actually had conquered the world.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/turkey>

https://youtu.be/77RHISYAD_E

Has Jesus conquered the world? Where is the evidence?

Was Jesus talking just to all of the disciples together, or to us, or you or me?

How ready and prepared are you to be a disciple of Jesus in this world?

Is suffering part and parcel of everyone's Christian life?

Father God, I may ask anything in Jesus' name, for You honour every request of Jesus. I pray that you will equip me to live in this world as a faithful disciple of Jesus. Amen.

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Day 11

Matthew 10.34-39

Don't think that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came to bring trouble, not peace. I came to turn sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. Your worst enemies will be in your own family.

If you love your father or mother or even your sons and daughters more than me, you are not fit to be my disciples.

And unless you are willing to take up your cross and come with me, you are not fit to be my disciples. If you try to save your life, you will lose it. But if you give it up for me, you will surely find it.

You sometimes want pages in your Bible to stick together so that you can avoid hard bits like the passage above. The Prince of Peace, proclaimed by angels singing peace on earth, tears up the plan we were all hoping for. When we thought that there would be peace on earth, a sentiment carried on Christmas cards that seems to bear no relation to the troubles, the violence, persecution, the ethnic cleansing, genocide that is reported happening in so many parts of this world, Jesus grows us up and tells us that there'll be trouble. And who is going to bring the trouble – why, Jesus!

He brought trouble all right – religious leaders were lining up in queues to kill him.

Matthew's account above is similar to Luke's that we read a few days ago. Again, Jesus makes those difficult demands on us about how much we are to love him. If we follow to the extent that he demands then it looks as if there's trouble in store for us, too. Perhaps we might send Christmas cards with "Trouble on Earth" printed on them.

Some strands of Christianity have declared a line in the sand when it comes to family, quoting the sanctity of marriage and family as unbreakable. Jesus does rather ride roughshod over that line when he says that anyone who loves close family more than they love Jesus is not fit for the Kingdom.

So, how much do you love this man Jesus? Is it a theoretical love or one that is a pretence? Does Jesus make himself unlovable with his remarks?

After all this Jesus then caps it all by saying that I am to give up my life for him. Haven't we given enough already?

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/tunisia>

<https://youtu.be/iGAwiXgmHLO>

How do you reconcile Jesus' words above with the angel's in Luke 1:17?

Am I fit to be a disciple? If not, how do I get fitter?

Should missionaries take their families with them when they go to dangerous places?

How hard should you pray for unbelieving members of your family?

How hard should you evangelise them?

Father God, it's clear that the way of the cross is tough, and I'm not up to it in my own strength. I pray that You draw me closer to You and also build me up in love so that I willingly respond with my life. Amen.

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Day 12

Matthew 24.1-14

After Jesus left the temple, his disciples came over and said, "Look at all these buildings!" Jesus replied, "Do you see these buildings? They will certainly be torn down! Not one stone will be left in place.

...

Don't let anyone fool you. Many will come and claim to be me. They will say that they are the Messiah, and they will fool many people. You will soon hear about wars and threats of wars, but don't be afraid.

These things will have to happen first, but that isn't the end. Nations and kingdoms will go to war against each other. People will starve to death, and in some places there will be earthquakes.

But this is just the beginning of troubles. You will be arrested, punished, and even killed. Because of me, you will be hated by people of all nations. Many will give up and will betray and hate each other. Many false prophets will come and fool a lot of people. Evil will spread and cause many people to stop loving others.

But if you keep on being faithful right to the end, you will be saved. When the good news about the kingdom has been preached all over the world and told to all nations, the end will come.

Jesus is full of surprises. His disciples were marvelling at the size and grandeur of the city and Jesus is seeing destruction and desolation. His words hit a nerve and the disciples ask him to explain more deeply. There will be false messiahs, people who claim to be God's Chosen One. There will be wars, or talk of wars. And this will only herald the start of the end.

Our problem with God's timing is that we don't know it. All that Jesus talked about could relate to many times in the past, might describe the present age, or could be about the future. In our time we have seen some terrible things, and persecution of Christians across the world seems to be rife. We are called to be ready for and expect the return of Christ, an event which the whole world will see and will not be mistaken, but in the meantime we have all sorts of movements, breakaways, idolatries and falsehoods that attempt to pervert the true message of the gospel, within and outside Christianity, and alongside that we have war and disaster to accompany us.

It's clear that being a Christian in these days will be dangerous – it will be full-on and no-one's going to get away from it. Jesus offers this one lifeline – keep on being faithful, faithful when all around you there is chaos, faithful even when others have given up their faith, faithful even when you are mocked, despised or persecuted for your faith, and you will be saved.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/ethiopia>

<https://youtu.be/RPmO75cXXcM>

Is God working his purpose out?

Is the time drawing near, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God?

If we seek to evangelise the whole world are we then bringing on the end?

Father God, keep me aware of the signs of the times, but not to the extent that these get in the way of my conviction of a secure and safe place in Jesus. Prepare me for what lies ahead. Amen.

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Day 13

1 Kings 19.1-10

Ahab told his wife Jezebel what Elijah had done and that he had killed the prophets. She sent a message to Elijah: "You killed my prophets. Now I'm going to kill you! I pray that the gods will punish me even more severely if I don't do it by this time tomorrow."

Elijah was afraid when he got her message, and he ran to the town of Beersheba in Judah. He left his servant there, then walked another whole day into the desert. Finally, he came to a large bush and sat down in its shade.

He begged the LORD, "I've had enough. Just let me die! I'm no better off than my ancestors." Then he lay down in the shade and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel woke him up and said, "Get up and eat." Elijah looked around, and by his head was a jar of water and some baked bread. He sat up, ate and drank, then lay down and went back to sleep. Soon the LORD's angel woke him again and said, "Get up and eat, or else you'll get too tired to travel." So Elijah sat up and ate and drank.

The food and water made him strong enough to walk forty more days. At last, he reached Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, and he spent the night there in a cave. While Elijah was on Mount Sinai, the LORD asked, "Elijah, why are you here?" He answered, "LORD God All-Powerful, I've always done my best to obey you. But your people have broken their solemn promise to you. They have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets, except me. And now they are even trying to kill me!"

We're going to spend a little time in the Old Testament, seeing how some of God's people of old were used by God. Elijah had just defeated great forces of evil single-handedly (with God). He should have been rejoicing in the mighty power of God, but at this moment, after hearing of Jezebel's death threat against him (sworn against the gods who Elijah demonstrated didn't actually exist!) he was now frightened for his life. Jezebel was clearly a powerful woman.

It's a terrible place to be when it seems that your only way out of the misery you're in is death. Christians can suffer from depression and most of us have possibly passed through some dark nights. Psalm 23 tells us that we are not alone when walking in the valley of the shadow of death. King David must have been there, too.

Elijah goes far into the desert, sustained miraculously (irritatingly?) by God, and ends up on Mount Sinai. Was he aiming for that place, or did he just end up there? God asks Elijah a question. God may already know the answer, but there's something about the way we word our answers that tells a lot about us (cf Adam, where are you?). Elijah is perturbed by overriding fear and anxiety, which seems crazy under the circumstances. God deals with Elijah gently but firmly – read on from this passage to find out how. God had used and supported Elijah, and He was in no way ready to let him go. God is not finished with any one of us yet.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/kazakhstan>

https://youtu.be/hjZ_IIP9c5A

Do you know where Kazakhstan is?

Why did God let Elijah run further into the desert?

Have you spent forty days or more in isolation from God? How did it end?

Are you in some form of isolation at this moment? How will it end?

Would you be a prophet if God called you? It's a trick question.

What happens when God has finished with you? It's a trick question.

Father God, you provided for Elijah for forty days while you waited patiently for him to turn back to you. Your grace and loving-kindness have brought me safe thus far, and I place my trust in you on the homeward path. Amen.

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Day 14

1 Samuel 17.45-52

David answered: You've come out to fight me with a sword and a spear and a dagger. But I've come out to fight you in the name of the LORD All-Powerful. He is the God of Israel's army, and you have insulted him too! Today the LORD will help me defeat you. I'll knock you down and cut off your head, and I'll feed the bodies of the other Philistine soldiers to the birds and wild animals. Then the whole world will know that Israel has a real God. Everybody here will see that the LORD doesn't need swords or spears to save his people. The LORD always wins his battles, and he will help us defeat you.

When Goliath started forward, David ran toward him. He put a rock in his sling and swung the sling around by its straps. When he let go of one strap, the rock flew out and hit Goliath on the forehead. It cracked his skull, and he fell face down on the ground. David defeated Goliath with a sling and a rock. He killed him without even using a sword. David ran over and pulled out Goliath's sword. Then he used it to cut off Goliath's head.

When the Philistines saw what had happened to their hero, they started running away. But the soldiers of Israel and Judah let out a battle cry and went after them as far as Gath and Ekron. The bodies of the Philistines were scattered all along the road from Shaaraim to Gath and Ekron. When the Israelite army returned from chasing the Philistines, they took what they wanted from the enemy camp.

David had only come up to the front line to bring some food for his brothers. His father had kept him back as the youngest to look after the sheep. To God, however, even keeping his family's sheep safe, work that alternated with being in Saul's court, is a training for the great task he has in store for David. Without his skill in using a sling, which was developed while protecting his sheep against predators, he would have been useless against Goliath and the Philistines.

He had no idea when he came with his brothers' sandwiches that Israel was in panic. David's response was one of true righteous anger – who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God? David was right – who on earth did Goliath think he was? And all David's big brother Eliab could do was insult the youngster for speaking out of turn.

When David turned up to fight, they let him – everyone else was too scared to fight Goliath. They knew he was going to die. David spurned the heavy armour they tried to place on him. They were convinced now that he was going to die. While his big brothers, the soldiers and commanders of the army of Israel were quaking in fear David went forth with his sling and a few stones and killed Goliath.

One boy saved Israel from shame and defeat.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/qatar>

<https://youtu.be/zRvCUz6KFB4>

<https://youtu.be/YJ8J5CkK-u4>

What did David mean when he referred to the armies of the living God?

What drove David?

What skills have you developed that God has used or might use?

Would you stand with David or tremble with Eliab?

Father God, you chose David for a task. You did not create me as a passenger. Awaken my spirit to that to which you have chosen and called me. Amen.

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Day 15

Daniel 3.12-21

".. Sir, you appointed three men to high positions in Babylon Province, but they have disobeyed you. Those Jews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refuse to worship your gods and the statue you have set up."

King Nebuchadnezzar was furious. So he sent for the three young men and said, "I hear that you refuse to worship my gods and the gold statue I have set up. Now I am going to give you one more chance. If you bow down and worship the statue when you hear the music, everything will be all right. But if you don't, you will at once be thrown into a flaming furnace. No god can save you from me."

The three men replied, "Your Majesty, we don't need to defend ourselves. The God we worship can save us from you and your flaming furnace. But even if he doesn't, we still won't worship your gods and the gold statue you have set up."

Nebuchadnezzar's face twisted with anger at the three men. And he ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than usual. Next, he commanded some of his strongest soldiers to tie up the men and throw them into the flaming furnace. The king wanted it done at that very moment.

So the soldiers tied up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and threw them into the flaming furnace with all of their clothes still on, including their turbans. The fire was so hot that flames leaped out and killed the soldiers.

Daniel had been placed in high authority and Nebuchadnezzar had proclaimed that Daniel's god (i.e. God) was to be top god. This was probably not good news to the various shamans, magicians and assorted characters whose advice for the king kept them in good employment and influence. Daniel's three companions Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (now with Babylonian names) were working as his assistants.

Now the capricious king had erected a giant gold statue and everyone had to worship it. The three young men refused to do it – they were reported and stood before the king. They had a position of trust and authority in the land they'd been brought to – they had no rights as exiles, people of a defeated nation. That they had work was a good reason not to step over the line. Don't disrespect the king! When the king says "jump!", you say, "how high?". But these men were obedient to a greater king, the mighty, powerful, faithful God of their fathers.

They were betrayed and now stood before the furious king. In his anger he slipped out an oath that enabled them to stand bold before him - the king had declared "No god can save you from me". We know how the story continued, but remember, too, that after the ordeal these men were accorded even greater authority and regal protection by Nebuchadnezzar.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/brunei>

https://youtu.be/rLT1_PBPdhY

Have you ever given in to a popular tide of belief or behaviour, knowing it was not right?

Has your faith ever been put on the line? If not, was it because the object of your faith or your faith itself that was lacking?

Father God, all it took was one angel to keep the faithful ones safe. Every hair numbered and every one unsinged. Let your protection be evident in my life of faith in you. Amen.

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Day 16

Esther 3.1-12

Later, King Xerxes promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha to the highest position in his kingdom. Haman was a descendant of Agag, and the king had given orders for his officials at the royal gate to honour Haman by kneeling down to him.

All of them obeyed except Mordecai. When the other officials asked Mordecai why he disobeyed the king's command, he said, "Because I am a Jew." They spoke to him for several days about kneeling down, but he still refused to obey.

Finally, they reported this to Haman, to find out if he would let Mordecai get away with it. Haman was furious to learn that Mordecai refused to kneel down and honour him. And when he found out that Mordecai was a Jew, he knew that killing only Mordecai was not enough. Every Jew in the whole kingdom had to be killed.

It was now the twelfth year of the rule of King Xerxes. During Nisan, the first month of the year, Haman said, "Find out the best time for me to do this." The time chosen was Adar, the twelfth month. Then Haman went to the king and said: Your Majesty, there are some people who live all over your kingdom and won't have a thing to do with anyone else. They have customs that are different from everyone else's, and they refuse to obey your laws. We would be better off to get rid of them! Why not give orders for all of them to be killed? I can promise that you will get tons of silver for your treasury.

The king handed his official ring to Haman, who hated the Jews, and the king told him, "Do what you want with those people! You can keep their money." On the thirteenth day of Nisan, Haman called in the king's secretaries and ordered them to write letters in every language used in the kingdom. The letters were written in the name of the king and sealed by using the king's own ring. At once they were sent to the king's highest officials, the governors of each province, and the leaders of the different nations in the kingdom of Xerxes.

Haman has been promoted, but his pride is wounded by the one man who would not kneel down to him, so Haman schemes to get rid not only of that man but his whole race. Haman was exercising the authority granted him by king Xerxes.

Mordecai refuses to bend his knee to anyone except God. By claiming his Jewish faith and life to the other officials as his reason for not kneeling before Haman he'd marked all those of his nation as traitors. If this is how one Jew behaves, then they must all be the same. Perhaps Mordecai might have been a little less awkward about it all?

Mordecai is now in grave danger, as are his people. How easy it would be to recant and to bow the knee for a quiet life. Has Mordecai actually sealed the fate of his fellow-Jews? Haman efficiently arranges everything for the complete destruction of God's people. Does that ring a bell in more recent times?

Read on to find out what happened.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/nepal>



How confident are you in the trust God has placed in you?

Do you seek the favour or acknowledgement of people as you carry out what God calls you to do?

Ever done any of the word cloud above?

How confident are you in the face of opposition to your faith? What should you do about it?

Father God, Mordecai may have seemed stubborn, but You vindicated his dogged determination to put You first without compromise. I want You to be uncompromisingly first in all aspects of my life. Amen

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Day 17

Nehemiah 4.1-9

When Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, heard that we were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, he became angry and started insulting our people. In front of his friends and the Samaritan army he said, "What is this feeble bunch of Jews trying to do? Are they going to rebuild the wall and offer sacrifices all in one day? Do they think they can make something out of this pile of scorched stones?"

Tobiah from Ammon was standing beside Sanballat and said, "Look at the wall they are building! Why, even a fox could knock over this pile of stones."

But I prayed, "Our God, these people hate us and have wished horrible things for us. Please answer our prayers and make their insults fall on them! Let them be the ones to be dragged away as prisoners of war. Don't forgive the mean and evil way they have insulted the builders."

The people worked hard, and we built the walls of Jerusalem halfway up again. But Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people from the city of Ashdod saw the walls going up and the holes being repaired. So they became angry and decided to stir up trouble, and to fight against the people of Jerusalem. But we kept on praying to our God, and we also stationed guards day and night.

Nehemiah, an exile in Babylon, was moved to do something to restore Jerusalem, which lay broken, defeated and desolate. It is reasonable to assume that it was God who'd laid this on Nehemiah's heart because He desired and willed to see Jerusalem rebuilt. Nehemiah was God's chosen man to do this. Nehemiah was a high-ranking official in the court of king Artaxerxes, though his job description as cup-bearer may suggest otherwise.

Nehemiah had approached the task by coming first before God in penitence for the disobedience and faithlessness of his people (Chapter 1.5-10). Without a clean sheet before God he would not have been in any way successful. The king allows him to go.

Having gained leave Nehemiah set about the first important task – to rebuild the walls. This was no small task, partly because of the amount of work to be done, and partly due to the opposition he faced from those who lived nearby. And have you seen the size of the stones?! Nehemiah persuades those living in Jerusalem to help him in the task.

Governor Sanballat turns up with his army to mock the work. his comments are sharp – this bunch of builders was a motley crew and the walls were in a terrible state. Their mocking turns in time, however, to threatening behaviour since they saw that the walls actually were going up. In the face of all the opposition and through hard work and long hours spent the walls were rebuilt.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/myanmar>

<https://youtu.be/JvycNXMUcMY>

[Jerusalem ruined?](#)

Why didn't Sanballat just order his men or get a few foxes together to pull down the stones?

What forms of opposition do you encounter as a Christian?

Who are more likely to be opposed, sleeping or active Christians?

What was the one key factor Nehemiah's men had?

Father God, Nehemiah journeyed in faith to start a task that was bigger than he may have imagined, and that was dogged by opposition from the start. Challenge me to set out in faith on the tasks you would have me do. Amen.

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Day 18

Good advice

Don't be annoyed by anyone who does wrong, and don't envy them. They will soon disappear like grass without rain. Trust the LORD and live right! The land will be yours, and you will be safe. Do what the LORD wants, and he will give you your heart's desire. Let the LORD lead you and trust him to help. Then it will be as clear as the noonday sun that you were right.

Be patient and trust the LORD. Don't let it bother you when all goes well for those who do sinful things. Don't be angry or furious. Anger can lead to sin. All sinners will disappear, but if you trust the LORD, the land will be yours. Sinners will soon disappear, never to be found, but the poor will take the land and enjoy a big harvest.

Merciless people make plots against good people and snarl like animals, but the Lord laughs and knows their time is coming soon. The wicked kill with swords and shoot arrows to murder the poor and the needy and all who do right. But they will be killed by their own swords, and their arrows will be broken. It is better to live right and be poor than to be sinful and rich.

Where might these words come from? I'll tell you tomorrow if you don't know. The life of faith does not always present itself as the winning path. There are people who lead sinful lives and seem to get away with it. We know the rhyme about it being the same the whole world over, that the rich get the money, but it only works if we stop where life ends. God's promise is that the sinner, the unjust, the greedy, the merciless will not always have the upper hand. Some will live to see their downfall, but the others will have a reckoning in eternity. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The writer is proclaiming not some wishful thinking but an eternal truth. Trust in God and live according to his precepts and you will gain the land. For people of a farming economy land is treasure indeed.

There's more. God promises that hearts' desires will be fulfilled and that right will prevail. However, a call for patience puts things into a broader aspect as we wait for what God has in store to be realised. We, too, may see that played out in eternity.

There is a sting in the tail. Evil people may do real harm to good people, and even if they get their come-uppance, what's to be said to those who, having lived in need or poverty, or who have led good lives before God, lose their livelihoods or even their lives at the hands of evil people? It would seem that the reward for godly living may not appear in this lifetime.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/malaysia>

Should we be seeking to convert people from a Muslim background (see link above)?

How much weight does the prospect of riches for eternity carry against wealth now?

Which would you choose, if you could not have riches in both?

Father God, life is not always fair. Teach me to trust you for everything I need so that I may be able to serve you as you desire, and not to rant at the wicked. Amen.

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Day 19

Psalm 74.1-12

Our God, why have you completely rejected us? Why are you so angry with the ones you care for? Remember the people you rescued long ago, the tribe you chose to be your very own.

Think of Mount Zion, your home; walk over to the temple left in ruins forever by those who hate us. Your enemies roared like lions in your holy temple, and they have placed their banners there. It looks like a forest chopped to pieces. They used axes and hatchets to smash the carvings. They burned down your temple and badly disgraced it.

They said to themselves, "We'll crush them!" Then they burned every one of your meeting places all over the country. There are no more miracles and no more prophets. Who knows how long it will be like this? Our God, how much longer will our enemies sneer? Won't they ever stop insulting you? Why don't you punish them? Why are you holding back?

Our God and King, you have ruled since ancient times; you have won victories everywhere on this earth.

Yesterday's words come from Psalm 37. The book of Psalms speaks intimately of human life, faith, relationship to God, and worship. At times it sounds like the writer is complaining, or is arguing against God. There are laments, like this one, in which the writer speaks of the desolation of living without God's covering.

Many times Israel turned against God, and many times God hid his face from Israel. Their arrogance and pride, their faithlessness and disobedience were punished by God, not automatically but after many warnings to the prophets, and not without offering a way back to God through repentance. God is patient, but we must never assume that if God does not punish immediately then he is not displeased or angry.

The people of Israel are suffering the consequences of rejecting God, and have thus come out from under his protective wing and his blessing. They are now without power or defence. Do you not care for us, asks the writer. Of course God does, but like a father, God is bringing his children up. They are learning things the hard way, and not for the first time in the history of their relationship with God.

I'm touched by the lament, "There are no more miracles and no more prophets". Life is earthbound, and there is nothing to hope for when God withdraws his hand.

Life for the Christian can go through lean times as well as rich. It may be that there is an aspect of spiritual growth or commitment that needs addressing, or that God may be expecting a more mature approach and response from us. If we slide away from the pathway God calls us to, we also move away from his presence, and if we do not address what needs addressing, God's can seem very distant. Failures in the communication link with God are not of his making. God's call does not change, and his promises are true.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/tajikistan>

<https://youtu.be/MxYlxeKbv3I>

Where are the miracles and prophets today?

Is your Church fellowship in the right place with Father God?

Is there any dead foliage that needs removing, or stems that need pruning? How will you set about this? Who can help you address this?

Father God, I seek to live in Jesus, the vine, and I know that You may prune branches, but in Jesus I am safe. Amen.

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Day 20

Acts 3:11-19

While the man kept holding on to Peter and John, the whole crowd ran to them in amazement at the place known as Solomon's Porch. Peter saw that a crowd had gathered, and he said: Friends, why are you surprised at what has happened? Why are you staring at us? Do you think we have some power of our own? Do you think we were able to make this man walk because we are so religious?

The God that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and our other ancestors worshiped has brought honour to his Servant Jesus. He is the one you betrayed. You turned against him when he was being tried by Pilate, even though Pilate wanted to set him free. You rejected Jesus, who was holy and good. You asked for a murderer to be set free, and you killed the one who leads people to life. But God raised him from death, and all of us can tell you what he has done.

You see this man, and you know him. He put his faith in the name of Jesus and was made strong. Faith in Jesus made this man completely well while everyone was watching.

My friends, I am sure that you and your leaders didn't know what you were doing. But God had his prophets tell that his Messiah would suffer, and now he has kept that promise. So turn to God! Give up your sins, and you will be forgiven.

Jesus' disciples had been transformed by the enabling power of God's Holy Spirit. From the upper room experience at Pentecost a newly-filled group of people went about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Peter and John had encountered (not for the first time) the man at the temple gate and they'd healed him in Jesus' name (Look it up earlier in the chapter if you are not familiar with the story).

The man was now jumping and praising God, the crowds were amazed, and Peter the unlettered started preaching. His message – Jesus, sacrificed for your sins, risen and glorified, Israel's Messiah. What a sermon. Peter trusted the Holy Spirit to lead him both in his approach to the beggar and in his words to the crowd. You will note that the truth Peter spoke was not softened for his audience – some of them may well have been in the crowd that called for Jesus to be crucified.

Let's think about what might have happened if Peter had not made that approach to the beggar. He and John see that familiar beggar – Peter makes to go to him but John stops him, telling him not to be ridiculous. Or perhaps both feel the urge to do something but each is waiting for the other. Or they think "tomorrow".

I could list, as can you, from personal experience, all manner of reasons why we shy away from doing what God calls us to do. He might not (at least, not yet) be calling you to heal someone in public, but He might be calling you to speak words to someone, to put something right, or step away from something sinful.

Of course there are fears about looking silly or being shown up, or perhaps you're not prepared to deal with the consequences that follow on from responding to God. Tomorrow will not always be there. Something like a thousand people had come to Christ because of Peter stepping out that day.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/jordan>

And to cheer you up a little, <https://youtu.be/UvRSKjlhHao>

Which is easier to say "Here's a pound", or "In the name of Jesus Christ, walk!".

Have you been prompted by God to do something out of the ordinary?

Is there something still outstanding that you have shied away from for fear of failure?

Have you ever felt moved by God to do or say something, but resisted? If so, have you sought forgiveness, and asked God for another opportunity?

Is there someone whose faith you admire but couldn't match? If so, why do you think you are a lesser person?

What training do you need to get out and preach the Gospel to others?

Father God, so fill my heart with love for you in Jesus that I cannot contain it. Let it overflow from me to those around me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Day 21

Acts 4.1-14

The apostles were still talking to the people, when some priests, the captain of the temple guard, and some Sadducees arrived. These men were angry because the apostles were teaching the people that the dead would be raised from death, just as Jesus had been raised from death.

It was already late in the afternoon, and they arrested Peter and John and put them in jail for the night. But a lot of people who had heard the message believed it. So by now there were about five thousand followers of the Lord. The next morning the leaders, the elders, and the teachers of the Law of Moses met in Jerusalem. The high priest Annas was there, as well as Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and other members of the high priest's family.

They brought in Peter and John and made them stand in the middle while they questioned them. They asked, "By what power and in whose name have you done this?" Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and told the nation's leaders and the elders: You are questioning us today about a kind deed in which a crippled man was healed. But there is something we must tell you and everyone else in Israel.

This man is standing here completely well because of the power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth. You put Jesus to death on a cross, but God raised him to life. He is the stone that you builders thought was worthless, and now he is the most important stone of all.

Only Jesus has the power to save! His name is the only one in all the world that can save anyone.

The officials were amazed to see how brave Peter and John were, and they knew that these two apostles were only ordinary men and not well educated. The officials were certain that these men had been with Jesus. But they could not deny what had happened. The man who had been healed was standing there with the apostles.

The story continues. Peter and John are swept off the streets before any more disturbance can happen. It's interesting that the healing of the beggar is not the issue – it's about Jesus' resurrection. It is so easy for people to be so bound up in some minor issue that they miss the important one, in this case being the fact that a man who was disabled was re-enabled in the name of the living Lord Jesus Christ. If Jesus was dead the miracle could not have happened. The Sadducees had ears to hear keywords but no eyes to see.

Peter has now had his first night in prison and an audience with the combined forces of the Jewish authorities. Had he asked for such an audience before, he'd have been ignored. Now they all want to hear what he has to say. Jesus takes you to the people that matter. Everyone could see that a man had been healed and Peter and John become famous/infamous, depending on your viewpoint. The man was there, too – I wonder if he'd also spent a night in jail for being part of the disturbance.

The healed man can now start to secure his own livelihood. How might you feel, though, if at work someone comes with a better way to do things and both your role and your livelihood are suddenly on the line? You might not be positively disposed towards the colleague. This was fast becoming the situation that the religious leaders were facing, and they reacted in order to save their livelihood.

Peter is once again filled with the Holy Spirit and preaches Jesus and the power of his name. His words cut through to those listening, though for many of them their self-imposed blindness and deafness stops them from experiencing the truth of the risen Lord Jesus.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/laos>

<https://youtu.be/iOP2FBFHbLA>

How do you think John felt in all of this?

Who might Jesus take you to, or who is it he's already calling to you?

Father God, it is only by Jesus' name that anyone can be saved, or a person healed. Teach me the power of this precious name and how to use it in all aspects of my life. Amen.

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Day 22

Acts 4.23-31

As soon as Peter and John had been set free, they went back and told the others everything that the chief priests and the leaders had said to them. When the rest of the Lord's followers heard this, they prayed together and said:

Master, you created heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. And by the Holy Spirit you spoke to our ancestor David. He was your servant, and you told him to say: "Why are all the Gentiles so furious? Why do people make foolish plans? The kings of earth prepare for war, and the rulers join together against the Lord and his Messiah."

Here in Jerusalem, Herod and Pontius Pilate got together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel. Then they turned against your holy Servant Jesus, your chosen Messiah. They did what you in your power and wisdom had already decided would happen. Lord, listen to their threats! We are your servants. So make us brave enough to speak your message.

Show your mighty power, as we heal people and work miracles and wonders in the name of your holy Servant Jesus.

After they had prayed, the meeting place shook. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and bravely spoke God's message.

While some of us may be looking to hide away for a while to review the situation after a brush with the law, Peter and John were still on fire and ready to go. The response of the group was not one of celebration but of increased commitment. Rather than boast about how the authorities had failed to win the case they knew that oppression and persecution were going to be the order of the day.

The prayer they pray together takes and uses Psalm 2 – why do unbelievers conspire together against God. The "Gentiles" in this case are the Jewish authorities! David's words make some sense at last! So what do they pray for? A quiet life? Deliverance from evil? Neither of these, as they are routes out of God's calling on them. They pray for braveness in the face of opposition. They pray that God will be revealed in his power as they continue to work for him in performing miracles of healing and wonders in Jesus' name. More of the same, Lord!

Re-filling came in abundance to them as the Holy Spirit once more confirmed God's response to their prayers.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/turkmenistan/>

<https://youtu.be/GxjoAO-dJnA>

Do your prayers mirror those of the people in that room?

Do you quote Scripture back to God?

How will God's mighty power be shown through you today?

Father God, I dare to pray along with those disciples that you show your mighty power, as we heal people and work miracles and wonders in the name of your holy Servant Jesus. Amen.

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Day 23

Acts 5.17-26

The high priest and all the other Sadducees who were with him became jealous. They arrested the apostles and put them in the city jail. But that night an angel from the Lord opened the doors of the jail and led the apostles out. The angel said, "Go to the temple and tell the people everything about this new life." So they went into the temple before sunrise and started teaching.

The high priest and his men called together their council, which included all of Israel's leaders. Then they ordered the apostles to be brought to them from the jail. The temple police who were sent to the jail did not find the apostles. They returned and said, "We found the jail locked tight and the guards standing at the doors. But when we opened the doors and went in, we didn't find anyone there." The captain of the temple police and the chief priests listened to their report, but they did not know what to think about it.

Just then someone came in and said, "Right now those men you put in jail are in the temple, teaching the people!" The captain went with some of the temple police and brought the apostles back. But they did not use force. They were afraid that the people might start throwing stones at them.

The Church was growing fast. We tend to think that good preaching will draw in the crowds, but what really draws them in is miracles! Healing, cleansing, spiritual gifts of knowledge and discernment. Things had got to such a pitch that people in need of healing were being placed where Peter's shadow might pass over them. There is no power in the shadow itself – that's just Peter taking your light! It's the element of faith that is being exercised, just as when that woman touched the hem of Jesus' garment. Her faith had healed her.

This level of faith is reached because the sick person believed that the healer had God's authority to heal. When Naaman came to Elisha's house for healing from his leprosy Elisha sent his servant with the instruction to go and wash seven times in the Jordan. After complaining about it he did it and was healed. He trusted Elisha's authority. Some religions ascribe healing power to objects such as the bones of holy people. There's not a lot of authority in bones, nor is there anything Godly in new age paraphernalia such as healing crystals.

The authorities are getting twitchy again. They have power, but they have no power over this new move of God. They do what they can do, and that's to give the apostles another night in the cells. God does not even let them get away with this, and sends an angel to release them. The last thing the authorities want is for these apostles to be back again, telling of even more miraculous things.

Who'd be chief of police in Jerusalem?!

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/vietnam>

How many angels does it take to confound the authorities?

How many angels does God have at his disposal?

Father God, you rescued your apostles from prison because they had work to do that day. You enable me by your power to do the work you have called me to this day. Your kingdom come. Amen.

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Day 24

Acts 8.1-8

Saul approved the stoning of Stephen. Some faithful followers of the Lord buried Stephen and mourned very much for him.

At that time the church in Jerusalem suffered terribly. All of the Lord's followers, except the apostles, were scattered everywhere in Judea and Samaria. Saul started making a lot of trouble for the church. He went from house to house, arresting men and women and putting them in jail.

The Lord's followers who had been scattered went from place to place, telling the good news. Philip went to the city of Samaria and told the people about Christ. They crowded around Philip because they were eager to hear what he was saying and to see him work miracles. Many people with evil spirits were healed, and the spirits went out of them with a shout. A lot of crippled and lame people were also healed. Everyone in that city was very glad because of what was happening.

Even when you try to scatter the Christians, off they go like a virus and start doing miracles wherever they get dispersed. Saul was determined to shut the movement down, but it seemed that more and more Christians were popping up. There's nothing like persecution to make the church grow.

It's true.

Persecution is probably the last thing we want – but how much do we water down our faith and our trust in God when we agree to keep our churches and our worship within the bounds dictated by the state? We end up as collaborators or even traitors if we agree to stop witnessing. We abide by laws that honour God's laws, don't we?

The Gospel Message is to be preached to all and the Great Commission is an imperative.

I don't think we'll know "deliver us from evil" until we find ourselves caught up in it. Jesus' prayer does not say, "keep us away from evil" – how will evil ever be encountered and overcome unless we face it?

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/egypt>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/10/christians-egypt-unprecedented-persecution-report>

From a publication by the World Evangelical Alliance in 2010:

Persecuted Christians have learned truths about God that Christians under less pressure need to hear in order to experience the fullness of God. The spiritual insights of the persecuted are vital to the transformation of the lives of the rest of the Body of Christ. One of these essential insights is that we will all be – if witnessing for Christ – in some sense persecuted. There is a grander, greater narrative of God's action underneath the stories of individual pain, suffering, deliverance, and endurance. Our call to the Church of Jesus Christ: We must willingly, actively, and corporately take up the cross of Christ in our time.

Why did God allow Stephen to die?

Should we evangelise people of other faiths in our own country, or should we practise tolerance?

Father God, I see you more at work in those who have given you everything than in those who sit comfortably. I want to see you more at work in my life, so that I may glorify you. Amen.

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Day 25

Acts 9.8-18

Saul got up from the ground, and when he opened his eyes, he could not see a thing. Someone then led him by the hand to Damascus, and for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink.

A follower named Ananias lived in Damascus, and the Lord spoke to him in a vision. Ananias answered, "Lord, here I am." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the house of Judas on Straight Street. When you get there, you will find a man named Saul from the city of Tarsus. Saul is praying, and he has seen a vision. He saw a man named Ananias coming to him and putting his hands on him, so that he could see again."

Ananias replied, "Lord, a lot of people have told me about the terrible things this man has done to your followers in Jerusalem. Now the chief priests have given him the power to come here and arrest anyone who worships in your name."

The Lord said to Ananias, "Go! I have chosen him to tell foreigners, kings, and the people of Israel about me. I will show him how much he must suffer for worshiping in my name."

Ananias left and went into the house where Saul was staying. Ananias placed his hands on him and said, "Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me. He is the same one who appeared to you along the road. He wants you to be able to see and to be filled with the Holy Spirit." Suddenly something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see. He got up and was baptized.

Saul is blinded, but is probably more affected by Jesus talking directly to him and revealing that he, Jesus, the one who'd died, is the one that Saul is persecuting. Hearing from a dead man is a shock, and hearing from the one whose memory you are trying to wipe out is another. Being told by a visitor a little later that you are now going to work for Christ Jesus is the icing on the cake of shock.

I wonder what Saul's posse made of it all, and whether they stayed with Saul or just slipped back to Jerusalem a little disappointed that there weren't going to be any arrests today.

Saul stumbles into Damascus. He prays, and is given the vision of Ananias coming to heal him – that is, it would seem, before Ananias himself got to hear about it. Anyway, God joins up the pieces and Saul is healed.

God has been working his purpose out and Saul, for whom God had set a time to turn, from now on will use his intellect, his deep knowledge and powerful skills of persuasion for the Kingdom, which is of course what Saul thought he had been doing all along in his quest to keep the Jewish faith pure.

God reveals to Ananias what's in store for Saul. He has been chosen for a mighty task, and he will suffer.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/uzbekistan/>

Another version of something earlier: <https://youtu.be/ediEhCEK2Q8>

Was Ananias right to be dubious?

Is suffering an unavoidable fallout from following Jesus?

What have you avoided because you only want the good times of God?

Father God, you performed an amazing miracle in turning Saul around. You took his zeal for the faith of his fathers and turned it into zeal for Christ Jesus. Enliven in me today a love and passion for Christ Jesus, so that I am fired up to share the Good News of the Kingdom with others. Amen.

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Day 26

Acts 12.1-11

At that time King Herod caused terrible suffering for some members of the church. He ordered soldiers to cut off the head of James, the brother of John.

When Herod saw that this pleased the Jewish people, he had Peter arrested during the Festival of Thin Bread. He put Peter in jail and ordered four squads of soldiers to guard him. Herod planned to put him on trial in public after the festival.

While Peter was being kept in jail, the church never stopped praying to God for him. The night before Peter was to be put on trial, he was asleep and bound by two chains. A soldier was guarding him on each side, and two other soldiers were guarding the entrance to the jail.

Suddenly an angel from the Lord appeared, and light flashed around in the cell. The angel poked Peter in the side and woke him up. Then he said, "Quick! Get up!" The chains fell off his hands, and the angel said, "Get dressed and put on your sandals." Peter did what he was told. Then the angel said, "Now put on your coat and follow me."

Peter left with the angel, but he thought everything was only a dream. They went past the two groups of soldiers, and when they came to the iron gate to the city, it opened by itself. They went out and were going along the street, when all at once the angel disappeared. Peter now realized what had happened, and he said, "I am certain that the Lord sent his angel to rescue me from Herod and from everything the Jewish leaders planned to do to me."

The Church comes under persecution again. James, one of Jesus' special three, is killed, and some people were pleased with what Herod did, causing him to go for another disciple. Herod's motive was possibly one of currying popularity with the troublesome Jews under his rule. God was not ready to let Peter go quite so easily.

The church did not know that, of course, so they prayed incessantly. I can't quite imagine what that was like, even though I've taken part in some long prayer meetings. Peter's arrest was a big shock to all – he was the undisputed leader of the group. All they could do was pray. When all you can do is pray, prayer becomes far more meaningful.

While God might not have been ready to call Peter home, we should not ignore the barrage of prayer at the door of heaven that came in from those faithful people, the tidal wave of tears that washed the floor of the throne room, the constant calling out into the space where the six-winged seraphs hovered in adoration. God dispatched an angel to Jerusalem.

The ever-practical angel poked Peter to wake him up. Peter's response was automatic, as he thought he was dreaming it all – that's fair enough under the circumstances, but breathing in the cool fresh air and seeing the normal city streets may have helped him realise that he was indeed free.

Read on in Acts 12 to see how those faithful prayer warriors reacted to God's granting of their prayers.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/syria>

https://youtu.be/_KOBsu_A4LU

https://youtu.be/l_3VWvncp1o

Did you ever give up praying for someone?

How long should a prayer last?

For how many days do you think Peter might have been in that jail?

Father, it was through the constant and faithful prayer of the church that Peter was miraculously saved. Build my prayer life so that I may continue through unerring faith and hope to trust in you and in your promises, for however long it takes. Amen.

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Day 27

1 Corinthians 1.18-28

The message about the cross doesn't make any sense to lost people. But for those of us who are being saved, it is God's power at work.

As God says in the Scriptures, "I will destroy the wisdom of all who claim to be wise. I will confuse those who think they know so much." What happened to those wise people? What happened to those experts in the Scriptures? What happened to the ones who think they have all the answers? Didn't God show that the wisdom of this world is foolish? God was wise and decided not to let the people of this world use their wisdom to learn about him.

Instead, God chose to save only those who believe the foolish message we preach.

Jews ask for miracles, and Greeks want something that sounds wise. But we preach that Christ was nailed to a cross. Most Jews have problems with this, and most Gentiles think it is foolish.

Our message is God's power and wisdom for the Jews and the Greeks that he has chosen. Even when God is foolish, he is wiser than everyone else, and even when God is weak, he is stronger than everyone else.

My dear friends, remember what you were when God chose you. The people of this world didn't think that many of you were wise. Only a few of you were in places of power, and not many of you came from important families. But God chose the foolish things of this world to put the wise to shame. He chose the weak things of this world to put the powerful to shame. What the world thinks is worthless, useless, and nothing at all is what God has used to destroy what the world considers important.

It's great to know that the stupidity of the cross is actually the most profound and wise act of God. Do we, because of the fear of offending people of other faiths or none, step back from proclaiming the message of the cross, or because people may think us mad? The Gospel message is madness, but this madness is immeasurably more sane than anything the world can come up with. The Gospel message talks of blood, of shame, of sin and a fallen world with fallen people in it, but the remedy it provides is forgiveness, restoration, and eternal life. Scientific research cannot capture the boundless nature of God. Understanding Creation as a random coming together of bits from somewhere, and considering humanity as an evolutionary bus stop on the way to an unknown terminus does not get to the heart of the Creator and his LOVE for mankind.

People in our benefice, people in Ipswich may wonder what it's all about. If the world tells them that God is a nonsense then how are we going to let them know the truth?

By the way, God is never weak – that's Paul being poetic.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/nigeria> Pray for the girls kidnapped by Boko Haram

<https://youtu.be/uDb8GLLSW20>

Do you sometimes feel that Christians in our country are less zealous of their religion than other religions in other countries? Is this a good thing?

Do we have something better to offer than what the world offers? What is it? Are you sharing it?

Father God, Your Son endured the ultimate shame and degradation on the Cross. You call me to carry my cross and share its shame and also its victory. Make me glad to be a fool for Jesus. Amen.

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Day 28

1 Corinthians 10.11-14

These things happened to them as a warning to us. All this was written in the Scriptures to teach us who live in these last days. Even if you think you can stand up to temptation, be careful not to fall. You are tempted in the same way that everyone else is tempted. But God can be trusted not to let you be tempted too much, and he will show you how to escape from your temptations.

My friends, you must keep away from idols. I am speaking to you as people who have enough sense to know what I am talking about.

Temptation is everywhere in Christian life. Temptation is like the whiff of a scent. It conjures up a desire to respond in some way. We're all tempted. Jesus was tempted. The trouble with temptation is that it is so alluring. It's also quite deadly. Temptation can lead to wrong thoughts, which, though they may not automatically lead to wrong actions, will fester away inside. Satan will find your weak spot and gnaw away at it. The person who gives in to temptation will argue that it's OK (though God knows you're only trying to convince yourself). If I have a secret sin that I repeatedly fall prey to, I cannot argue that it's OK because I'm not hurting anyone else: this is pride. Father God's heart is broken by your sin. Remember that your body (heart, mind, soul as well) is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Let God be worshiped in that temple.

Paul has reminded his listeners that idolatry is a sign of disobedience to God. The Israelites were severely punished when they place objects before God in worship.

It's possible in our age that we can do much the same thing when the object of our worship is The Church, The Vicar, The Prayer Book (or any other worship manual), The Organ, etc. Any of the trappings of our worship, traditional or modern alike, can, if we allow them, get in the way of our worship. I have heard of choir members who refuse to sing new hymns, of music leaders who throw all old hymns away. They are both wrong, and from their position of authority and leadership both can lead people astray.

Christian maturity is discovered in those who can see beyond their own personal preferences and can lay down their prejudices. A mature Christian can worship at a church or fellowship that has totally different traditions to what he or she is used to if Christ alone is worshipped in that fellowship. Having sought and found comfort in the familiarity of the church or fellowship we attend, it is important that we concentrate on Jesus and not on the format, the flowers or the furniture.

Even aids to worship, such as candles, incense, icons, statues, stained glass, pointy windows and so on should not become *requisite* to worship as we will have elevated them to substitutes for worship. Candles symbolise presence – they do not invoke presence. Incense represents prayer – it is not prayer. Icons and other pictorial elements can help a person reflect on the nature of Jesus – they are not Jesus.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/maldives/>

<https://youtu.be/kuirBAKHc5g>

<https://youtu.be/3NZASU-th10>

Name the sin you find the most attractive.

Name the idol you have not yet renounced.

Name the person who can free you from both.

Father God, I need you every hour of my day and night. I invite you in to the places where pride has held sway for so many years. Break my foolish pride. Be present in my life through your Holy Spirit's filling and abiding and let me see you and not the symbols of you. Amen.

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Day 29

2 Corinthians 11.16-30

I don't want any of you to think that I am a fool. But if you do, then let me be a fool and brag a little. When I do all this bragging, I do it as a fool and not for the Lord. Yet if others want to brag about what they have done, so will I.

...

I have worked harder and have been put in jail more times. I have been beaten with whips more and have been in danger of death more often. Five times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes with a whip. Three times the Romans beat me with a big stick, and once my enemies stoned me.

I have been shipwrecked three times, and I even had to spend a night and a day in the sea. During my many travels, I have been in danger from rivers, robbers, my own people, and foreigners. My life has been in danger in cities, in deserts, at sea, and with people who only pretended to be the Lord's followers.

I have worked and struggled and spent many sleepless nights. I have gone hungry and thirsty and often had nothing to eat. I have been cold from not having enough clothes to keep me warm.

Besides everything else, each day I am burdened down, worrying about all the churches. When others are weak, I am weak too. When others are tricked into sin, I get angry. If I have to brag, I will brag about how weak I am.

Who'd be Paul? Well, I expect that Saul of Tarsus wouldn't. Had Saul known before he set out to Damascus what God had in store for his life he may have called in sick that day. In this passage, however, Paul is describing the perils and pains of the journey he's been on, but there is not a shadow of a doubt in his mind that this was the right path.

Imagine that following God's call was going to leave you a bit cold through lack of suitable clothing. Would you decide against following because God had not provided warm clothes for the journey? Surely God would provide for all your needs? Would you fall back from going to a place where some before you had been ill-treated? Surely God would deliver me from evil? Would you excuse yourself from serving God because you had to bury your father? Surely our all-knowing God could have arranged things in his diary a bit better than this?!

Paul is up amongst the medal-winners in the race of life, but God had expected great things from him and Paul delivered. If God asks just a little of you and you refuse, then perhaps it's beginning to sound as if you might be the third servant in that parable. It might be good to remember that there are people today who are suffering terrible oppression because they will not deny the name of Jesus.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/saudi-arabia>

Why did God choose Peter and Paul?

Did God intend Paul to be shipwrecked?

Have you ever refused God's call, using the excuse that you are already doing enough stuff for him?

Does God call us by other means than a direct word to us?

Father God, I struggle to believe that you know me better than I know myself and that your call on my life is perfect, because this was what I was made for. Let me grow to know my place in your plan. Amen.

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Day 30

2 Timothy 1.3-10

Night and day I mention you in my prayers. I am always grateful for you, as I pray to the God my ancestors and I have served with a clear conscience. I remember how you cried, and I want to see you, because that will make me truly happy. I also remember the genuine faith of your mother Eunice. Your grandmother Lois had the same sort of faith, and I am sure that you have it as well.

So I ask you to make full use of the gift that God gave you when I placed my hands on you. Use it well. God's Spirit doesn't make cowards out of us. The Spirit gives us power, love, and self-control. Don't be ashamed to speak for our Lord. And don't be ashamed of me, just because I am in jail for serving him.

Use the power that comes from God and join with me in suffering for telling the good news. God saved us and chose us to be his holy people. We did nothing to deserve this, but God planned it because he is so kind.

Even before time began God planned for Christ Jesus to show kindness to us. Now Christ Jesus has come to show us the kindness of God. Christ our Saviour defeated death and brought us the good news. It shines like a light and offers life that never ends.

Paul's letters to Timothy are clearly more personal than his letters to churches. Timothy is dear to Paul.

To the point – God's Spirit doesn't make cowards out of us. Is that so?!

Paul knows that he's not the only one who will suffer for the sake of the Gospel. The Gospel is the most precious message we can ever receive and the most precious we can ever share. It is worth more than a fistful of fivers – you'd have few enemies if you went around giving away cash. However, sharing and proclaiming the message of eternal life in Christ Jesus, a gift worth more than all the world's cash, seems to be met with apathy, derision, and outright opposition. There must be some forces behind that opposition, and I don't mean the British Humanist Association or the National Secular Society.

"At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have.

We do this because we're humanists, people who shape our own lives in the here and now, because we believe it's the only life we get.

Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them."

Sounds reasonable. Are we living for this world alone, too?

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/india>

<https://youtu.be/xWoWDdeD-ns>

<https://youtu.be/gA-TMUDQ7us>

How much would you take as a bribe not to share the Good News?

How do you weigh the merits of this life and the next when making decisions?

How does being holy affect my view on the world?

Whose shame am I protecting when I avoid sharing the Good News?

Father God, You gave me your Son Jesus, a gift beyond measure. Stir up this gift in me that it spills over to others. Amen.

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Day 31

James 5.7-11

My friends, be patient until the Lord returns. Think of farmers who wait patiently for the spring and summer rains to make their valuable crops grow. Be patient like those farmers and don't give up. The Lord will soon be here! Don't grumble about each other or you will be judged, and the judge is right outside the door.

My friends, follow the example of the prophets who spoke for the Lord. They were patient, even when they had to suffer. In fact, we praise the ones who endured the most. You remember how patient Job was and how the Lord finally helped him. The Lord did this because he is so merciful and kind.

Job a prophet?! Patience is the behaviour we exhibit as we wait in hope. Hope is knowing that God is going to do what He has promised. The timing is His alone, so we wait with patient hope. Strangely, the word *patience* comes from the Latin for suffering, hence hospital patients. The patient person allows God's processes to run their course in God's timing. What can we do to hasten the time that shall surely be when the earth will be filled with the glory of God? Well, we can actually move the hands forward on the clock because the outcome is dependent on the Gospel message being taken to the whole world (see Matthew 24.14).

God knows what he is doing when he chooses to work through us. He knows us very well and is totally aware of our shortcomings. If we offer God our obedience and willingness he can cover the shortcomings. There is no way in which we can claim unworthiness for the task to which God calls us. To do so is to suggest that God has made a mistake in choosing us. We also may have to accept the possibility that suffering will form part of the call.

It's when the going gets slow, or light has not yet appeared at the end of the tunnel, that we need to fall back on God, to rest assured in his promises and to trust the reality of our calling. We can easily forget that there's more than just the task God gives us, because when we join in the purposes of God we are walking beside him in Christ. There is no safer place to be than before Father God, clothed in Jesus.

Now listing the ten most dangerous places to be a Christian..

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/iran>

<https://youtu.be/qjRcQ-Ajt40> Some descant last verse!

Could God allow his prophets to just prophesy and not suffer?

Would you agree that God was merciful and kind to Job?

Could I be safer by not following God's call?

Father God, You call me to take part in your purposes. Only one thing I know – that wherever or to whatever you send me, you are there, too. Amen.

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Day 32

Hebrews 4.12-16

What God has said isn't only alive and active! It is sharper than any double-edged sword. His word can cut through our spirits and souls and through our joints and marrow, until it discovers the desires and thoughts of our hearts.

Nothing is hidden from God! He sees through everything, and we will have to tell him the truth.

We have a great high priest, who has gone into heaven, and he is Jesus the Son of God. That is why we must hold on to what we have said about him. Jesus understands every weakness of ours, because he was tempted in every way that we are. But he did not sin! So whenever we are in need, we should come bravely before the throne of our merciful God. There we will be treated with undeserved kindness, and we will find help.

What God has said can be found in the Bible. This is our source-book. Anything that we have learnt or practised that is contradictory to what the Bible tells us, or that has no roots in the Bible, is wrong. Where the Bible makes no comment then we have to attempt to agree within the spirit of the text. That's not always possible. Rather than dwell on the edges, let's first be sure that we live in accordance with what the Bible teaches. That in itself may cause some serious challenges for us.

Nothing is hidden from God – He sees it all. Treat that as an encouragement rather than a warning.

Because Jesus lived a long time ago and in another place I might start thinking that he didn't actually go through what I'm going through now. It's all so much more sophisticated and complex. Surely Jesus didn't get tempted to step over the line with Mary Magdalene? No reason why Satan wouldn't have tried that one on Jesus. Surely the Son of God was not affected by Satan's offer to give him everything upon the bending of his knee. He was, but he resisted. Could Satan make an offer like that? Yes, because he had that authority. Would Jesus be automatically immune to the temptation? No. Jesus was like us, and he was tempted, too. If temptation did not affect him then he was not like us. It did, and he was. It wasn't any easier for Jesus to resist, but he did. Jesus knew scripture and quoted it back to velvet-tongued Satan.

We, too, can resist temptation, again not in our own strength – willpower has nothing to do with it. Jesus won the victory over Satan. It was a massive spiritual battle that Jesus won. Standing in Jesus I, too, can resist Satan. Living in Jesus I have nothing to fear for I am covered in Jesus.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/yemen/>

<https://youtu.be/m0VRQGDjio>

Has God spoken outside the Bible? If so, how can we trust that it's God speaking?

Warning or encouragement. Which?

What should I do if I am constantly giving in to some particular temptation?

Father God, no evil can stand in your presence or approach you. I place my life in your Son, Jesus, who sits enthroned beside you. Here I am safe. Amen.

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Day 33

Isaiah 43.1-6

Descendants of Jacob, I, the LORD, created you and formed your nation. Israel, don't be afraid. I have rescued you. I have called you by name; now you belong to me.

When you cross deep rivers, I will be with you, and you won't drown. When you walk through fire, you won't be burned or scorched by the flames.

I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, the God who saves you. I gave up Egypt, Ethiopia, and the region of Seba in exchange for you. To me, you are very dear, and I love you. That's why I gave up nations and people to rescue you.

Paul would have been pleased if the burning pain of the floggings he endured would not be felt, but it was. However, God saved him after three shipwrecks, from perishing in the sea, from stoning, 195 lashes, a few beatings, muggings, hunger and thirst, threats and quite a bit of jostling. I could add that people said unpleasant things about him, because there are Christians around who would prefer to be nice and have others be nice to them, and for whom the lightest bit of criticism would be something best avoided.

Consider Paul. Consider what God has said in the passage above. Spare a thought, too, for the fact that Paul's biggest enemies were mainly the people of his own nation.

Paul made it through to be a great evangelist, apostle, teacher and theologian. God entrusted him with establishing Christian communities beyond Israel. Many of his letters survive and they form the basis of much of our understanding of Christ Jesus.

So, new people of Abraham, the redeemed of the Lord Jesus because of his suffering and death, beloved of Father God, where will you go and what will you give up for our Lord?

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/iraq>

<https://youtu.be/VOSjF99XWF8>

Was Paul a fanatic?

Has God taken you through deep rivers, or have you walked through fire?

Father God, how can I ever know that you will keep me from drowning unless I walk in deep waters? How will I know your protection from burning unless I walk in the fire? I am precious, more precious to you than the wealth of nations. Draw me into your holy fire and living water. Amen.

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Day 34

Luke 19:11-28

Jesus told them this story: A prince once went to a foreign country to be crowned king and then to return. But before leaving, he called in ten servants and gave each of them some money.

He told them, "Use this to earn more money until I get back." ... After the prince had been made king, he returned and called in his servants. He asked them how much they had earned with the money they had been given.

The first servant came and said, "Sir, with the money you gave me I have earned ten times as much." "That's fine, my good servant!" the king said. "Since you have shown that you can be trusted with a small amount, you will be given ten cities to rule."

The second one came and said, "Sir, with the money you gave me, I have earned five times as much." The king said, "You will be given five cities."

Another servant came and said, "Sir, here is your money. I kept it safe in a handkerchief. You are a hard man, and I was afraid of you. You take what isn't yours, and you harvest crops you didn't plant."

"You worthless servant!" the king told him. "You have condemned yourself by what you have just said. You knew that I am a hard man, taking what isn't mine and harvesting what I've not planted. Why didn't you put my money in the bank? On my return, I could have had the money together with interest."

Then he said to some other servants standing there, "Take the money away from him and give it to the servant who earned ten times as much." But they said, "Sir, he already has ten times as much!" The king replied, "Those who have something will be given more. But everything will be taken away from those who don't have anything."

You may have heard Matthew's version where three servants were given differing amounts of money to look after. In Luke's there are ten servants each given what appears to be the same sum. The first servant made more than the second, but both are congratulated, and they receive rewards proportional to what they earned.

This master has entrusted his wealth to the servants, not a small amount of pin money. He is expecting them to manage his business interests while he is away, not to play with pocket money.

It would take some hard work to make ten times what you started with – it doesn't just fall into your hands. God's blessings are bountiful, but God cannot bless your non-endeavour. It wouldn't be that easy to make five times what was entrusted to you, either. The parable is not so much about financial gain, or about human talents or skills but rather about our commitment to invest the gift of Jesus into the lives of others, sowing seed, making the ground good for hundredfold returns, never mind ten.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/libya>

<https://youtu.be/HP1CnSfkoao>

Is Matthew's or Luke's rendition closer to the truth of what God has given us?

How would you describe what God has given you, and how you are to manage it?

In terms of receiving blessing (reward) in your life, whose move is it, yours or God's?

Father God, you gave me everything in Jesus. I can keep him to myself or I can sow and invest in the share his love

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Day 35

Ephesians 6.10-13

Finally, let the mighty strength of the Lord make you strong. Put on all the armour that God gives, so you can defend yourself against the devil's tricks. We are not fighting against humans. We are fighting against forces and authorities and against rulers of darkness and powers in the spiritual world.

So put on all the armour that God gives. Then when that evil day comes, you will be able to defend yourself. And when the battle is over, you will still be standing firm.

Any soldier operating in the field of combat needs suitable armour for protection. He or she needs weapons for fighting, too. Paul tells us that we are in a battle, but our struggles are not against humans. It might seem as if it's people who are blocking, diverting, opposing, attacking us in our presentation of the gospel message, but this is not the case. Our battle is against forces not of human origin. The people we see standing against us are subject themselves to spiritual influences, even if they are unaware of it.

Paul talks of the forces and authorities, the rulers of darkness and spiritual powers - read Colossians 2.15 (we covered this last Advent). Over all of these stands Satan. Jesus defeated Satan, who is powerless over those who live in Christ. Christ sends us into battle against Satan's fading power over the fallen world and we need to be covered in the armour and equipped with the weapons God provides in order to remain standing at the end of the day.

We'll describe the armour and the weapons tomorrow, but to venture out without any is foolish. David, who refused Saul's heavy armour, went forth to battle with just one weapon that he knew would work first time. Goliath was easy. Satan is much cleverer.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/eritrea>

<https://youtu.be/XItoCLcVZEE>

Is the Christian soldier an outdated concept in the 21st century?

What is the biggest threat to people today?

Father God, my confidence in you may not be as bold and forthright as that of young David, but I will place my trust in you and daily put on the armour of protection that I need to keep me safe, and the weapons to fight the works of Satan. Amen.

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Day 36

Ephesians 6.14-20

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (NIV)

Paul describes the work of the Christian in terms of armour and weapons in the fight against Satan. Satan is a spiritual being, one created by but rebelling against God.

We can over-analyse these items, ascribing more to them than Paul ever intended. But we do need them.

The belt holds everything together, the breastplate protects the vital organs. Our footwear prepares us for taking the Gospel message (of peace, not war) abroad. The shield is ready to be manoeuvred into position to stave off the wounding arrows of Satan. The helmet, too is a vital piece of armour, as is salvation.

The sword is a weapon of attack. The Word of God is described as a sword that can cut deeply into us. It is the weapon Jesus used in the wilderness when Satan tempted him (unsuccessfully). Soldiers in battle wear their armour at all times. We are called to do the same. Each day we re-assemble the armour for the day's task ahead. Armour needs maintenance – your shield must be stronger than the arrows that are coming your way. Your sword must be kept ready by daily sharpening in the Word, i.e. by reading the Bible. Your helmet is as strong as your assurance that you are saved.

Moreover, we are called to pray, and pray hard. Paul encourages us to pray in the Spirit, to be led by the Holy Spirit rather than by a list we may have in front of us. The Holy Spirit is the fast track to God.

For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God (1 Co 2.11).

Now listing the five most dangerous places to be a Christian...

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/pakistan>

<https://youtu.be/44GUiMdFAPa>

Have you ever sensed forces opposed to the work of God that you do?

How do you keep your armour bright?

Father God, keep me aware of the squadrons of angels who stand guard over my home and family, my church, my place of work and my town. Stand me in righteousness, with a heart to share the gospel, build and test my faith, assure me of salvation and the power of your word. Amen.

Scripture taken from the New International Version, used by Permission.

Day 37

Hebrews 10.31-38

It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

Don't forget all the hard times you went through when you first received the light. Sometimes you were abused and mistreated in public, and at other times you shared in the sufferings of others. You were kind to people in jail. And you gladly let your possessions be taken away, because you knew you had something better, something that would last forever.

Keep on being brave! It will bring you great rewards. Learn to be patient, so that you will please God and be given what he has promised. As the Scriptures say, "God is coming soon! It won't be very long. The people God accepts will live because of their faith. But he isn't pleased with anyone who turns back."

In our Christian life there are going to be times or seasons of suffering, the need for endurance, dark valleys and dead plateaus. None of what we might go through matches what Christ went through. His suffering was made harder and his burden heavier by his willingness to carry my sins and to take the punishment for them. Without Jesus I am nothing.

The elite among soldiers go through selection procedures that are designed to push them to their limits. Many fall by the wayside, for it is only the fittest, most focussed, most dedicated that will go through tests of endurance and physical and mental suffering and come through. These are the people we rely on for our security, who work in the shadows and in the dangerous places, putting themselves into danger and who continue to stay ready for action at any time.

Our training is in knowledge and understanding of God's word, trust in and dedication to Christ, obedience to father God. This, too, requires spiritual stamina, endurance as we trust in God's promises, opposition and suffering as we shine light into dark places and fight the forces of evil in our world.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/sudan>

<https://youtu.be/9kc3BfDjKFQ>

<https://youtu.be/tTpTQ4kBLxA>

Are you SAS or sap for Jesus?

Do you operate in the shadows or in the light?

What reward are you expecting in heaven?

Father God, my possessions have never been under threat, or my liberty challenged. I pray for my dear brothers and sisters in Christ whose lives are constantly under watch by those who control an atheistic regime or a perverted religion. Keep them safe, and me ever vigilant for them. Amen.

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Day 38

Luke 23.11-24

Herod and his soldiers made fun of Jesus and insulted him. They put a fine robe on him and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends, even though they had been enemies before this.

Pilate called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people. He told them, "You brought Jesus to me and said he was a troublemaker. But I have questioned him here in front of you, and I have not found him guilty of anything that you say he has done. Herod didn't find him guilty either and sent him back. This man doesn't deserve to be put to death! I will just have him beaten with a whip and set free."

But the whole crowd shouted, "Kill Jesus! Give us Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was in jail because he had started a riot in the city and had murdered someone. Pilate wanted to set Jesus free, so he spoke again to the crowds.

But they kept shouting, "Nail him to a cross! Nail him to a cross!" Pilate spoke to them a third time, "But what crime has he done? I have not found him guilty of anything for which he should be put to death. I will have him beaten with a whip and set free."

The people kept on shouting as loud as they could for Jesus to be put to death. Finally, Pilate gave in. He freed the man who was in jail for rioting and murder, because he was the one the crowd wanted to be set free.

Then Pilate handed Jesus over for them to do what they wanted with him.

This is the thanks the Redeemer of mankind got – a crowd baying for his death, and a Roman leader too weak to deny them. The priests, the religious leaders whose positions had been initiated by God, had moved so far away from their worship of God that they could not recognise God when He in Jesus stared them in the face. We shouldn't be hard on them for their blindness, but their hatred is something they each will have to account for before God.

We are saved for eternity through faith in Jesus Christ, our Saviour, who died for our sins. In heaven we will stand before the throne and before the Lamb and will sing our hearts out for ever, but in this life, if we avoid God's call by pretending we haven't heard or make the excuse that we're too weak or have some other priorities, we will simply not be at peace. Do we think we know better than God does?

Those who plead the blood of Jesus are forgiven and restored.

Jesus endured the cross and grave in obedience to his father's will. Father God raised him from death and gave him glory and power, and it is he whom we shall adore and worship from eternity to eternity.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/somalia>

<https://youtu.be/78l6ZoXCqjc> or <https://youtu.be/cJ-xxffXJsc>

<https://youtu.be/et84fahatP0>

Did Jesus really go through that for me?

What proportion of your life is spent on earth?

Father God, it just seems too good to be true, that You would allow your Son to come to earth for this. As I die in Christ Jesus and rise with him into eternal life, enable me to see the sky from the runway. Amen.

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Day 39

Philippians 2.1-11

Don't be jealous or proud, but be humble and consider others more important than yourselves. Care about them as much as you care about yourselves and think the same way that Christ Jesus thought:

Christ was truly God. But he did not try to remain equal with God. Instead he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us. Christ was humble. He obeyed God and even died on a cross.

Then God gave Christ the highest place and honoured his name above all others. So at the name of Jesus everyone will bow down, those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. And to the glory of God the Father everyone will openly agree, "Jesus Christ is Lord!"

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He became like us, and suffered and died for us, so that we can say without equivocation that He is Lord. He has been on this earth. He has lived among us. He lives in us now by his Holy Spirit. It is through Christ's work and by the Holy Spirit's enabling that we can call God Almighty our Father.

Jesus has been given the highest honour. He sits in glory in heaven. His name, the name that was used by the Apostles and by believers through the centuries, is powerful in its own right. It has authority, and we may and must claim Jesus' name as we work for him in spreading the Gospel message where we are.

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/afghanistan>

<https://youtu.be/vXOstbNiAwk>

<https://youtu.be/ORZTYDPavEY>

When will every knee bow down?

How many knees are bending in our village/our town?

Father God, how sweet is the name of Jesus, how powerful is the name of Jesus. We march in his name, under his banner, we proclaim his name. Let "Jesus" be the name written on my heart. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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Day 40

Romans 8.31-39

What can we say about all this? If God is on our side, can anyone be against us? God did not keep back his own Son, but he gave him for us. If God did this, won't he freely give us everything else?

If God says his chosen ones are acceptable to him, can anyone bring charges against them? Or can anyone condemn them? No indeed! Christ died and was raised to life, and now he is at God's right side, speaking to him for us.

Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death? It is exactly as the Scriptures say, "For you we face death all day long. We are like sheep on their way to be butchered."

In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!

This passage is key to understanding our Christian life. In it we see victory and suffering, victory despite suffering, victory through suffering.

Can anyone be against us? Yes, of course, but with God on our side we have victory. The opponent cannot stand. God's amazing gift to us was Jesus. He who rules on high gave up his Son, who in obedience to his father lived on this same earth we inhabit. God became man, just like us. Christ won the victory and we claim the ground in his name.

The fight is not yet over, though the battle is won. If we are wounded in some way we are still carried by the redeeming love of Christ and we will be saved. Learn that last section by heart.

North Korea ranks top of the Open Doors list for intolerance towards Christianity:

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/north-korea/>

Open Doors magazine. The January edition has an article on surviving in North Korea:

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/resources/magazine/>

1 태초에 말씀이 계시니라 이 말씀이 하나님과 함께 계셨으니 이 말씀은 곧 하나님이시니라

2 그가 태초에 하나님과 함께 계셨고

3 만물이 그로 말미암아 지은바 되었으니 지은 것이 하나도 그가 없이는 된 것이 없느니라

Millions of people in North Korea are unable to see these words in print. They are the first three verses of John's Gospel – do you, with your Bible and apps and internet access, know those words?

I challenge you to continue in prayer for the persecuted church – our church. On my Firefox browser the page below did not show the boxes to fill in, but it's OK on Chrome, Edge and Safari:

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/resources/prayer/email-subscribe/>

<https://youtu.be/xhOIWmTHgbk> **Are you?**

Father God, your word, the Bible, is even more precious when access to it is restricted by others. Let me value this gift as a brother or sister living in a repressive regime would. Amen.

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