

 **Life Change 180**

**A Manual for Living Life as an Apprentice of Jesus**

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**Introduction**

The manual is entitled *Life Change 180* partly because it includes 180 daily devotions but, more importantly, because its contents invite us to do a 180 degree U-turn from living with ourselves at the centre of our lives and living instead with Jesus at the centre of our lives. When we make the decision to make this U-turn, we can be sure that we are travelling in the direction that God has always intended for us to travel. In this direction, we can look forward to the fullest and richest life that we can possibly live. And this transformed life is a life that goes on forever.

It is not necessarily an easy life, but it is the most rewarding life we can ever live.

The aim of this devotional manual is to encourage readers to make this U-turn and to persevere in this new life-transforming direction.

**A journal to be applied in our daily lives**

Hands are amazing creations. Each one contains just over 30 muscles and just under 30 bones.

With our hands we are able to do amazing work, assemble remarkable products, draw fascinating pictures, write inspiring words, create delicious food, make ravishing music and greet people with warm and welcoming handshakes.

And those are just a tiny selection of what our hands can achieve. Hands are truly astonishing.

And they give us the word “manual” – from the Latin word for hand.

Doing something manually means we do it with our own hands not with a machine.

Manuals are important. If some new gadget is not working for us, chances are we didn’t stop to read the manual.

A “manual” explains how we are to work something with our hands: which switches to turn; which dials to rotate; which buttons to press and in what order. A manual is meant to produce results by making something work better for us.

Manuals can only do that if we make a commitment to not only read the words printed on the page but also get active with our hands.

This manual is no exception. It is designed to help us to get more out of life. So much more.

I don’t want you to simply read the words of this manual.

I want you to get involved in applying these words in your life.

This manual will never fulfil its potential in your life if you only read it.

So, before you go any further, please be ready to get engaged with what you read.

Be ready to think, reflect, get curious, ask yourself questions, write notes, record ideas, determine next steps.

This is a manual that invites you to be involved with its words, to be active not passive.

In the course of reading it, I hope that you will find yourself deliberating, writing, speaking, singing, shouting, dancing, drawing, doodling – and whatever other activities help you respond actively to its content.

The manual will then have achieved its purpose: helping you to embrace the glorious potential of a life well-lived in the company of Jesus.

**A few words of explanation about this manual.**

There is a familiar response to the question: how do you eat an elephant?

Response: one bite at a time.

This manual is laid out in bite-size chunks.

One chunk for each day from Monday to Friday each week.

So, if you miss a day or two during an unusually busy week you can catch up at the weekend and still stay on track.

It has been structured to be used during a school or university year from the autumn through to the next summer. The rhythm of many people’s lives tends to follow this schedule each year – whether you are still in education as a student or connected to those who are through family or church. This schedule is therefore useful for many people.

Having said all that, you can start using it at any time of the year if that is more appropriate for you right now.

The manual contains twelve weeks of sessions for each of the three school/university terms.

These terms are usually at least twelve weeks long – at least at school if not university – so if you find yourself not able to keep going week by week you have time to catch up over the Christmas and Easter holidays.

Again, the aim of the structure is to allow you to follow it through at a sustainable pace with opportunities for catching up if you fall behind. Life is very full in the 21st century and there are all sorts of reasons why we might need space to catch up. This manual is designed to make it easy to catch up and to give even the busiest people a helping hand to make the finishing line together.

And if you are in the position of not needing the catch-up time at weekends or during the school holidays then you are in a good place for being able to fill in the gaps with your own further reading, thinking and applying.

The twelve weeks of each term are further divided into three sections covering four weeks each.

Generally, each four week section addresses one particular theme.

Often, each week will address one particular focus.

Each day there is a Bible reading, some comments on the topic for the day, some questions for further reflection and a final prayer. There is blank space for your own scribbles and notes, doodles and drawings, reflections and writing. Feel free to fill this space with words and pictures, text and diagrams. As I said in the Introduction, manuals are meant to inspire manual activities – so please make sure that you get active in your response. It’s your personal journal – so don’t hold back in your written responses. Have the freedom to write and draw whatever you find useful and helpful each day.

Most of all, I hope that you enjoy the journey through the pages ahead.

They are all about life lived in the company of Jesus and that life is meant to be full of enjoyment and adventure.

# **An Overview of Part One of the Journey: Weeks 1-12**

Some people like to know something about their journey before they set out.

If you are not one of those people, please skip this section and move on to the next page.

If you are one of those people, here’s an outline of where you will be travelling over the next 12 weeks or so:

Weeks 1-2: Why Jesus matters – our Saviour and Lord

Weeks 3-4: Our identity, community and calling through Jesus

Week 5-6: Living life with Jesus at the centre – what are the implications?

Week 7: Our commitment to Jesus

Week 8: Following in the steps of Jesus

Weeks 9-12: Seven habits to sustain our journey with Jesus

## Week 1: Day 1 Jesus our Saviour

**Bible text**

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yetdid not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’* Matthew 1:18-21

**The Power of a Name**

Today we begin a journey exploring the way Jesus’ life impacts ours.

And we start by considering the identity of Jesus. Who exactly is Jesus? Why is he so significant? Why does his life matter for us?

A big clue comes from his name.

Names are important and names given by God are very important.

A name given by God indicates a purpose, a destiny, a calling.

Jesus was given His name because His life was about bringing salvation. His God-given purpose was to be the Saviour of the world.

Jesus brings us the possibility of salvation from three great enemies.

Firstly, Jesus brings us salvation from our sinfulness – all the wrong in our lives; our selfishness; our disobedience against God.

Secondly, Jesus brings us salvation from the powers of darkness and evil in this world.

Thirdly, Jesus brings us salvation from death by bringing us everlasting life.

Every human being needs saving from these enemies.

Faith in Jesus brings us the gift of His salvation.

Trusting Jesus means we are able to receive what He came for: to be the unique Saviour of the world. Nothing else and no-one else can bring us that gift.

**For Reflection and Journaling**

1. Where do we see the generosity of God in this bible reading?
2. In what ways does Joseph have to show courage as he responds with faith?
3. Have you ever sensed God guide you in some specific way that required you to show faith?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus, Thank You that Your name means Saviour. Thank You that You are the unique Saviour of the world. Thank You for saving me from sinfulness and its consequences, from darkness and its power over me, from death’s hold over me. Thank You for Your astonishing victory. Help me to live free from the fear of these enemies today and throughout my life. Amen.

## Week 1: Day 2 Jesus our Mediator

**Bible texts:**

*Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’* John 14:6

*For there is one God and one mediator between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus* 1 Timothy 2:5

**Jesus is our means of connection with God**

Our God is a Holy God as well as being a God of Love.

The love of God means that He wants connection with us; He longs for intimacy with us.

The holiness of God on the other hand means that we are forever separated from God because of our sinfulness.

There is only one way in which our sinfulness can be removed – and that is through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross of Good Friday. All other means and methods are inadequate and insufficient.

This is why Jesus explained that no one can come to God the Father except through accepting his sacrifice on their behalf. Jesus is the Way into the Presence of God.

This is also why at the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross the heavy dividing curtain between the main part of the Jerusalem Temple and the innermost section of the Temple where God’s presence resided was torn in two. Through the death of Jesus the way is now open for us to come into God’s Presence forever.

Jesus is the unique, unrivalled, perfect mediator between God and humankind.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you respond to the idea that Jesus is the only way we can access the intimate presence of God in our lives?
2. In what ways would you like to have more intimacy with God?
3. What hindrances still exist in your life that mean you do not yet experience this closeness with God?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for Your sacrifice that means it is possible for me to have the closest possible relationship with the One True God of Heaven and Earth, who loves me and wants the best for me. Thank You for opening up this way of access to the Father. Help me to make the most of this means of access every day. Amen.

## Week 1: Day 3 Jesus our Substitute

**Bible texts:**

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,* *each of us has turned to our own way;* *and the Lord has laid on him* *the iniquity of us all.* Isaiah 53:6

*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.* 1 Peter 3:18

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

**Jesus has taken upon himself what we deserve**

In Old Testament times, animals were sacrificed to bring about temporary forgiveness for God’s people. In these sacrifices, the priest would lay his hands on the animal, symbolically transferring human guilt to the innocent animal. The animal sacrificed was therefore seen as a substitute for the guilty people, taking upon itself God’s judgement for sin in order that people could be restored in their relationship with God. This restoration of relationship is called atonement – literally “at -one – ment” - and from this we get the idea of substitutionary atonement – an innocent life substituting for a guilty life in order to restore relationship with God.

Jesus’ death brought about the perfect substitutionary atonement for all people – past, present and future. The perfect Son of God - unblemished by sin - took upon Himself the sins of the world and took upon Himself the just punishment for that sin so that guilty people could be set free from that just punishment.

This is why John the Baptist said that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

An even greater exchange is at work however.

Not only does Jesus take upon Himself our sinfulness; we receive the righteousness of Jesus in return. It is as if He takes our filthy clothes from us, giving us His spotless clothes to wear in return.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Isaiah prophesied the significance of the atoning death of Jesus 700 years before Jesus was born. How do you respond to this prophetic promise making clear that God had a plan for the salvation of humankind through His Son?
2. Have you thought about the way Jesus’ death fulfils the Old Testament pattern of substitutionary atonement?
3. How do you respond to the promise that Jesus offers us His righteousness in exchange for our sinfulness?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You died in my place. Thank You that You took upon Yourself my faults, my failings, my guilt, my shame. Thank You that in return You give me Your perfect righteousness and purity. Help me to live in a way which honours Your all-sufficient sacrifice on my behalf. Help me to respond by trusting that Your death brings me Life forever more. Amen.

## Week 1: Day 4 Jesus our Shepherd

**Bible texts:**

*‘I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.* John 10:14-16

*Then Jesus told them this parable: ‘Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.”**I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.* Luke 15:3-7

**A Uniquely Amazing Shepherd**

Shepherds in Jesus’ day were renowned as dodgy characters – which makes it interesting that shepherds were among the first to be told about Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. In contrast to this infamous reputation, Jesus states that He is the Good Shepherd. His goodness is marked in two great ways.

Firstly, Jesus lays down His life for us as our Substitute – which we reflected on in the previous session. The heart of the Good Shepherd is therefore one of compassionate care that pays the ultimate sacrifice of life itself. This is no casual commitment.

Secondly, the Good Shepherd goes searching for lost sheep to bring them into the safety and security of His compassionate care. Jesus is deeply troubled by those who are outside the safety of His care and He diligently searches for them to bring them Home.

There is so much reassurance in these characteristics of Jesus. He assures us of His rescue when we are lost and alone and He assures us of His wise and courageous care once we are part of His flock.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you ever felt like a lost sheep needing to be found and brought home?
2. In what ways do you need to experience the love of the Good Shepherd right now?
3. What would you like to say to the Good Shepherd today as you reflect on His eternal goodness?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that you are the Good Shepherd. Thank You that go searching for lost sheep to bring them home. Thank You that once the sheep are home You promise them unrelenting care and compassion. Thank You for being my Rescuer and Redeemer. Help me to know Your compassionate care more fully in my life today. Amen.

## Week 1: Day 5 The Grace of Jesus

**Bible texts:**

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.* Ephesians 2:8-9

*God has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time* 2 Timothy 1:9

*God saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.* Titus 3:5

**Salvation by Grace Through Faith**

The understanding of our salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus is what marks Christianity as being distinctive from all other world religions.

Speak to a follower of any other religion and they will speak about how good works are essential to win the approval of God and be confident of salvation.

For the follower of Jesus, salvation comes about by trusting in what Jesus has done for us – not what we have to do for Jesus.

Somebody once said that religion is spelt D-O while Christianity is spelt D-O-N-E.

Religion is about doing stuff to win God’s approval; Christianity is about recognising that when we trust in the power of Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf, we receive the righteousness of Jesus and therefore know that we have the approval of God and with it, the assurance of our eternal salvation.

This is not to say that good works are not important in the life of a Christian – they most certainly are. James makes clear that faith without good works is dead (James 2:26). But for the Christian, these works are the FRUIT of salvation, not the ROOT of salvation. Good works are a response of gratitude not a request for inclusion in God’s salvation plans.

*Amazing Grace* is one of the most widely known songs around the world. John Newton – the author – was wise in his choice of adjective to describe God’s grace. It truly is amazing.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you respond to the idea that good works cannot bring us salvation?
2. How do you respond to the difference between religions that require human effort to win salvation and faith in Jesus that begins with the assurance of salvation and encourages good works in response to that free gift?
3. How can you make sure that you avoid the error of thinking that any kind of life is permissible so long as we trust in the sacrifice of Jesus?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that we have been saved by Your Amazing Grace rather than by doing good works. Please help me to have a correct understanding of the role of good works in my life of faith as a response of gratitude to Your free gift of eternal life and not as the basis for my salvation. Amen.

## Week 2: Day 1 Jesus our Lord: God the Son

**Bible texts:**

*Thomas said to Jesus, ‘My Lord and my God!’* John 20:28

*When they saw Jesus, they worshipped him…* Matthew 28:17

**Jesus is both human and divine**

Last week we considered Jesus as Saviour. This week we consider Jesus as Lord.

Many people come to a place of accepting Jesus as Saviour but they fail to realise that He is also their Lord.

There are many aspects of the Lordship of Jesus; we start by considering the fact that Jesus was and is God the Son – the Second Person of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three Divine Persons in One Divine Being.

Jesus is fully human – and He is also fully God. He is not a 50:50 mixture – but 100% human and 100% divine.

We see Jesus exercising His divinity (being God) every time He forgives sins – for only God can forgive someone’s sins.

We see Jesus demonstrating His divinity in His freedom from sin – for only God is sinless.

We see His first followers declaring His divinity in their worship described in the two texts above – for only God can be offered our full and complete worship.

Jesus is our Lord because Jesus is our God.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. In what ways have you engaged with the idea of Jesus as Lord over your life?
2. Where do you sense there may be a need for you surrendering areas of your life to His Lordship?
3. How do you respond to the idea of surrendering these areas to Jesus? Try to be as honest as you can in your thinking and writing.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, I worship You as my God. Thank You that You are unique in embracing both humanity and divinity; You know what it is like to be a human and yet You are fully God. Help me to entrust my life to Your supreme Lordship, today and forever. Amen.

## Week 2: Day 2 Jesus our Lord: Creator and Sustainer

**Bible text:**

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.* Colossians 1:15-20

**Jesus is Lord over Creation**

This passage from Colossians is one of the most astonishing descriptions of the Lordship of Jesus in the New Testament. There is a lifetime of exploration of its amazing implications.

Paul writes that in Jesus all things were created (v16): Jesus was a key player in the divine act of creation. It is important that we recognise that He did not start His life of divine influence at the moment of His human conception in Mary’s womb. God the Son has always been part of God the Trinity – and Jesus was there before the start of human history.

Furthermore, Paul writes that in Jesus all things hold together (v17). Jesus is therefore responsible for keeping all things together – almost like divine glue. Put it the other way round, without Jesus the universe would fall apart.

Jesus is therefore both Creator and Sustainer of all that exists; involved at its start and involved in its maintenance ever since.

Jesus is truly Lord over the universe in all its astounding complexity.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Is there a sense that you have previously thought of the start of Jesus’ influence in history when He began His ministry as an adult, without much involvement - if any - up to that point?
2. How do you respond to the idea of Jesus as Creator?
3. How do you respond to the idea of Jesus as Sustainer?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of All that is, Sustainer of All that is, I worship you as Lord over all. Increase the depth and breadth of my understanding of Your Lordship over this universe, past, present and future. Increase my sense of awe at the Majesty of Your Lordship over all that is, seen and unseen. You are Lord. Amen.

## Week 2: Day 3 Jesus our Lord: Word made Flesh

**Bible texts:**

*My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.* Isaiah 55:11

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* John 1:1,14

*The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.* Hebrews 1:3

**Jesus the Word of God in human form**

The prologue to John’s gospel (John 1:1-18) describes Jesus as the Word of God in human form.

Jesus is God’s best communication to this world in the form of a human life.

Jesus is the exact representation of God’s Being – a true likeness of God.

If we want to know what God is like, we simply have to look at Jesus.

If we want to know what God says about something, we simply have to examine the words of Jesus.

Jesus is the invisible God in visible form. No longer do we need to doubt because we complain that God cannot be seen. God can be seen clearly – because God has lived on Earth as a human being, well-documented and vividly described by his first followers.

The promise given in Isaiah 55:11 is that God’s Word always achieves its purpose.

Since Jesus is God’s Word in human flesh, how much more will the words of Jesus have divine authority to accomplish their purpose.

We can therefore have assurance that the promises spoken by Jesus will be powerful and effective in our lives to bring immeasurable blessings.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How does the idea of Jesus being God’s Word in human flesh help us to recognise that God is not silent and invisible as some of His critics suggest?
2. How does the idea of Jesus being God’s Word in human flesh coupled with the promise that God’s Word fulfils its purpose bring you increased assurance of receiving blessing from Jesus?
3. How does the idea of Jesus being the exact representation of God’s Being help you to understand God’s character more fully?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You are God’s Word in human form. As I read Your words help me to understand them more clearly, help me to engage with their power more fully and help me to receive their blessings more completely. Amen.

## Week 2: Day 4 Jesus our Lord: Resurrected Saviour

**Bible texts:**
*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* John 3:16

*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.* John 5:24

*Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.’* John 11:25

*My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?* John 14:2

**Jesus is Lord over Death**

Death is a great enemy of humankind.

The intensity of grief we experience when we lose family members and friends is demonstration how fierce this enemy is. The wounds of bereavement run deep.

It is therefore a wonderful source of comfort as we face the reality and pain of death that Jesus has won a clear and decisive victory over this hostile enemy.

The resurrection of Jesus on the first Easter morning is the proof we need that Jesus is Lord over death; He has conquered this enemy forever.

For the committed believer, death is now a doorway not a destination. When we are ready to trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, then we are able to receive all the amazing benefits that Jesus has won for us – and this includes the gift of eternal life.

This gift is meant to bring us confident assurance that we know our destiny beyond death; we can live life now without the fear of death and dying. We can live life now in the sure and certain expectation that we will pass from this life to a new life beyond death where there is freedom from pain and suffering. Our existence beyond death when we die trusting in Jesus as Saviour and Lord is far greater and richer than our existence in this life now. Paul asserted that to live is Christ, to die is gain (Philippians 1:21). With this eternal perspective, dying is not the worst that can happen to us – but the best.

Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. We can be bold and confident in the light of that bold and confident assertion.

Death is a defeated enemy. Forever.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you fear dying? How do the bible texts read today help diminish that fear?
2. Have you gained a clear sense of assurance about eternal life beyond death? What hindrances still stand in your way?
3. What do you make of Jesus’ promise that He goes ahead of us to prepare a room in the Father’s eternal house? What kind of room would you like to have?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Resurrection and the Life. You have been raised as the Conqueror over Death forever. Thank You that our confidence about everlasting life rests on the sure and certain ground of Your Resurrection. Please help me to be free of any fear about dying when I know that I can have confidence in trusting You as my Lord and Saviour. Amen.

## Week 2: Day 5 Jesus our Lord: King of kings

**Bible texts:**

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
    and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
    in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
    to the glory of God the Father.* Philippians 2:9-11

*On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: king of kings and lord of lords****.***Revelation 19:16

**Jesus is Lord of All**

Throughout this week we have considered how Jesus is not only Saviour – but also Lord.

Jesus is our Divine Creator and Sustainer who reveals the character and nature of God perfectly, and who has overcome the power of death through His Resurrection.

For these reasons – and many others not considered this week but affirmed throughout the New Testament – Paul asserts in the verses from Philippians above that Jesus has been given a name which is exalted above every other name in this universe.

In a remarkable passage close to the conclusion of the New Testament we read another of Jesus’ titles that reveals His unrivalled supremacy as King of kings and Lord of lords.

In other words, Jesus is exalted high over every leader and ruler on this Earth, past, present and future – no matter what their position of human power and authority.

Jesus therefore deserves our highest praise as the One who is exalted as Lord over everyone and everything.

We must make sure that we don’t stop at the point of understanding Jesus as our Saviour; we must also see that Jesus wants to be our Lord. Living under the Lordship of Jesus is always going to be the best way to live because Jesus sees the whole of our lives stretched out before us. Jesus is outside of time just as much as He is outside of space. Jesus knows the end from the beginning. His leadership of your life aims to direct your steps to live the best kind of life.

It is to the riches of knowing Jesus as Lord that we turn our attention over the next two weeks.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Who is your most admired human king in history? How does seeing Jesus as the King over all kings magnify your appreciation of His rule, given the remarkable achievements of many great kings in history?
2. Who is your most admired human leader in history? How does seeing Jesus as the Lord over all leaders heighten your respect of His rule, given the remarkable record of many great leaders in history?
3. Which names are causing you concern right now – perhaps a person or a place or a condition? As you remember that the name of Jesus is exalted in authority over every other name – including these names bringing you concern right now – how does this affirmation bring you a fresh sense of encouragement this week?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You are the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Help me to understand more fully the way You are exalted high above all rulers and leaders through history. Thank You that Your name is exalted high over all other names. Give me fresh faith through considering Your name being exalted over my fears and concerns this week. Amen.

## Week 3: Day 1 Our identity in Jesus: New creations

**Bible texts:**

*Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.* John 3:3

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!* 2 Corinthians 5:17

**New Life in Christ**

Last week we considered some key aspects of how Jesus is Lord. This week we will consider how living in submission to the Lordship of Christ brings us immeasurable blessings.

When we turn to Christ as Saviour and Lord we become a new creation; we start a new life.

It’s intriguing that some people try to categorise Christians as being either “born-again” Christians or more “relaxed” and “chilled” Christians. The New Testament knows only one kind of Christian; Jesus himself said that we must be “born again” (John 3:3). Putting our faith in Jesus means that we have a spiritual birth.

When we trust in Jesus we start a new life “in Christ” – and this new beginning involves putting to death our old, sinful self and starting to live as a new person.

Paul explains that just as Jesus was crucified as he took upon himself the sin of the world, there is a sense in which our old, sinful self is also crucified with Jesus:

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Galatians 2:20

And Peter explains that just as Jesus was raised from the dead following his crucifixion, so we are raised into a new phase of existence when we commit ourselves to Jesus as Lord:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,* 1 Peter 1:3

To be “in Christ” means we experience spiritually what Jesus experienced: the death of our old self and the beginning of a new self. Our new life in Christ is now empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit so that we can increasingly live a new pattern of life that is shaped by God’s desires and purposes. This is the exciting journey of transformation that begins when we decide to put Jesus at the centre of our lives.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What aspects of your life up to this point need to be “crucified”?
2. How do you most desire the life of God’s Spirit to make a difference to your life from now on?
3. What practical steps can you take in partnership with the Holy Spirit to live this new life with intentionality?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that you offer me the chance to live a new life with You, putting to death my old sinful life and being raised up into a new life, so much better and richer than anything I have previously known. Please help me to see the changes that are needed as I consider what this new life can look like. Thank You that this new life is the best kind of life I can ever live – because it is a life that You will be guiding and leading. Amen.

## Week 3: Day 2 Our identity in Jesus: Adopted children

**Bible texts:**

*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God* John 1:12

*For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba Father.’**The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.* Romans 8:14-16

**From Orphans to Heirs**

Part of our new identity involves starting life as an adopted child of God.

Before we put our faith in Jesus we are outside God’s family. When we trust Jesus as Lord then we are adopted into God’s family to become sons and daughters in an ever-growing, ever-expanding worldwide family.

People who lead street children adoption ministries around the world speak about the remarkable transition that takes place as children move from the savage world of self-preservation on the streets to the safe and secure new reality of being adopted into a loving, compassionate family. The process may take many months – but gradually these adopted children experience a change of mindset from being ferociously competitive and selfish – the only way to survive on the streets – to a new way of living that involves sharing and sensitivity to others.

This is the transition that we can all experience as we turn away from the old model of self-preservation to the new pattern of looking after one another intentionally and courageously so that we become the best we can possibly be.

Jesus invites us into this amazing new family to experience a new way of being in which we are loved and celebrated for who we are.

We start life as spiritual orphans; we are invited to become spiritual heirs, inheriting all the riches of God’s amazing kingdom.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you considered the idea that we are adopted into a new spiritual family when we come to faith in Jesus?
2. What kinds of changes would you expect a street child to experience as they move into a loving, caring family? What is the spiritual equivalent of these changes?
3. What questions do you have about sharing in the inheritance of God’s family?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for inviting me into Your family. Thank You that I don’t have to live as a spiritual orphan but I can live as a spiritual heir. Help me to understand more clearly the implications of this spiritual inheritance. Amen.

## Week 3: Day 3 Our identity in Jesus: Members of the Royal Family

**Bible texts:**

*Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children*…Ephesians 5:1

*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things* Colossians 3:1-2

**From spiritual paupers to spiritual royalty**

We have considered how Jesus is the King of kings and also how we are adopted into His family through putting our faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

As sons and daughters of a Royal King, that clearly makes us all princes and princesses.

This is our new identity in Jesus: members of the Royal Family.

Many people like to know all about the comings and goings, the ups and downs of the British Royal Family. The reality is that we are all invited into a much larger, much more powerful, much more significant royal family led by the King of kings.

Self-esteem is constantly under attack in our times – not least because of continual comparison with others through social media. We are incessantly bombarded by the brightest and best moments of countless lives around us – and not surprisingly, we can easily feel that our life is shoddy and mundane in comparison. For significant numbers of people this constant comparison and consequent self-rejection brings with it severe mental stresses and strains that have led to an epidemic of damaged mental health. Depression and self-harming have never been more widespread.

Once we recognise our new identity in Christ we can begin each day with a new perspective – the perspective of living as royal children in the most awesome royal family of history.

This is what Paul means by saying that we should not be fixated on worldly issues but we should set our minds on things above. This is not to say that this world’s issues don’t matter – they certainly do. But we can approach these pressing concerns more effectively if we first of all stop to focus on who we are in Christ – loved, cherished, adopted children of God who have moved from being spiritual paupers to now being spiritual co-heirs. Enriched and empowered by this perspective on our true identity in Christ we can address the needs and concerns around us with a totally different set of attitudes.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Which aspect of being part of a royal family do you see as being most valuable?
2. In what ways do you struggle in your mental well-being? (None of us has perfect physical health and so it is likely that none of us has perfect mental health either.)
3. What does it mean for you today to look at your earthly agenda from a heavenly perspective?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You have invited me into a Royal Family of epic proportions and significance. Help me to start each day with this fresh perspective because of the new identity that You are giving me. Please help me to maintain this life-giving perspective through today as I trust in Your love and strength. Amen.

## Week 3: Day 4 Our identity in Jesus: Saints

**Bible texts:**

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God…to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people* Romans 1:1,7

*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God…to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people* 1 Corinthians 1:1-2

**Holy Brothers and Sisters**

We have seen how we are adopted as God’s children into an astonishing royal family, extending across the globe and through time.

There are many remarkable aspects to this family, some of which we will consider next week, all of which you can spend the rest of your life exploring.

Today we focus on the sacred nature of this family and the sacred nature of our identity as members of this family.

God is a Holy God and His family is therefore a Holy Family.

When some Bible translations use the phrase “a holy people” (as the New International Version does above), others use the word “saints”. We are used to the idea of the heroes of the past who have done amazing, pioneering work for God – like the four patron saints of the UK – David, Andrew, Patrick and George.

It is good that we remember that we are all “saints” when we belong to this royal family of God.

Paul had this concept firmly in mind as he opened all his letters to New Testament churches. There are two examples above from his first two letters in the New Testament. In both, he addresses his readers as “a holy people” – in other words, “saints”.

Our new identity in Christ brings with it the new lapel badge: St. Rachel – or whatever your first name might be. This is our precious new identity when we trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord and represents not only a new identity but also a fresh calling from God to live distinctively, to live according to the pattern that God wants for His holy people. It is important for us that we make the most of this calling from God to be one of His precious saints.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you considered before the idea of being called a “saint”? If not, what are your first responses and questions?
2. How might your day look different if you had the perspective of being called a saint throughout the day?
3. Which official saint from history would you most like to explore and why?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that call me to be part of Your holy people across the world. Please help me to understand what this means, help to develop my desire to fulfil this calling and give me the wisdom, courage and determination to live out this calling day by day. Amen.

## Week 3: Day 5 Our identity in Jesus: Apprentices

**Bible texts:**

*Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations…* Matthew 28:18-19

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.* 1 Peter 2:21

**Following in the Steps of Jesus**

Jesus lived as a Jewish teacher or rabbi and at that time, a rabbi’s students were expected to follow his steps – literally. The band of students – or disciples – would live, study and work with the rabbi, sharing their whole lives together so that the life and conduct of the rabbi would gradually become the life and conduct of each of the students.

After His resurrection, Jesus gave a bold commission to His first band of disciples – to go and make new disciples from every nation on Earth. Clearly, this was not a commission that the first generation of disciples could complete, given their small number and their limited time. The commission has been carried forward through history for two thousand years and continues to be a significant challenge today.

A key aspect of our identity in Christ is to be one of His contemporary disciples. Since Jesus’ disciples were expected to be more than students of theories but to apply their learning in practical ways, a better word to use would be apprentice. Modern apprenticeships involve hands-on learning of new skills. This is a much more accurate term for what we are called to embrace: gaining effective new skills from an experienced Trainer that can be applied on a daily basis to make a difference.

So our new identity involves being an active apprentice in Jesus’ vocational training centre, eager to learn and ready to get our hands dirty on a daily basis.

We are not called to be spectators but active participants. It’s a very exciting adventure for all of us.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Who has had most influence in attracting you to the life of apprenticeship to Jesus?
2. How do you respond to the idea of being an apprentice rather than simply a student?
3. What practical skills do you most want to apply as an apprentice of Jesus?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your Great Commission to Your first apprentices. Thank You that You equipped them so that they could fulfil this commission with passion and expertise meaning that I am able to respond to the invitation today to be Your effective apprentice. Please equip me and train me so that I can develop my apprenticeship skills and make a difference around me. Amen.

## Week 4: Day 1 Our community through Jesus: A New Family

**Bible text:**

*Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.* Hebrews 2:11

**A Family that delights in us**

All of us have three core longings that need to be fulfilled for us to live a happy and fulfilled life: a clear identity; a close community; a compelling destiny.

These three fulfilments help to answer three basic questions: Who am I? Who loves me? Where am I heading?

Last week we addressed the first of these; this week we address the other two.

When it comes to our need for a close community around us in which we can be loved we have already explored how we are adopted into a spiritual family when we come to faith in Jesus. Born as spiritual orphans, we can then move into a new spiritual family when we come to faith in Christ.

Every local church provides a local expression of this worldwide family. And at its best, the local church we attend should be fulfilling its role as our spiritual family in which we can be cherished and celebrated, both for who we are and who are becoming.

The best families provide persistent security, shelter, fun, laughter, encouragement, help, food, clothing, rest, recreation, healthy traditions and celebrations – all great characteristics that make our lives healthy and strong. At their best, local churches should be providing the spiritual equivalent of these family attributes. So, for example, while we might not expect our local church to provide our physical clothes, we can expect our local church to provide us with “a garment of praise” (Isaiah 61:3) through meaningful worship and “a belt of truth” (Ephesians 6:14) through inspiring teaching.

Our church family should be a place of security and encouragement – a group of loving people who want the best for us and who are willing to work and pray for us so that we know that we are cherished. This probably can’t happen effectively on Sundays – so it is up to us to make sure that we also belong to a missional community during the week as well so that there is the opportunity for personal connections to be made.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Write out some of what you consider the best attributes of family life.
2. How do you find these qualities in the church family you attend? How could you help to make sure that they are fulfilled in the future?
3. Can you think of any examples where you have noticed people being celebrated and cherished in the life of your church?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that you invite me into Your worldwide family. Please help me to make the most of this family – to be ready to receive the love your family offers and to be able to offer love and encouragement to everyone I meet in return. Thank You that I can find security within these relationships. Amen.

## Week 4: Day 2 Our community through Jesus: Space for Growth

**Bible text:**

*I am writing to you, dear children,
    because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.
I am writing to you, fathers,
    because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young men,
    because you have overcome the evil one.*

*I write to you, dear children,
    because you know the Father.
I write to you, fathers,
    because you know him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men,
    because you are strong,
    and the word of God lives in you,
    and you have overcome the evil one.*

1 John 2:12-14

**Families nurture development**

Families are great places for providing security and celebration for us; they are places where we feel loved and connected.

They are also great places for encouraging healthy growth towards maturity. Babies become children; children become young adults; and young adults then get married and start their own families so that the cycle continues.

The same is true spiritually. After our spiritual rebirth – when we come to faith in Jesus – we are infants in our new family, needing to become children, then young adults, and then we become parents to the next generation of Jesus-followers as we help our friends grow into the same mature faith in Christ that we are developing. John has this spiritual family progression in mind as he wrote the verses above.

The path to physical and relational maturity requires some key ingredients – like food, rest, meaningful conversations, responsibilities, boundaries, feedback, discipline when we make mistakes and celebration when we get it right.

The path to spiritual maturity requires some key ingredients too – like spiritual understanding, intentional conversations, growing responsibilities, clear boundaries, feedback from leaders, discipline when we make mistakes and celebration when we get it right.

Problems occur in families when the path to maturity is either accelerated too fast – children being treated as adults – or is halted – young adults who are still behaving like children, or worse still infants.

And the same is true in our spiritual family too: problems occur when spiritual children are given the responsibility of adulthood too soon and they are simply not ready to take on this role. Other problems occur when those who should now be adults continue to behave like immature children.

Spiritual families need to encourage spiritual development at the right pace: not too slow and not too fast.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How did your own family get the encouragement of your development right? Where was there room for improvement?
2. How do you respond to the idea of church family as a place for development?
3. Can you think of good examples of people you know who are showing clear signs of spiritual growth?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You have provided a place for me to grow spiritually. Thank You that You know how I need to grow. Help me to know how and when I can grow in a healthy way. Help me to not try to grow too fast nor to grow too slowly. Amen.

## Week 4: Day 3 Our calling in Jesus: Worship

**Bible texts:**

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.* Mark 12:30

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.* Hebrews 13:8

**Our First Calling**

We have explored our new identity in Christ and our new spiritual family in Christ. For the rest of this week we will consider our new purposes in Christ.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest and most important response that needs to be made to God He answered very clearly by quoting the first commandment: to love God with every fibre of our being. In other words, to worship God first above all else. This is our first and most important calling and our primary purpose in life. One historical faith affirmation declares that our chief end is “to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever”.

Worship in its fullest sense is about responding to all that God is with all that we are. It is so much more than singing songs that exalt God’s greatness – important though such singing is.

Worship is a continuous lifestyle of praise and thanksgiving towards God – who is always worthy to be praised and thanked, because He is always unchanging.

We will consider worship again in Week 9 but for now let’s recognise that worship is not only a musical activity but a continuous attitude, not only a practice but a positioning of our hearts towards God.

Worship is to our spiritual lives what oxygen is to our physical lives; it sustains us and releases energy to keep going, keep trusting, keep persevering through all the changing circumstances of life, no matter whether they are good or bad, encouraging or discouraging, uplifting or deflating.

Worship is about the “worth-ship” of God in every situation; God is always worthy of praise.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What is your response to the idea of worship as a lifestyle?
2. Do you find it easy to worship God? What are your favourite ways to worship?
3. When do you find it hard to worship God? Have you found ways of encouraging worship when life is tough?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, I praise You that you are always the same, yesterday, today and forever. You are always worthy of my praise. Help me to develop an attitude of gratitude in all circumstances, good or bad so that I can develop a lifestyle of worship and so that my heart is always positioned well towards Your abundant generosity. Amen.

## Week 4: Day 4 Our calling in Jesus: Seeking God’s Kingdom

**Bible text:**

*Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* Matthew 6:33

**Partners with God in extending God’s Kingdom**

The Kingdom of God is a common theme through the teaching of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament. Many of Jesus’ parables, for example, focus on explaining some aspect of the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is the “Domain of the King of kings”. In other words, wherever the rule and reign of God becomes reality we see an expression of the Kingdom of God.

So, for example, if a sick person is prayed for and they experience rapid recovery then they have experienced the Kingdom of God.

If a fearful person is helped by God to move from fear to peace-filled confidence then they have experienced the Kingdom of God.

If a deceived person is led from deception into the truth then they have experienced the Kingdom of God.

If an oppressed person is released from injustice into the freedom of justice then they have experienced the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was clear in his teaching that there are only two kingdoms – the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, characterised by darkness and brokenness. A second key calling for us is to partner with Jesus in extending His Kingdom of abundant life and wholeness by taking ground from the kingdom of this world.

Whatever our line of study or work, we can all engage with the priority of seeking God’s Kingdom extension in our area of influence. This can be a lifelong adventure of faith for all of us.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Having considered the examples given here, what extension of God’s Kingdom do you most want to see in your area of work or study?
2. What challenges lie ahead in seeing this desire become reality?
3. What resources are needed to see this desire become reality?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your growing Kingdom on Earth. Help me to seek Your kingdom first in all my relationships, work and study. Give me wisdom to see what is needed, give me courage to press ahead towards these goals, and give me perseverance to keep going. Amen.

## Week 4: Day 5 Our calling in Jesus: Eternal Life on a New Earth

**Bible texts:**

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.* 1 John 5:13

*But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.* 2 Peter 3:13

*Our citizenship is in heaven.* Philippians 3:20

*There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.* Revelation 21:4

**A Secure Destiny**

We have explored two important aspects of our calling in Christ this week: worship and partnering with Jesus in extending His Kingdom rule on Earth. These are both vital aspects of our purposes on this present Earth.

We also need to recognise that this present life on this side of death is only the prologue of our existence when we trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Chapter 1 has not even started yet.

When we put our trust in Jesus, we receive the free gift of eternal life. We therefore can be confident and certain of our destiny: living with Jesus for all eternity on a New Earth free from sin, suffering and pain.

These then are some of the abundant blessings that are offered to those who invite Jesus to become the Lord of their lives.

Our identity is clear: we are new creations, adopted children in a Royal Family, pursuing holiness and developing our skills as Jesus’ apprentices.

Our spiritual community is committed to delight in us and to develop us to our full potential.

Our life-giving goals include glorifying God, helping to build His kingdom on Earth now with the final destiny of everlasting life in a re-created Earth that is full of joy and free from pain.

Knowing and serving Jesus as Lord is therefore the highest reward and the greatest blessing that any person can receive in this life.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. John clearly states that eternal life begins now, on this side of death. How do you respond to this affirmation?
2. Chapter 1 hasn’t started yet. Are you making the most of the Prologue?
3. What appropriate pleasures – currently impossible - do you look forward to on the New Earth?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your invitation to everlasting life on the New Earth – an eternity of freedom from pain and freedom for fulfilment. Help me to keep the perspective of this eternal destiny before me and to recognise that this life is only the Prologue of the everlasting life that we can enjoy in Your company. Amen.

## Week 5: Day 1 Living with Jesus at the Centre of our Lives

**Bible texts:**

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.* Proverbs 3:5-6

*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* John 10:10

*Then Jesus said to them all: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.* *For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.*  Luke 9:23-24

**Jesus as the Hub of the Wheel of Personal Faith**

In Weeks 1 and 2 we have considered the reasons why Jesus is our Saviour and is worthy to be called Lord. In Weeks 3 and 4 we have considered some of the key blessings of knowing Jesus as Saviour and Lord: a new identity, a new family and a new destiny.

During the next 2 weeks we will consider more of the blessings alongside some of the challenges of faith in Jesus. Before we make a lifelong commitment to Jesus, we need to have a clear sense of what the implications are.

Jesus explained to His first followers – and by implication, every subsequent generation of followers - that if if we want to become one of His apprentices then each one of us has to take up our cross (Luke 9:23). This is a symbolic way of saying that there will be aspects of our lives that need to change if we are to follow Jesus. When we live with ourselves at the centre of our lives, the way we have been living is damaging to ourselves and to others and so needs to change because Jesus loves us and wants the very best for us. John 10:10 is clear: Jesus wants us to have life to the full; abundant life; a flourishing life.

So while Jesus is inviting us to a life of sacrifice, He is also inviting us to a life of fulfilment. This is the paradox of God’s Kingdom: when we lay down our own self-centred desires in order to prioritise what Jesus wants for us and the people around us, we will find that we discover a whole new experience of personal fulfilment that simply would not be experienced if we carried on along the road of selfishness.

The route of persistent self-denial is also the road of ultimate self-fulfilment. This is why putting Jesus at the centre of our lives is good news which can bring such amazing blessings to our lives.

It is helpful to think about our lives as a rotating wheel with a series of spokes radiating out from a central hub. The hub represents the source of our strength that also brings forward movement and progress. When we put our trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord we are making Jesus the hub of our lives. We are going to consider how living life with Jesus as the hub of that wheel makes life distinctive from living life with ourselves at the centre.

Specifically, we will spend the next 2 weeks considering eight important spokes of our life’s wheel, each representing a key aspect of our daily lives. These eight spokes are: rest; recreation; family; friends; work; money; time with God; and time with our church family.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Jesus wants us to live an abundant life: life the best way it can possibly be. In what ways do you think you are living less that this abundant life right now?
2. Jesus wants to be the central hub in our lives in order that the wheel of our lives can turn smoothly and effectively and allow us to make the best possible progress through our lives. How do you respond to the idea of putting Jesus at the centre of your life?
3. If Jesus is placed at the centre of our lives, then there may be changes required to make abundant life possible. Are we ready to make the changes that Jesus wants to bring? If not, what needs to change in our perspective to allow us to make these changes?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, please open my mind and heart to be able to see what life looks like when you are placed at the centre of my life. Please help me to be open to new ideas about what abundant life looks like from your perspective. Please speak to me about changes that are needed to allow me to live this kind of life that honours You every day. Amen.

## Week 5: Day 2 Spoke 1: Rest

**Bible texts:** *In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.* Psalm 4:8

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* Matthew 11:28-29

*Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, Jesus said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’* Mark 6:31

**Working from Rest, not Resting from Work**

Jesus cared about the state of restfulness of his disciples. It clearly mattered to him if they were not getting enough rest. And it matters to Jesus now that we are able to live a sustainable life of work because we are getting good rest.

The first implication is our sleep patterns. It is interesting that in the first chapter of the Bible, days begin at sundown not sunrise: *And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.* Genesis 1:5

Still today, the Jewish sabbath begins at dusk not dawn. From this perspective, our working day begins the evening before we work, not the morning we start work. How much sound sleep we gets depends upon how well we wind down in the evening before we sleep and when we put the light out.

Living with Jesus at the centre of our lives will mean that we love ourselves well enough to get a good night of sleep and not stay up too late, working until the last possible minute so that we are not well-prepared for sound sleep. If we are tired, the rest of our lives will never be the best it can be. If we are well-rested, then we are better able to live a sustainable life. Honouring Jesus at the centre of our lives means we will aim to get sufficient sleep.

A second implication is our weekly pattern of work. The Old Testament commanded a day of rest each week: *The seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work.* Exodus 20:10 Let’s ask ourselves this honest question: do we think we will be more effective in our lives if we work solidly seven days a week, every week or if we intentionally take one day-off to rest, relax, read, reflect and enjoy recreation with family and friends?

Deliberately taking a day off each week is a matter of expressing trust in Jesus that we will be more effective in six days of work with Jesus at the centre of our lives, than seven days trusting in our own strength to get everything done that needs to be done. When we honour Jesus with our pattern of work, then His blessings are able to flow more freely through our lives. Honouring Jesus brings the implication that we will work hard on six days of each week while cherishing the recreation that He wants us to enjoy on our day of sabbath rest.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What are your current patterns of getting ready for sleep? Do you wind down well or are you looking at social media on your phone until you put the light out? Are you getting enough sound sleep or do you need to start the wind down earlier?
2. Do we think we will be more productive trusting in our own strength 7 days a week or trusting that Jesus will allow us to maximise our fruitfulness from 6 days of work after one day relaxing and being refreshed?
3. Are you taking at least one day off work and study each week? If not, is this something you can try out for a few weeks and see what the benefits might be?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that you care about my rest and sleep patterns. Please help me to consider what changes to my evenings are necessary to get the best possible sleep. Please help me to consider what changes are necessary to be able to make sure I have one day off a week so that I can work from a place of rest. Amen.

## Week 5: Day 3 Spoke 2: Recreation

**Bible text:**

*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”* Matthew 11:19

**Embracing the Abundant Life of Being Re-Created**

The verse above demonstrates that Jesus enjoyed good parties; He loved being with interesting people. His first miracle took place at a wedding celebration and involved transformation of ordinary water into fabulous wine. His presence brought amazing pleasure to that party (see John 2:1-11 for this story).

We also know that He made time for incredible picnics – just think about the miracle of five thousand families being fed on one occasion through the multiplication of a meagre pack lunch (see John 6:1-13)

Somebody once observed that most of the gospel stories show Jesus either at a meal, going to a meal or coming from a meal.

Given the fact that Jesus had three years to initiate a new world faith and train sufficient apprentices effectively to take this new faith forward persistently and sustainably until His final return, it is remarkable that He was renowned as someone who took time for relaxed recreation with people. Of course, Jesus was always intentional in His conversations with people – but it seems clear that He also enjoyed relaxing with friends. In doing so, Jesus affirmed the importance of recreation.

The implication for a Jesus-centred life is that we follow Jesus’ model and ensure that our weekly pattern of life includes time for recreation – whatever our preferred recreation might be. For some this will be sport; for others artistic activities; for others hospitality with friends – the list could go on.

Recreation is all about being re-created: engaging with hobbies and leisure pursuits that bring refreshment to our inner beings so that we can feel more fully alive.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Are you having enough recreation in your life? If not, what activities and hobbies bring you the greatest refreshment and enjoyment? How can you integrate these interests into your life so that you are able to enjoy the abundant life that Jesus wants for you?
2. Some leisure pursuits may be destructive for us and so living under the loving leadership of Jesus may mean that we need to stop these pursuits e.g. internet pornography. Are there any pursuits we currently enjoy that are inappropriate for someone who wants to follow Jesus?
3. Sometimes we need to bring a new sense of moderation to our recreational pursuits. For example, there is nothing wrong with enjoying an alcoholic drink a few times a week – but there is definitely something wrong with drinking alcohol to the point where we lose self-control and start to speak and act unwisely. What boundaries do we need to put in place so that our leisure pursuits do not mean that we are compromising our faith in Jesus?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You encourage us to pursue recreation so that we bring creative refreshment to our lives. Help me to pursue the right recreation in the right ways so that I can enjoy the abundant life that you want for me without compromise or shame. Amen.

## Week 5: Day 4 Spoke 3: Family

**Bible texts:**

*The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.’Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptised. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole household.* Acts 16:29-34

*Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised.* Acts 18:8

*You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord’s people.*1 Corinthians 16:15

**Families Finding Faith**

We have explored rest and recreation; now we explore relationships.

We are made in the image of a relational God – a community of three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in One Being. Human beings are made for deep and significant relationships and one important area of relationships will be our biological family (we will consider our spiritual family later).

Firstly, a Jesus-centred life will mean that we invest quality time in our family relationships. Of course, this will vary depending on our age and stage of life – but Jesus wants us to invest time in our families; He wants us to delight in each other and to develop each other.

Secondly, a Jesus-centred life will mean that we want our families to be families of faith. The bible verses above indicate that Jesus is in the business of bringing whole families to faith; these verses refer to whole households (including families) coming to trust in Jesus. If members of our family are outside the family of faith this will mean that we need to be praying for these family members to find faith while sensitively using opportunities to love them into faith.

Thirdly, a Jesus-centred life will mean that we take the initiative in bringing healing to broken relationships in families. Families are often messy because people are often messy and reconciliation is often needed. Jesus wants us to bring forgiveness and restoration to broken families, even if this is complicated and costly. Of course, if we have done our very best on many occasions to do this well and have not yet seen results then we need to entrust these painful situations into His care.

Where we face a painful family situation, we can be encouraged that we can find the support we need through our spiritual family and so there is never any reason why we should feel alone or isolated.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you feel you are investing sufficient time in family members each week? Where would you like to address any weaknesses in this area? What practical steps do you need to take to make the necessary changes?
2. Which close family members are outside the family of faith? Do you have a practical way of remembering to pray for them each week? Are there resources that might be helpful for them to encourage them into faith?
3. Are there broken relationships in your family? How do you sense Jesus leading you to try and bring reconciliation? What initiatives do you need to bring to encourage this restoration?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, You know what it is like to be a child and a sibling. You know about the messiness of family life. Please show me where I need to be more loving to my family – spending more time with them; praying for them to find faith or deepen their faith; bringing healing and restoration to them. Help me to have the courage and compassion to put these changes into place. Amen.

## Week 5: Day 5 Spoke 4: Friends

**Bible texts:**

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.* Luke 10:38

*Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.* Romans 12:10

**The Power of Friendship**

Along with family relationships, another important area of relationships will be our friendships.

Jesus enjoyed meeting with friends of all kinds: sometimes those who were committed apprentices like Peter, James and John; sometimes those who simply enjoyed His company like Martha and Mary.

A Jesus-centred life will therefore be a life that is characterised by regular time with friends – maybe lifelong friends from our past experiences or friends at work or neighbours or friends who share our recreational interests.

A Jesus-centred life will involve investing in friendships, being careful to love our friends well with time, encouraging words, gifts and practical help. Of course, we will want to receive these blessings from our friends too; but with Jesus at the centre, we will want to take the initiative in bringing these characteristics to these friendships. And as we model what it means to be a Jesus-centred friend, then our friends will generally respond in similar ways.

A Jesus-centred life will also mean that we exercise discernment about friends who are detrimental to our well-being. Perhaps we have had friends who have encouraged us into experiences of recreation that have been destructive – maybe binge-drinking or experimenting with drugs or watching internet pornography. Jesus may be encouraging us to distance ourselves from their contact because He loves us and wants us to be kept safe from harmful influences.

A Jesus-centred life will also mean that we put boundaries in place in romantic friendships. The pressure to have sex before marriage is intense in our culture but the bible is clear that the only Jesus-honouring context for sexual activity is lifelong, heterosexual marriage. Living with Jesus at the centre of our lives will mean that we postpone sexual expression until we get married. The most intense physical intimacy between two people – sexual intercourse - should be kept for the deepest relational commitment – and that is marriage. The Jesus who wants us to have abundant life is the same Jesus who regards getting married as a virgin to be normal not abnormal. Unmarried people need to hear Jesus’ clear affirmation: you are not a freak to get married as a virgin.

Living with Jesus at the centre means that we will challenge the lie that you cannot flourish without enjoying sexual activity. As a lifelong single man who lived the most fully flourishing human life ever lived, Jesus is the living-proof of this truth that our society desperately needs to hear.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Are you having enough time with close, life-giving friends? If not, what steps can you take to fill in the gaps?
2. Are there any friends who are proving damaging or destructive right now? What can you do to protect yourself from this negative influence?
3. If you are unmarried, how do you respond to the idea of keeping sex for marriage? If you find this difficult, are there friends who can keep you accountable as you take this step of waiting for marriage?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the friends I have. Help me to love them well. Keep me safe from people who don’t have my best interests at heart. And help me to keep my friendships pure and free from compromise. Amen.

## Week 6: Day 1 Spoke 5: Work

**Bible texts:**

*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him…Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.* Colossians 3:17,23

*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.* 1 Corinthians 15:58

**Working for a Heavenly Boss**

Most of us spend a large proportion of our week in work - paid or unpaid. How we view this time and how we use this time is therefore critical. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul gives three clear encouragements about our working lives when Jesus is at the centre of our lives.

Firstly, Paul wants followers of Jesus to work “in the name of Jesus”. In Jewish thought (and remember that Paul had been a Jewish teacher before he was a Christian missionary) someone’s name indicates their character. So, if we work in the name of Jesus, our work should exemplify the character of Jesus including honesty; faithfulness; diligence; creativity; justice; generosity; kindness; and patience.

Secondly, Paul says that we should “give thanks to God the Father through Jesus”; in other words, we should work with an attitude of gratitude and not with an attitude of complaint and grumbling. Attitudes are deeply infectious; when we are around thankful, joyful people, we catch their gratitude and joy. Living with Jesus at the centre therefore means that we should always look for the good in every situation rather than continually complaining about what is not going well.

Thirdly, Paul encourages us to consider our work first and foremost as being a service to Jesus rather than being a service to our human bosses. Clearly, most of us are working for a human boss – but if we consider our work as an offering for Jesus first, then we will make sure that our human bosses will be impressed with our efforts. If we are self-employed we will make sure that we are always pursuing excellence in what we do.

Finally, in the verse from Corinthians we see Paul remind us that nothing we do for Jesus is ever in vain or worthless. No matter how futile our day’s work has been, if we have offered it as a gift to Jesus, doing the very best we can in an attitude of honour and thanksgiving, it is very precious in His eyes.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What changes might be needed in your work or study this week if you maintained the attitude of working “in the name of Jesus” each day?
2. In what ways might you be able to demonstrate more gratitude in your workplace or place of study this week?
3. How might offering your work or study to Jesus as a gift of worship change your attitude to your working week?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You know what a working week looks like having worked as a carpenter for many years. Please help me to consider more fully what it means to work with your character of love and faithfulness. Help me to be thankful in my work. Help me to offer my work to you as a gift. Please remind me of these priorities through this week. Amen.

## Week 6: Day 2 Spoke 6: Money

**Bible texts:**

*Since you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.* 2 Corinthians 8:7

*Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* 2 Corinthians 9:7

**God is a cheerful giver and God loves cheerful givers**

We worship the most lavishly generous God. You only have to think about the amazing biodiversity of our planet to realise the extravagant nature of His generosity to us in creation – and His generosity to us in giving us five remarkable senses to be able to enjoy the sight, scent, sound, taste and texture of His creation around us.

Think also about God’s supreme generosity to us in giving us His own Son as our Saviour.

Think about God’s generosity to us in giving us the free gift of everlasting life and the presence of the Holy Spirit when we trust Jesus as our Saviour.

We are made in the image of an astonishingly generous God to enjoy being generous. We manifest God’s image in us when we give generously. And who doesn’t enjoy being generous? There is a profound connection between being miserable and being a miser, between being joyful and being generous.

Paul encouraged the Christians in Corinth to excel at “the grace of giving”. By using the word “grace” Paul indicates that giving is not about what we HAVE to do but about what we WANT to do.

In the Old Testament God’s people HAD to give 10% of their income back to God as a matter of obedience to God’s laws.

In the New Covenant God’s people have so much more that they can give thanks for – including the gift of an all-sufficient Saviour – and so Paul’s thinking is that we will WANT to give at least 10% of our income back to God because of His gracious gifts to us. His hope is that we will consider this gift a pleasure and a privilege, not a burden and an irritation.

Living with Jesus at the centre will mean that we love being generous with our money – including being generous to God and helping to contribute to God’s work through the local church. We can never outgive God. If we honour God with our finances now we will receive so much more in return in the days ahead.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect upon God’s generosity to us in creation and salvation. Meditate on your favourite aspect of His creation – perhaps a person or a place or a taste or a fragrance or a sound – and give thanks for His cheerful generosity.
2. Grace is about freely giving way beyond what a cause deserves. How does this word help us to understand the attitude to giving that can be ours as we respond to God’s generosity, love and faithfulness?
3. Have you considered giving 10% of your income to the work of your local church? If not, would you be willing to experiment for a year by doing this and see what blessings come your way as a result?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You gave up Your life for my sake so that I could be forgiven and become an adopted child in your family. You offer me the gift of eternal life in the presence of Your Spirit as I come to trust in You. In the light of your generosity to me, please help me to be generous to others and to You. Give me the readiness to trust in Your provision for me as I honour You with my income. Amen.

## Week 6: Day 3 Spoke 7: Personal Time with God

**Bible texts:**

*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.* Mark 1:35

*When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.* Matthew 6:6

**Cherishing your Conversations with God**

Jesus gives us a model of taking time alone to pray with God since this was His regular practice and He gives us the instruction to do this in our lives too.

Prayer is simply having a conversation with God. In the same way that conversations involve the interplay of talking and listening, prayer involves times of talking to God and times of listening to what God is saying to us.

We will explore this in more detail later on, but for now the important point is that a Jesus-centred life will include time alone with God as a regular habit – hopefully a daily habit.

We live in an era of unprecidented resources to enrich our spiritual lives and this includes resources for our time alone with God each day.

Once you have completed this devotional journal, the question will arise: how are you going to structure 20 minutes with God each morning?

Here are a few ideas. You could look on You Tube for an inspiring song of worship to begin your time with God, giving thanks for who He is and what He has given you. You could search for a song led by a worship band like Housefires or a church like Hillsong or Bethel or The Upper Room – this could be your first five minutes of worship.

Then, you could use You Version (downloadable app) to read the Bible for 10 minutes; there are plenty of bible reading plans to help you with this. Five minutes could be the reading; and 5 minutes could be for reflecting on the text: what is God saying to you through this bible passage? You might want to write a few key points down.

Then you could finish with 5 minutes of prayer, asking God to help you apply what you have learned and praying for people and situations of need on your heart.

Twenty minutes to start the day with God. Twenty minutes well spent.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. As you have been using this devotional journal, have you had a pattern of taking time to be with God each morning? How do you respond to this idea as something you might want to explore?
2. God loves to speak to us and one of the key ways He does this is through the bible. What do you sense God say to you today through the two bible verses quoted?
3. Prayer is simply talking and listening to God. Have you thought about writing down your prayers to keep you focused and so you can record the ways in which you see God answer your prayers?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for your example of taking time to pray each day and then training your first apprentices to do the same. Please help me to have the desire to follow this pattern each day. Please help me to find the right resources for worship and bible reading and to encourage my prayer life so that this time with You becomes a regular habit that I enjoy each day. Amen.

## Week 6: Day 4 Spoke 8: Time with Church

**Bible texts:**

*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts* Acts 2:46

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* Hebrews 10:24-25 (Note: the Day here means the day of Jesus’ return to Earth at the time of the Second Advent).

**Cherishing Time with your Spiritual Family**

We have explored how faith in Jesus brings us into a new worldwide family. Healthy life-giving families enjoy spending time together – and the same is true for your spiritual family. Each church is a local expression of this worldwide spiritual family and it is important to be able to find a local church which we enjoy and to which we can contribute by getting involved.

We need time alone with God each day and we need time with our church each week to be encouraged and to encourage others.

The first followers of Jesus made time to be with the very first church in large gatherings and in homes. Paul had this same pattern of preaching at large public gatherings and also in homes: *You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.* Acts 20:20

This pattern is a helpful one for us to embrace too: making time to gather with other Christians in a large group setting, probably on a Sunday, and also making time to gather in a small group setting at some other time in the week.

The passage in Hebrews above reminds us that it is vital that we maintain the habit of connecting with other Christians if we want to keep growing as a follower of Jesus. Contemporary life is always busy and there are always 101 ways to use every minute of every day. There will therefore always be 101 other activities that we could be doing rather than meeting with our spiritual brothers and sisters.

Living a Jesus-centred life will mean that we make time with our spiritual family a priority. And meeting in person is so much richer and more significant than any online alternative, useful though such interactions may be when needed.

While the journey to the church service or meeting might require you to fend off the temptations to go and do something else instead, the journey home will always be characterised by the clear sense that you are now really glad you made the effort to engage with your spiritual family. Don’t forget – your family members need you.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you identified your preferred local church? What do you appreciate most about this church? Give thanks for these strengths.
2. Are you part of a midweek small group? If not, is this something that you would like to join? What practical steps do you need to take to find a good small group?
3. What factors regularly keep you away from church services? How can you address these factors so that attending church in person can become a high priority?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for inspiring leaders to begin new churches across the world and down through history. Thank you for the many great churches in my area. Please give me clarity about which church you are calling me to attend and please help me to be faithful in my attendance on Sundays and midweek. Help me to contribute to the life of my local church and to remember that my spiritual family needs me to be there. Amen.

## Week 6: Day 5 Advancing the Wheel of Faith

**Bible texts:**

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*Philippians 4:1

*Let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.* Hebrews 6:1

**Growing towards spiritual maturity in Christ**

We have spent the last two weeks exploring the pattern of living a Jesus-centred life. We have explored rest and recreation, relationships with family and friends, our work and our money, time alone with God each day and time with our local church each week.

We have seen that living with Jesus at the centre has an impact on each of these eight areas of our lives. If Jesus is Lord of our lives, then there will be a new set of priorities to put into practice. These priorities are not meant to become a burden for us but a way of making sure that we increasingly enjoy the abundant life that Jesus wants for us.

Sometimes, these priorities will require sacrifice. If we are going to get enough sleep we have to sacrifice all-night parties. If we are going to attend our small group we might have to sacrifice a movie night. If we are going to attend an evening church service we may need to sacrifice a curry night with friends. If we are going to stay free from destructive habits we might need to end an unhelpful relationship. Each sacrifice however will eventually bring us a rich reward in the form of a more abundant life – because Jesus always fulfils His promises.

We have explored these eight aspects as spokes of a wheel with Jesus as the hub. Wheels are not meant to stay still; they are meant to assist forward movement. As we commit ourselves to living a Jesus-centred life and as we put these perspectives and habits into place on a daily basis we should find that we are developing momentum as we press forward.

The Jesus-centred life is one of growing towards spiritual maturity and seeing our lives become characterised by a deeper and richer trust in the faithfulness of Jesus to bring us the life we have always wanted.

Reaping this reward requires persisting in placing Jesus at the centre of our lives as a continuous perspective not an occasional whim. And this conscious, deliberate choice is the focus for next week.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Having considered these eight wheel spokes, what most excites you about living a life with Jesus at the centre?
2. Where do you sense sacrifice may be needed in your life if you are to live consistently with Jesus at the centre?
3. What hindrances to this way of living exist in your life? What can you do to overcome these hindrances?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the opportunity of exploring what it means to live a life with You at the centre over the last two weeks. Help me to be clear about the blessings and the challenges, the rewards and the sacrifices that follow from living under Your Lordship. Help me to see that the challenges bring added blessings and the sacrifices bring fresh rewards as I prepare to commit my life to You in a new chapter of my life. Amen.

## Week 7: Day 1 Two Ways to Live

**Bible texts:**

*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life.* John 3:36

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life inChrist Jesus our Lord.* Romans 6:23

**Who is on the throne of your life?**

Have you ever considered who is the ruler of your life? Who is leading the way forward? Who do you honour most?

The bible makes clear that there are two options to pursue.

Either we are on the throne of our lives or Jesus is. Either I am the person who is making all the major decisions or I am living in a very different way by submitting the big choices to the wisdom and leading of Jesus who is Lord over all and knows our end from the very beginning.

We have seen that Jesus is uniquely worthy to be on the throne of our lives. Bible texts like this one indicate that Jesus alone is worthy of that supreme honour:

*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being*. Revelation 4:11

And bible texts like this one indicate that no human separated from God is worthy to be in charge, for we all have faults and failings that mean we will regularly make the wrong choices:

*…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* Romans 3:23

So there is a clear choice about how we order our lives: with ourselves on the throne and getting it seriously wrong or having Jesus on the throne and letting Jesus ensure we are heading the right way.

With Jesus on the throne we are promised eternal life; with ourselves on the throne we are promised we will not see eternal life.

There is a clear contrast in destinies set before us requiring a clear decision to be made about who is going to be the Lord over our lives.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you thought before about who is on the throne of your life? What is your response to this idea?
2. As you take an honest look at the way you make big decisions, who is on the throne right now?
3. If you recognise that you are on the throne, making the major choices, is this something you want to change? Why?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, I thank You that You are worthy of all honour in my life. I want to live in a way that honours You above all else. Please help me to make the choice to put You on the throne of my life in every situation and to be led by Your wisdom and love in all situations. Amen.

## Week 7: Day 2 Jesus as Lord and Saviour

**Bible texts:**

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead* 1 Peter 1:3

*You will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.* 2 Peter 1:11

**Knowing Jesus as our Lord and Our Saviour**

We spent Weeks 1 and 2 exploring the identity and achievements of Jesus – who Jesus is and what Jesus has accomplished for us. The New Testament makes clear that Jesus is the unique, unrivalled Saviour of this world and He is also the supreme, unparalleled Lord over all.

We spent Weeks 3 and 4 considering the blessings that flow from living a life of faith in Jesus Christ: a new identity set free from the prison of our sinful past, a new family to delight in us and encourage our growth, and a new destiny in the Kingdom of God, working with Jesus to extend this eternal Kingdom’s boundaries.

We spent Weeks 5 and 6 considering the implications of asking Jesus to become the Lord over every aspect of our lives: our rest and recreation; our family and friends; our work and finances; doing our best to spend time with God each day and having time with our spiritual family each week.

In the light of these explorations, we have a choice to make. Are we going to accept Jesus as our Loving Saviour and are we going to follow Jesus as our Compassionate Lord?

The New Testament advises us strongly that we cannot and must not stop at the point of simply accepting that Jesus is the Saviour of the world without this having an impact on how we live our lives. In other words, we cannot believe that Jesus is the Unique Saviour we need without also welcoming Him into our lives as our Lord, the Leader who is going to inspire our right decisions and choices.

The invitation we are receiving is one of entering into a loving relationship of honour and trust – because Jesus is worthy of honour and because He is ultimately trustworthy. Jesus only ever wants the best for us – abundant life forever.

This is the most important choice of our lives because it has eternal implications.

We cannot enter into this new life without careful consideration.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Review Weeks 1 and 2 – who Jesus is and what He has done for us. What strikes you as most important from these truths?
2. Review Weeks 3 and 4 – the blessings that flow from giving your life to Jesus. What strikes you as most important from these insights?
3. Review Weeks 5 and 6 – the eight spokes of the wheel of a Jesus-centred life. Are there any concerns you have about committing yourself to Jesus as your Lord over these eight aspects of your life?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You are the Saviour of the world and that you desire to be my Lord. Help me to see clearly the blessings that flow from this commitment to You as the Leader of my life as well as the changes that are needed. Please bring me to that place of seeing clearly my need for You to be the Lord of my life forever. Amen.

## Week 7: Day 3 Losing your life to Find Life

**Bible texts:**

*What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?* Luke 9:25

*Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.* Matthew 10:39

**The Paradoxes of God’s Kingdom**

Paradox is a feature of this universe. For example, the more we know, the more we recognise we still need to know; just think about the progression from the knowledge of someone in Year 13 to someone who has completed a Ph.D. in that area of human understanding. Or think about the paradoxes of science: light can be seen as both a wave and a stream of particles.

When it comes to our selfish striving for productivity and prosperity another paradox becomes clear: we can gain the whole world in terms of fame and fortune and yet be forced to admit that in the process we have unintentionally said goodbye to our best selves. For example, how many people have invested their best efforts and time in building a dazzling career for themselves only to realise that they have made the irreversible mistake of sacrificing their families and friends on the altar of selfish success?

And when it comes to our relationship with Jesus yet another paradox emerges. If we resolutely hang onto our lives making sure that we remain firmly and securely on the throne of our lives then Jesus says we will have lost our lives forever. On the other hand, if we surrender our lives to Jesus as Lord then we will make our lives secure forever.

There is a strong temptation to feel that hanging on to the role of ultimate leadership in our lives is the only way to live freely and that giving our lives over to Jesus will mean the end to such freedom. Paradoxically, the opposite is the truth because Jesus is the One who knows the best way for us to live freely –free from selfishness, free from shame, free from condemnation.

Keeping our lives for our own ends means we live in captivity. Giving our lives to Jesus means that we live freely. This is the most important paradox we can ever understand and get right.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you met people who have gained the whole world but sacrificed their hearts and relationships in the process?
2. Reflect on how keeping your life to yourself will bring imprisonment.
3. Reflect on how giving up your life to Jesus will mean that you find the best fulfilment.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Master of Paradoxes: a King who came to serve; a sinless Savour who takes our sin upon Himself; One who experiences Death only to break Death’s hold on us through Resurrection; a Wounded Healer. Help me to be clear about the paradox of losing my life to find it; handing over my life to secure it; surrendering my life to sustain it. Help me to apply this paradox wisely and well. Amen.

## Week 7: Day 4 Decision Time

**Bible texts:**

*‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him.* Matthew 4:19-20

*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* Acts 2:37-38

**Making a Commitment to Jesus**

We have explored the reasons for accepting Jesus as Saviour and Lord. We have considered the blessings and riches of living life as a committed follower of Jesus. We have considered the challenges and sacrifices of living as a devoted follower of Jesus.

This has been an important journey to make because before we commit ourselves to Jesus we need to recognise both the riches and the requirements; both the costs and the rewards.

The time has come for a well-informed decision to be made or for a fresh commitment to be renewed.

The decision required is to accept Jesus as your Saviour and to commit your life to Jesus as your Lord. Maybe you have already done this some time ago; perhaps this is the first time you are doing so.

Whether this is a first time commitment or a fresh renewal of faith, this is an important step to take – the greatest step that any person can ever make.

When Jesus invited his first followers to leave behind their old life and commit themselves to a bold, new adventure they immediately said yes.

If you are ready to follow their example and say “Yes” to Jesus today, then the process is very simple. Here are three ABC steps to consider.

Firstly, you **admit** to Jesus that you have lived according to your own self-centred priorities and have made lots of wrong choices.

Secondly, you **believe** that Jesus died on Good Friday as your substitute, bringing you forgiveness for the mistakes and failures of the past.

Thirdly, you **commit** yourself to a path of repentance, which simply means that you are turning from your old life of living and will now live under the leadership of Jesus – the all-seeing, all-understanding, all-powerful, all-loving, always-present-with-us Lord who knows best how to live abundantly day by day.

When you take these three steps, then you are able to ask to receive the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Jesus – who will fill your life and empower and equip you to lead your new life of faith in Jesus.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect once again on the price that Jesus had to pay as He died for your sins on Good Friday, bringing you the opportunity of forgiveness and a fresh start from today.
2. Reflect on some of the most significant ways in which you have not followed the ways of Jesus in your life so far – perhaps relationships that have been wrong or habits that have been unhelpful. You might want to ask Jesus to bring to mind others that can be mentioned as you pray.
3. Reflect on some of the most significant ways in which your life is going to change as a result of your commitment today.

**A Prayer of Personal Commitment to Jesus:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Today I admit to you the wrong in my life. Specifically, I am sorry for… (list the areas that have come to mind here). Thank You that You died for all of my sins – the ones I am aware of and the ones I am not aware of. Please forgive me all the mistakes and failings in my life. I receive Your forgiveness today and I surrender my life to You, in the certainty that You will lead me to live my life the best possible way from this point on. Please fill me with Your Holy Spirit so that I can have all the resources I need to live a life worthy of the calling I am receiving today. Amen.

## Week 7: Day 5 Baptism Promises

**Bible texts:**

*Don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.* Romans 6:3-4

*This water symbolises baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience towards God.*1 Peter 3:21

**Celebrating Your Fresh Start**

When we begin the new chapter of marriage there is always a wedding ceremony marking this significant step. The same is true when we begin the new chapter of a personal friendship with Jesus. In this case the ceremony is a baptism service and if you have either made a new commitment to Jesus or a renewed commitment to Jesus and you have not been baptised before then this would be a great time to be baptised.

In many churches baptism involves being fully immersed in a tank of water. The symbolism of this is important. As you go down into the water, this symbolises the death of your old, self-centred life. As you rise up out of the water, this symbolises the beginning of your new, Christ-centred life – following the theme of rising up through resurrection following death.

The use of water in baptism is also very significant since it symbolises the Holy Spirit.

Firstly, we need water to stay alive and we cannot stay alive spiritually without the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, we need water to wash ourselves clean and we need the Holy Spirit to cleanse us of our past selfish mistakes.

Thirdly, there is a lot of power in water (for example, waves at sea) and we need the power of the Holy Spirit to live our new life of faith in Jesus.

Fourthly, water can provide lots of fun (for example, jumping in seaside waves or flume rides) and our new life of faith is meant to be a great adventure that brings lots of excitement to us.

In summary, baptism is a powerful symbol of the start of a new life as a whole-hearted apprentice of Jesus. The water of baptism reminds us that the life of the baptised follower of Jesus is full of rich spiritual life, committed to obedience and purity, empowered with supernatural resources and engaged in a life-long adventure of faith. Baptism brings an exciting new beginning.

New Testament followers of Jesus were always baptised as they started their journey of faith; we should make sure that we follow their example too.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you know if you have been baptised (or christened as a baby)? If not, this this is something that you will need to arrange with your local church. When would you like this to happen and who will you invite to celebrate this new beginning?
2. If you were baptised before you might like to think about taking the step of confirmation. This is the chance to re-confirm the promises made on your behalf by your parents when you were baptised. This time you will be making the promises yourself as a committed follower of Jesus. This service also allows you to reaffirm baptism promises and can be done with full immersion in water to remind you of what happened at your baptism.
3. Reflect on the three promises you make in a baptism service: I turn to Christ. I repent of my sins. I renounce evil (this means you will turn from everything that dishonours Jesus and commit yourself to follow a path of obedience to the ways of Jesus).

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, I have turned to You as Lord; I have repented of my sins; I have renounced evil. I am ready to fulfil my baptism vows. Help me have insight into what public step I need to take now to demonstrate and celebrate the start of the rest of my life, trusting in You as Saviour and Lord. Amen.

## Week 8: Day 1 Living Through Reliance on the Holy Spirit

**Bible texts:**

*As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’* Matthew 3:16-17

*When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal those who were ill.* Luke 9:1-2

*Since we live by the Spirit let us keep in step with the Spirit.* Galatians 5:25

**Jesus’ reproducible model for ministry**

Early on we explored how Jesus was and is both fully God and fully human. His ministry was characterised by astonishing miracles of healing and deliverance from evil powers. As we consider this supernatural life, an important question arises about how Jesus undertook this ministry: did He achieve these miracles simply because He is God?

To answer this question we have to consider another feature of the gospel records: the fact that Jesus commissioned his first followers to do exactly the same miracles of healing and deliverance that He was doing. Clearly, his followers were ministering as humans – and so the fact that they accomplished the same miracles as Jesus reveals the reality that Jesus deliberately undertook His ministry as a human being empowered by the power of the Holy Spirit. He didn’t do miracles simply because He is God.

If his supernatural results were based on his identity as God it would hardly have been appropriate to commission His followers to do the same works of healing. It would be like an experienced astronaut asking some keen amateurs to reach the moon with a hot air balloon.

It is significant that Jesus never did any miracles until He was baptised by the Holy Spirit. Once He was empowered by the Spirit, He then started to achieve miracles. He chose this path so that He could be a model that we can all follow – human beings resourced by the Holy Spirit. That is why it was possible for His first apprentices to undertake works of healing – and that it is why we are able to take on this ministry today.

The life of faith in Jesus is an astonishing adventure involving the power of the Holy Spirit bringing change and transformation to a broken world. This adventure of transformation is the focus for this week.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you thought about Jesus’ model of doing miracles as one that we can follow before? How do you respond to this invitation?
2. Have you heard of any contemporary miracles of healing? You might like to explore a few stories of healing miracles on You Tube to recognise that Jesus is still healing people today.
3. What impact would more regular miracles have on the growth of God’s church in the 21st century?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the model you laid down for us – a human being empowered by the Holy Spirit. Thank You that your first followers were able to embrace this model for their own lives and that faithful followers have done so ever since. Please open my eyes to the transformation You want to bring to this broken world through the release of supernatural power. Amen.

## Week 8: Day 2 Serving through the Power of the Holy Spirit

**Bible texts:**

*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* Acts 1:8

*My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power,* 1 Corinthians 2:4

*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.* 1 Corinthians 4:20

*Be filled with the Holy Spirit.* Ephesians 5:18

**The Kingdom of God proclaimed and demonstrated**

Jesus’ teaching proclaimed the vision and agenda of God’s Kingdom; His miracles demonstrated that vision becoming reality.

We have already noted that there are only two kingdoms – the kingdom of the world characterised by brokenness and darkness and the kingdom of God characterised by wholeness and light. Our calling in Christ is to work together to see the light of God’s Kingdom extend its influence, replacing the darkness of the kingdom of the world. Since these kingdoms are supernatural kingdoms ruled over by spiritual powers, kingdom replacement requires supernatural, spiritual resources – the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is why Jesus announced to His disciples that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit – an event celebrated on Pentecost Sunday every year, fifty days after Easter. Ever since Pentecost (see Acts 2), the worldwide Church has had access to the power of the Holy Spirit to be able to fulfil the mission of Jesus – to bring the healing and deliverance of the Kingdom of God to our desperately needy world.

It is essential that people understand the good news of Jesus’ love and salvation. It is also vital that people recognise that living with Jesus at the centre of our lives brings with it the expectation that we will all be agents of kingdom change and transformation. We are not simply waiting in this life to be transported from Earth to Heaven when we die; we are partnering with Jesus now and throughout our lives to see Heaven transported to Earth.

The full and complete gospel is the good news of salvation coupled with the good news of Kingdom advancement through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Living with Jesus at the centre means living to bring change.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you recognised the importance of the gospel of the Kingdom alongside the gospel of salvation before? How do you respond to this invitation to be an active participant in kingdom exchange (the Kingdom of God replacing the kingdom of darkness)?
2. In what ways is it possible to make the mistake of seeing the Kingdom of God simply as a matter of good ideas rather than also being about a release of supernatural power for lasting change?
3. Where do you want to see supernatural power released to bring change around you right now?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You sent Your Holy Spirit on Your Church at Pentecost and You have been sending Your Holy Spirit ever since. Please fill me with your Holy Spirit today so that I have the power and resources to be able to serve You and extend Your kingdom in lasting ways. Please prompt me when opportunities arise to extend Your kingdom around me and give me the courage to use them well. Amen.

## Week 8: Day 3 Serving through the Authority of Jesus

**Bible text:**

*When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help.**‘Lord,’ he said, ‘my servant lies at home paralysed, suffering terribly.” Jesus said to him, ‘Shall I come and heal him?’ The centurion replied, ‘Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed.**For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go,” and he goes; and that one, “Come,” and he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this,” and he does it.’ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, ‘Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.* Matthew 8:5-10

**The Downward Flow of Spiritual Authority**

Jesus was amazed at the way the centurion understood how authority works and this gave the centurion the expectation of Jesus’ command making a difference to the suffering of his servant. As a professional commanding officer in the Roman army, the centurion recognised that when he gave orders they would be followed; those under his authority would not question whether or not they should follow through with the orders. His expectation was carried over into the world of spiritual transformation: if the Lord over human life gives a command it will be fulfilled.

Before His first followers were sent out to bring healing and deliverance, they were given Jesus’ authority. This same authority is given to us when we seek to fulfil the same commission of bringing healing and deliverance to people in need today.

We need both power (the might) and authority (the right) to bring the Kingdom of God into reality in situations of need.

An analogy might help here: an armed burglar has power but no authority to fulfil their will over an unarmed police officer. An unarmed police officer has authority but limited power to exert their will on an armed burglar. An armed police officer has both authority and power to exert their will on an armed burglar.

We need the power of the Holy Spirit and the authority of Jesus to be properly effective as we seek to advance God’s kingdom of healing and wholeness.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. In what ways is obedience to army commands important for military success? How does this relate to spiritual authority?
2. How can army officers lose their authority through disobedience to what their military superiors are asking of them? How does this relate to spiritual authority?
3. How does receiving the authority of Jesus give you extra courage to see God’s Kingdom become reality around you?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You give Your authority to Your followers as they seek to do Your will. Please help me to understand how to use this authority with confidence and love to bring effect transformation around me. Amen.

## Week 8: Day 4 Serving Jesus with Faith

**Bible texts:**

*Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.’* Matthew 17:20

*And without faith it is impossible to please God* Hebrews 11:6

**The Quality of Faith we need matters more than the Quantity**

The issue of faith is an important one when it comes to seeing miracles of transformation happen because by definition a miracle is a supernatural event that is beyond natural human capacity to achieve. If we make a particular transformation happen through human effort alone, we would never describe it as miraculous. Miracles require divine intervention and divine intervention requires us to have faith that God is going to intervene.

So it’s not difficult to see that faith in God’s power to change circumstances is clearly necessary if we want to see miracles take place.

When it comes to developing our faith for the miraculous it’s helpful to consider not so much the quantity of faith we have but the quality of faith we have. Jesus compared faith to mustard seeds – and seeds in Jesus’ teaching are symbols of truth. In other words, if we have a clear sense that God wants to bring a particular miracle of healing to a particular person at a particular time then this impression of truth from God is what Jesus would call a seed of faith. And when seeds are good quality, planted in the right soil with the right conditions, they will always develop.

So the quality of faith that is needed is the quality of hearing from God about what is needed in each situation. It’s not so much about having extensive faith as having perceptive faith that hears from God about what His intentions are, and then praying these intentions into reality.

In these terms, it is not so much about having great faith, as having faith in a Great God.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Hebrews 11:6 states that we cannot please God except through having faith. How does this impact the way we attempt to live a life that pleases God?
2. How do you respond to the idea of focusing on the quality rather than the quantity of faith you have?
3. As you listen to God in prayer, do you sense Him giving you an impression that could be a seed of faith for a supernatural change that He wants to bring to your life or to someone near you?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for encouraging faith among your first followers. Please encourage my faith as I listen to Your voice for direction about what You want to do in my life and in the lives of people around me. Help me to hear clearly and to have courage to respond to these revelations about Your will to impact the natural world with Your supernatural power. Amen.

## Week 8: Day 5 Living for Transformation

**Bible texts:**

*Of the increase of His rule and peace there will be no end.* Isaiah 9:7

*When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal those who were ill.* Luke 9:1-2

**An Ever-Advancing Kingdom of Transformation**

We have seen this week that living with Jesus as the centre means that we will increasingly want to be doing the same works of transformation that Jesus did and that His first followers did. We will want to hear His voice directing us to situations of need where He wants to make a difference.

As we respond to these promptings from Jesus, we will need the power of His Holy Spirit along with clear confidence in the authority of Jesus to bring about the necessary change. We will have to exercise faith that what Jesus has shown us as His will for a certain situation will become reality if we respond to this revelation with courageous obedience.

Let’s remember that a key part of our calling from Jesus is to seek His kingdom transformation of this broken world. We are called to be active partners in this process of seeing God’s Kingdom become an ever-increasing reality on Earth as it is already complete and perfect in Heaven.

We will face disappointments and discouragements along the way – but these experiences will be good opportunities to learn important lessons that will equip us for having another go with greater determination next time.

The Kingdom Transformation agenda is always going to be an exciting adventure for us to pursue. Let’s make sure that we don’t lose courage or momentum as we continue to press ahead with Jesus as our Lord and Leader. Let’s be assured that His kingdom is always going to be advancing and He longs to use us in that relentless advancement.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you respond to the promise that God’s kingdom will always be advancing, never retreating – even if there are setbacks along the way?
2. Have you faced a disappointment in relation to God’s kingdom expectations recently? What did you learn from this?
3. What kingdom transformation do you most want to see in your own context over the next year?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that Your kingdom is always advancing. Thank You that the eternal outcome of our struggles is secure even if we have to face temporary disappointments along the way. Please help me to stay courageous and determined to seek the advancement of Your Kingdom. Fill me with Your Spirit, give me a clear sense of Your authority and release faith to see You work in me and through me to bring Kingdom transformation. Amen.

## Week 9: Day 1 The Power of Discipline

**Bible texts:**

*One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,**I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.* Philippians 3:13-14

*No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer. Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor’s crown except by competing according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.* 2 Timothy 2:4-6

**Developing Holy Habits**

Paul was ruthlessly intentional about his own spiritual growth, comparing it with running a race towards a wonderful prize and he was determined to encourage younger leaders to be similarly intentional about their growth towards maturity.

Paul loved to use pictures and analogies in his letters to make his points clearer. As he writes to Timothy – one of these younger leaders – he uses the analogy of three areas of intense discipline and devotion to encourage Timothy to be devoted in his own progression towards spiritual maturity in Christ.

First of all, he reminds Timothy that soldiers have to be single-minded in their obedience to their commanding officer. Secondly, he speaks about the way athletes have to be attentive to the way that they run in order not to be disqualified for taking a short-cut in the race. Thirdly, he speaks about the way the hard work and effort of farmers leads to productivity which they can enjoy.

The soldier, athlete and farmer are singled out because they all require the application of discipline in order to fulfil their potential. The ill-disciplined soldier, indifferent athlete and apathetic farmer will all end up disappointed and fruitless due to their lack of focus and effort. Military success, gold medals and a wonderful harvest don’t just happen spontaneously; they all require a lot of effort.

Paul is impressing upon Timothy – and all future apprentices of Jesus – that we must be similarly focused if we are to grow in our spiritual lives. There are a series of disciplines that are necessary in our spiritual lives if we are to keep on growing and it is to these disciplines – all of them life-enhancing, none of them difficult – that we now turn our attention.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Who is your favourite athlete and why? Research their exercise and eating regime. Where do they show consistent discipline in order to be the best they can be?
2. Are you somebody who finds discipline easy or hard? If you find discipline easy, how have you seen discipline bring rewards in your life? If you find discipline hard, reflect on why this is the case. Think about times when you have been able to be disciplined and how this made an impact on your life.
3. Paul talks about not being distracted by what lies behind us but pressing on towards the finishing line of being united with Christ in heaven on the other side of death. How does this prospect lying ahead help fuel your desire to be disciplined in the area of spiritual growth?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You demonstrated discipline in your spiritual life and You encouraged your first followers to follow your example. Please help me to develop discipline in my spiritual life so that I can make sure that I continue to grow in my spiritual maturity day by day, week by week, year by year. Amen.

## Week 9: Day 2 Worship is our First Discipline

**Bible texts:**

*Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.* Psalm 96:1-2

*The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’* Revelation 5:8-10

**Joining in the Continuous Worship of Heaven**

We considered in Week 4 that our first priority is to worship God; Jesus made clear that this is the first and greatest commandment. And so, this is always going to be our first discipline.

The worship of heaven never stops we read in Revelation Chapter 4 verse 8:

*Day and night, they never stop saying: ‘“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,” who was, and is, and is to come.’*

It is an amazing observation that our worship joins in with the continuous worship of heaven that never ceases.

The continuity of worship in heaven also reminds us that there should be continuity in our worship throughout our lives; the perspective of the New Testament is that worship should be an offering of our whole lives to Jesus. Worship is therefore a lifestyle of continuous honour and gratitude to God for all that He is and all that He gives us – including life itself.

For example, we can begin the day with worship through having an appropriate declaration of praise as we get out of bed. Some people use these words: *Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning is now and shall be forever. Amen.*

We can praise God during all our daily journeys, whatever our mode of transport.

We can praise God through our working day by setting alarms at appropriate times to stop and pray a prayer of thanksgiving, deliberately choosing to give thanks, even if events are proving challenging.

We can praise God at all our meals by saying grace before we eat.

And at the end of our daily sequence of praise, we can praise God when we finally put the light out at night with words like these: *Thank You Lord that even though the physical light of this room is about to end, the spiritual light of Your Presence shines over me as I sleep.*

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you considered the continuous worship of heaven before? How does this change your perspective about our own worship joining in with what is already happening in heaven?
2. Experiment with the idea of continuous worship by seeing if you can respond to every challenge with an attitude of gratitude. It’s a hard habit to develop – but so worth it. Chart your progress each day and through the week.
3. Psalm 96 speaks about a new song. Have a search on You Tube for a new worship song that can inspire and shape your worship today.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, You are always worthy of my worship for You never change. Thank You that the praise and adoration of heaven never cease day and night. Please help me to be able to embrace a continuous lifestyle of worship; help me to be thankful in every situation for Your continuous redeeming love and companionship in the all the trials and tribulations of this life. No matter how tough life has become, help me to be able to say: “Thank You”. Amen.

## Week 9: Day 3 Entering into God’s Presence through Worship

**Bible texts:**

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.* Psalm 100:4

*Surely the righteous will praise your name, and the upright will live in your presence.* Psalm 140:13

**Seeking Intimacy with the Lord**

Before King Solomon built the original Temple, the Jewish people had a special construction (the Tabernacle) for the worship of God which was laid out as a sequence of holy spaces, the holiness of which grew ever more intense the further in you went. The most holy of these spaces could only be accessed once a year, and then, only by the High Priest – the most senior of the Jewish priests.

Around the outside was a perimeter fence with an entry gate, through which you entered the outer courts. This is why there is encouragement to the worshipper to enter through gates in order to come into God’s courts in Psalm 100 verse 4. This symbolic progression into God’s courts provides us with an important way of understanding the implications of focused times of sung worship: we are making a spiritual journey into the holiness of God’s Presence.

We start this important journey with an attitude and declaration of thanks and praise, making the deliberate decision to use the access password “Thank You” – even if this requires a deliberate choice in difficult circumstances.

We can then continue on this journey by moving on to more reflective songs that express our intimate connection with God as we become more aware of His Presence around us.

One of the most frequently used words for worship in the New Testament is the Greek word “proskyneo” which means to draw close to someone in order to kiss them. This wonderfully describes the intention of longer periods of sung worship: moving from shouting loud acclamations outside the palace, then entering the palace with more reflective worship before we finally enter into the throne room in order to bow down before the King of kings and kiss His hand as an act of total reverence.

There are many ways to worship Jesus – from meditation on a few words from scripture to enjoying a series of worship songs that lead us into the intimacy of His Holy Presence. The ultimate aim of our worship is to draw close to God and to become aware of His Presence around us. God longs for intimate connections with us just as a loving father longs for intimate connection with his children.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you thought about worship as a journey into a royal palace before? How does this help you reflect on the ultimate purpose of our worship – entering into God’s presence to enjoy a deeper connection with Him.
2. How does the idea of progressing from loud acclamations of honour in the street outside the palace to quiet expressions of devotion face to face help our understanding of what longer times of sung worship are all about?
3. Worship can range from a few words of spoken praise to much longer times of enjoying intimacy in God’s Presence. There are lots of resources for “soaking” in God’s Presence on You Tube. Set aside a longer time sometime today to use one of these resources and enjoy soaking in God’s Presence (search for “soaking worship” on You Tube).

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, Thank You that through the sacrifice of Jesus the way is open for us to enter into Your Presence and enjoy intimacy with You. Help me to make this journey in worship regularly and to enjoy rich times in Your Presence. Amen.

## Week 9: Day 4 Sacrificial Worship

**Bible texts:**

*I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.’* 2 Samuel 24:24

*When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.* Luke 7: 36-38

**Offering worship that costs us something**

The verse from 1 Samuel was spoken by King David: David refused to worship the Lord with something that had no cost attached to it. Such was his sense of indebted gratitude that he could not offer worship expressing the ultimate worthiness of God that was personally worthless.

A similar heart posture of indebted gratitude was shown by the woman in the second bible passage above: she was prepared to pay whatever price necessary to demonstrate her deep gratitude to Jesus for His loving acceptance and forgiveness. Women would never usually be allowed to touch a man as she does in public – especially a Jewish rabbi like Jesus. She is prepared to ignore a social taboo and be shamed and ridiculed by the other men present in order to express her heart of thanks to Jesus. She is prepared to wash Jesus’ feet with her own tears of thanksgiving, then wipe dirt and sweat off Jesus’ feet with her own hair and finally anoint his feet with expensive perfume. She is prepared to pay a financial cost (the perfume), a personal cost (bowing down and dirtying her hair) and an emotional cost (shame in the eyes of others) in expressing her heartfelt devotion to Jesus. Nothing else mattered more than offering her worship to Jesus.

We saw yesterday that New Testament worship often refers to drawing close to kiss the focus of our worship. The description of this woman’s worship is therefore one of the most profound passages about worship in the whole of the bible and demonstrates the essential ingredient of costliness in worship.

David and the woman at the dinner party are amazing role models for us in our worship. In the light of their examples, are we content to offer God worship that costs us nothing?

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What strikes you most about the actions of the woman at the dinner party?
2. Does the preservation of personal dignity and the fear of what others may think of you hold you back in the offer of your worship in any way?
3. What personal sacrifice do you feel prompted to offer Jesus in worship this week?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You have given Your all to save me from my sins, to rescue me from the power of evil and to give me eternal life. I owe You everything. Help me to be ready to offer costly worship to You and to enjoy the experience without any regrets. Amen.

## Week 9: Day 5 Creative Worship

**Bible text:**

*For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.* Romans 1:20

**Discovering New Ways to Worship God**

We have seen this week that worship is our first priority, that it should cost us something, that it involves joining in with the continuous worship of heaven and that it involves making a journey into the intimacy of God’s Presence. Today we consider how worship can be fuelled by creativity and imagination.

We are created in the image of a Creative God to be creative. Monotonous worship is a contradiction in terms: we cannot allow our worship to become boring and repetitive and predictable. If we are truly to glorify the greatness of God - including His infinite creativity – then we need to make sure that our pattern of worship includes scope for exploration of new, fresh, different ways to worship God.

This is not to say that there is not a place for familiar patterns of worship that we find meaningful and inspiring – for example, powerful, biblically based words that provide a structure for our worship each day. But alongside the familiar we also need to find times for experimentation, trying out new worship ideas, exchanging worship innovations.

For example, what about using your five senses more? What about lighting a fragrant candle for your personal time with God each day? What about holding a wooden cross in your hand as you pray? What about using an inspiring video on You Tube? What about savouring your favourite snack food as part of your worship time?

What about taking time to go for a worship-walk in the countryside and seeing how many of your senses you can use in worship throughout your walk? The verse above reminds us that God’s greatness is demonstrated abundantly in creation.

What about using worship songs from other nations around the world on You Tube – lots of them have subtitled translations so you can fully understand the songs’ meaning.

What about including movement in your worship – kneeling or lying down or dancing?

What about drawing or painting or sculpting something with plastercine as you worship?

What about writing your own psalm of praise or composing a new song of worship?

Many of us may feel slightly awkward when we first try something new and so all of this can be done alone and in private to start with. Having said that, taking on board yesterday’s reflection on the cost of worship, a feeling of slight awkwardness is a worthy price to pay as we respond to the ultimate worthiness of God.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you regularly include creativity in your worship? If not, what stops you?
2. How would you like to include creativity in your worship over the weekend?
3. How about planning some creative new ways to worship each day next week?

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, Thank You that You have created me in Your image to be creative. Please help me to get over my fear of what others may think and to escape from the lie that I am not a creative person so that I can be more creative in my worship. Please help me come up with creative ways to worship You as I respond to Your infinite creativity. Amen.

## Week 10: Day 1 Reading God’s Word – the Bible

**Bible texts:**

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.* 2 Timothy 3:16 *The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures for ever.’* Isaiah 40:8

**The Power of God’s Word**

The Bible is the reliable, trustworthy, authoritative, useful, relevant Word of God passed down faithfully from one generation to the next.

Jesus is our model as someone who meditated upon scripture and who was able to apply scripture to help Him live a life of faith.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days, He was able to draw upon bible verses that He had memorised to help Him through specific challenges that He faced. That experience showed that Jesus regarded the Bible as spiritual food that He used each day to stay well-nourished.

If we only have one meal a week, we will be seriously malnourished. Similarly, if we rely upon our visit to a church gathering each week for our bible input, we will be spiritually malnourished.

Our first discipline explored last week was worship; our second is reading the Bible.

The bible resources available for us have never been wider or deeper than they are right now through the internet. Bible apps are freely downloadable and so the Bible can be available to us 24/7 on our mobile phones.

One of the best is You Version and you can download onto your phone your preferred translation(s) –recommendations of contemporary and inspiring English would be:

The New International Version UK; The Passion Translation; The Message Translation.

You Version also includes daily reading plans of different durations so you know what to read each day. There are reading plans on many topics to suit your current needs. If you select the Plans tab at the bottom of your screen, you can start browsing for something suitable.

And remember that quality is better than quantity. Better to read and apply a single verse for the day than attempt to read 10 chapters and fail to ingest any of the wisdom you encounter there.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you respond to the idea of the bible as spiritual food for each day? How does this help us see the need to reach the bible every day?
2. Have you got a good contemporary hard copy translation of the bible or have you downloaded a good bible app like You Version? If not, take steps to get one as soon as possible. How are you going to read it each day? Make a plan.
3. As well as reading the bible verses assigned for each day of this journal, have you considered selecting a bible reading plan for using at lunch time or in the evening or last thing at night?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your model of engaging with scripture every day and being able to apply scripture to live effectively day by day. Help me to be motivated to read the bible every day, to understand its content clearly and to apply its wisdom to my life persistently, day by day. Amen.

## Week 10: Day 2 Reading the Bible contemplatively

**Bible texts:**

*Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.* Joshua 1:8

*My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.* Psalm 119:148

*For the word of God is alive and active* Hebrews 4:12

**Meditating on scripture**

There are many different ways to read the Bible. One of these is contemplative reading; in other words, meditating on a short passage and exploring it reflectively in order to grasp its deeper meanings and implications for us at the present time.

A practical example is the best way to explore this kind of reading.

Let’s consider the opening of Psalm 23: *The****Lord****is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.*

As you meditate on this passage, you could consider the way in which Jesus is the Good Shepherd who shows compassion for His sheep and provides for their needs. Meditate on the way that Jesus has provided for your needs – spiritual, relational, emotional, physical…

British shepherds guide sheep with the help of sheep-dogs from the back; on the other hand, Middle-Eastern shepherds (Jesus’ context during His ministry) lead their sheep from the front. Meditate on the way Jesus has led you recently; meditate about how He wants you to lie down in green pastures, enjoying quiet waters nearby so that you can be deeply refreshed.

You might want to find the sound of quiet waters on You Tube to help you imagine the scene.

As you do this exercise you might want to reflect on a series of imaginative questions:

Are you reluctant to follow Jesus to this green pasture or do you go willingly? What keeps you back? What do those feelings tell you about your spiritual responsiveness right now? What lies at the root of those feelings? What do you sense Jesus saying to you about these feelings?

Is your heart refreshed right now? Are you worried or anxious or troubled? What is Jesus saying to you about these concerns?

If time permits you could move on to the next verses of Psalm 23 – or you could carry on being refreshed in the contemplative space in which you find yourself. There is no need to move on if you are enjoying being where you are.

The wonderful truth is that God’s Word is alive and active today just as much as it was the day it was written, thousands of years ago. This flows from the fact that God inspired its writing; the Holy Spirit inspired human writers to record specific words at specific times knowing that they would be inspiring and relevant forever.

Through a life-time of meditation on scripture we can see how meaningful and significant the bible can be throughout the whole of our lives.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. If you have not meditated on bible passages before and you did the imaginative exercise outlined today how did you find the experience?
2. What did you find helpful? What did you find hard? How could the exercise be altered to remove any hindrances?
3. Continue your meditation on Psalm 23 or another passage as you develop this practice.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You meditated on scripture throughout Your life – for we see You being able to bring to mind key bible texts at key times to bring light into situations of challenge. Help me to develop this way of reading the bible so that I can enjoy meditating on scripture and find inspiration through this discipline. Amen.

## Week 10: Day 3 Studying the Bible

**Bible texts:**

*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.* Luke 24:27

*Paul’s letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.* 2 Peter 3:16

**Accessing Resources to Understand Scripture**

Yesterday we considered the contemplative reading of the bible: allowing our imaginations to be led by the Holy Spirit as we meditate on a short passage of scripture. Descriptive, poetic passages like Psalm 23 lend themselves to this kind of bible reading.

A key point to remember is that the bible is made up of 66 books which can be categorised into different styles or genres. There are poetic books – like the psalms – and historical books – like Joshua; there are prophetic books – like Jeremiah – and there are books containing leadership advice like Titus.

While some of these writings can be read imaginatively, many of them require careful study. There is a lifetime of exploration in these 66 books as we seek to understand their meaning and significance more fully. Even the apostle Peter found some of Paul’s letters hard to grasp – so we should not be surprised if we find ourselves finding some bible passages difficult to understand at first.

Thankfully help is at hand. There are lots of great and accessible books written about the books of the Bible called “commentaries” which can assist us in understanding the meaning of scripture more fully. A helpful way of reading a book of the Bible is to get hold of one of these bible commentaries and then to read the bible passage along with the accessible explanation about the bible text in the commentary.

There are several series available that are very accessible including the Bible Speaks Today series and the New Testament for Everyone series.

In addition, try out the Bible Project You Tube introductions before you start each book – 6-8 minutes or so of fascinating background to the book, its meaning and significance.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What questions do you have about the books of the bible that need answering?
2. Have you ever used a bible commentary? If not, is this something you might like to use in the future?
3. Which books of the bible would you most be interested in reading over the next year?

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, Thank You for inspiring the writers of the bible. Please inspire me to read the bible and direct me to the right resources so that I can understand its meaning more clearly, recognise its implications more deeply and apply its instruction more fully, day by day. Amen.

## Week 10: Day 4 Getting Going with Journaling

**Bible text:**

*Then the Lord replied: ‘Write down the revelation…’* Habakkuk 2:2

**Making Notes with a Purpose**

The third discipline we are going to considering is journaling: making notes that help you grow as a follower of Jesus.

What kind of notes might you want to make?

You might want to write out inspiring bible verses that you could memorise to assist your spiritual growth.

We have talked about using commentaries to explore the bible’s meaning in more depth and so you might want to record what you are learning as you go along.

Even after reading commentaries, there may will be questions that remain unanswered or points that need further clarification so you might want to record these questions for later consideration as well.

As you read the bible, you may well experience the Holy Spirit speaking specific truths to you from what you are reading. It is a good idea to write this revelation down in your journal.

As you read bible texts, there is a need to think about ways of applying the text in your life in practical ways and so you could write down what your next steps will be; then you will be able to remind yourself what steps you have set yourself and when you are going to fulfil them.

And as you turn your bible reading into prayers, you might want to write down your prayers and then be able to add answers to these prayers when they take place.

If you are artistically inclined, your time with God each day might prompt you to draw a diagram or picture to enrich your spiritual journey.

You might also want to take notes in your journal when you attend church meetings, workshops or conferences.

For all these reasons, a spiritual journal is a great resource to maintain day by day.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you already started a spiritual journal? If not, is this something you think you could start keeping?
2. Most people use both a paper journal and a digital journal. Both have advantages and disadvantages – so a combination of the two is good. The paper journal allows you to draw and sketch more easily and for many people simply feels good to keep going in a digital age. On the other hand, a growing digital journal of hundreds - eventually thousands - of pages can be searched easily to find specific entries and references from past years of note-taking. Which type do you think will be most advantageous for your own preferences?
3. If you haven’t already started, take steps to start your digital journal on your PC or order/buy an appropriate paper journal so you can get going with this as soon as possible.

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, You have inspired people to keep spiritual journals for thousands of years. Please inspire me to get going with this and to keep going with this so that I can chart and encourage my spiritual growth through writing down what You are showing me and what I desire to learn in the future. Amen.

## Week 10: Day 5 Keeping Going with Your Journaling

**Bible text:**
*Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.* Revelation 1:19

**Practical considerations for the long haul**

Journaling is a really important discipline to accelerate your spiritual growth and so it is important to keep going with this habit. A few practical considerations might be helpful at this point.

The great freedom of a spiritual journal is that you write whatever you want; it is your notebook for your notes and comments, questions and doodles. It is entirely your own and does not need to be shared with anyone – unless you want to do so. You can write down confidential notes if you want. Your notes can be angry, whimsical, poetic, imaginative, creative, ambitious, disappointed, inspired – whatever happens to be the mood of the moment.

To make it easier to access and search, you might want to make sure that you add key words to each entry in your digital journal. For example, if you want to be able to search promises you have noted down, make sure that the word “promise” is added to that section. If you want to re-visit prayers about a particular situation or person make sure that you add the name of that person or situation in your entry.

Some people find it useful to create a page number index on their PC for each of their paper journals so that they can search those more easily on their PC in the future. It doesn’t take long when you finish a journal to create an index on your PC with page titles. Anything worth writing down is worth revisiting later on – and after ten years of journal writing you will probably have at least ten paper journals to search through. As every decade goes by, you will probably have another ten to add to the pile.

Further down the spiritual road, it will be insightful to revisit your paper journals or digital journal to remind you of the spiritual journey that you have taken and to remember the lessons that you have been learning along the way.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you respond to the idea of making your journal a space for whatever you want to write – without the need to conform to anyone else’s expectations?
2. How do you think that revisiting your journal entries will be helpful in years to come?
3. Do you have a space allotted for your paper journals as they accumulate? This might not be a problem now, but once you have at least 10 or 20 then a bit of forethought about this will be helpful.

**Prayer:**

Dear Holy Spirit, Thank You for the opportunities of my journals – digital and paper. Give me confidence to write and record freely and accurately, creatively and responsibly. Give me the discipline to make future searches of my journals possible in years to come. And please make my journal-writing fun and fulfilling. Amen.

## Week 11: Day 1 Talking with God in Prayer

**Bible texts:**

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.* John 14:27

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* Philippians 4:6-7

**Prayer as a Lifestyle of Rapid Responses to Anxiety**

The first habit is worship; the second is bible reading; the third is journaling; the fourth is prayer. We noted earlier that prayer is a conversation with God – and since God is always with us, we can always pray. Very often this will mean silent prayer in our heads rather than out loud.

Paul says in this passage that we should not remain in a state of anxiety but we should pray in every situation; if we have any concerns at all, we should pray. Too often prayer becomes a last resort when God wants it to be a first resort. Parents never want their children to be kept in a place of angst without talking; parents long for their worried children to share their concerns and to talk the situation through so that they can come to a place of peace. God wants the same for us as we take time to pray.

Paul also says that we should pray with thanksgiving. Thanking God is always a good place to start. In every situation, there will always be something to give thanks for – even if it is God’s greatness and goodness, His power and love, His authority and compassion.

The promise Paul offers us is to regain a sense of peace replacing anxiety, calm replacing stress. Paul says that this peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. So this peace is more than a temporary lull in worry; this God-given peace is meant to keep us safe from anxiety attacks. This peace is meant to be a lasting state of mind in which we are able to be confident that Jesus is Lord over the situation in hand.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Is prayer a first resort or a last resort for you in situations of crisis?
2. How do you respond to the idea of prayer as a continual conversation with God through the day?
3. Paul encourages us to always pray with thanksgiving. Is this something that you practise when you pray?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You promise us Your lasting, transforming peace in the midst of stress and anxiety. Please help me to make conversation with You a first resort not a last resort. Help me to hear Your voice of reassurance in the midst of my distress and to cherish the peace that You want to bring me day by day. Amen.

## Week 11: Day 2 Different Kinds of Prayer

**Bible texts:**

*Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.* Hebrews 7:25

*I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour.* 1 Timothy 2:1-3

**A Diverse Conversation with God**

We have compared prayer with conversation and that implies that there are different kinds of prayer just as there are different kinds of conversation. Sometimes conversations will involve lots of words including requests, questions, clarifications, observations, declarations. Other conversations will be much quieter and slower – for example, when two people take a walk together and are simply enjoying being together in companionship. Lots of words are not necessary.

This contrast is true of prayer times too. Paul instructs Timothy in the verses above to be active in intercessory prayer – when we come before God to ask for His intervention in situations around the world. Paul was very enthusiastic about this kind of prayer as he regularly mentions in his letters how he loves spending time praying for people. We will all have different groups of people that we would like to pray for and many people find it helpful to have a schedule of prayer topics through the week.

For example, on Monday you could pray for your work colleagues; on Tuesday you could pray for your not-yet Christian friends to find faith; on Wednesday you could pray for your Christian friends; on Thursday you could pray for leaders around the world; on Friday you could pray for your family; on Saturday you could pray for different countries in need of peace.

A second type of prayer is contemplative prayer: being still in God’s presence and listening to His voice. This is similar to the meditative reading of a bible passage that we explored last week and can flow out of any suitable bible reading that we do. After you finish your meditative prayer, you can record what you hear God say in your journal.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you have a schedule of intercessory prayer topics through the week? If not, what kind of list would work for you?
2. Paul specifically states that we should pray for leaders and those in authority. What kinds of prayer can we offer for leaders?
3. Do you have space in your day for meditative prayer? Is this something you can give more time to enjoy?

**Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You intercede for us in heaven. Please inspire my intercessions day by day so that I can pray with faith and confidence. Help me to develop variety in my prayer times so that I can also enjoy times of quiet meditation in Your Presence, listening to Your voice of affirmation and encouragement. Amen.

## Week 11: Day 3 Perseverance in Prayer

**Bible texts:**

*‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: because you have prayed to me…this is the word the Lord has spoken…* Isaiah 37:21

*Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.* Luke 18:1

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.* Matthew 7:7-8

*Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people.* Revelation 5:8

**Keep on Praying**

God chooses to work through human prayers; faith-filled prayers make a difference to what happens in this world. The verse from Revelation above shows that our prayers are collected in heaven; none of them is ignored.

If Jesus prayed regularly and faithfully – then so should we. As you read through the bible, make a note of how and when people have prayed and how these prayers are answered. Answered prayer makes a fascinating bible study focus.

Everything Jesus says is important but the truths that He repeats are especially important. In Matthew 7:7-8 we see Jesus say the same thing six times – ask God and you will receive. We can be confident in stating that this truth is something we need to take to heart. The truth in question is all about persevering in our spiritual lives – and especially in the area of prayer.

Jesus told two parables on this very topic demonstrating that Jesus knew that the temptation to give up praying for something is very strong.

There are two ways in which we can stop praying: either we give up praying for something specific or we just give up praying altogether.

God always answers our prayers – just not in the way that we might imagine would be the case or in the timescale that we might want. We live in an instantaneous culture wanting everything now. God’s timing is often very different because He sees the complex interaction of many lives and situations from a heavenly perspective and His understanding is way beyond ours in depth and breadth. There will often be delays in the answers to our prayers but this is no reason to give up praying. We need to encourage each other to keep going.

Friends of ours were called by God to come to Wales to pray for a fresh revival – an outpouring of God’s Spirit that brings accelerated growth to God’s church. The last revival in Wales was in 1904 when 100,000 people gave their lives to Jesus in the space of a year. These friends have been praying every day for a new revival in Wales since 2006. They have listened to Jesus’ teaching about persevering in prayer and they are able to say with confidence after every day of faithful prayer they are one day closer to seeing their prayers answered.

Remind yourself of this often: every day, you are one day closer to the fulfilment of your longings that you bring to God in prayer.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you faced the temptation of not bothering to pray? How have you dealt with this temptation?
2. When have you been tempted to give up praying for something specific? Do you sense a call to start praying for this again?
3. Make a note in your journal of some examples of answered prayer – either in your own experience or from the bible (you can search online to find some good examples).

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for Your example of persistent prayer and for all Your encouragement to keep going with prayer even when the answer is delayed. Please inspire me to be persistent in prayer and to have fresh faith to believe that You hear and use my prayers. Amen.

## Week 11: Day 4 Connecting with Church: Small Group

**Bible texts:**

*For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.* Matthew 18:20

*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker – also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier – and to the church that meets in your home* Philemon 1-2

**Commitment to a midweek group**

The fifth habit is all about our church commitment. We explored belonging to a local church earlier when we were thinking about living with Jesus as the hub of our lives. Spokes 7 and 8 were about church – small group church and large group church. If we are to grow spiritually, we need to belong to a church. Church is a relational community of faith and we all need significant relationships to flourish.

The verses from Philemon above refer to a “house church” – a church group in someone’s home. What are the advantages of belonging to this kind of small group?

Firstly, you can get to know people better and be known better. You can sit down – hopefully over a small group meal – and enjoy conversation with people. You can get to know people’s aspirations and challenges, their work commitments and their recreational interests. You can build deep friendships that will last a lifetime – even if you move to another area later on.

Secondly, you can find a safe place to develop your gifts and skills for serving (more on this next week). It can be daunting to step out in a large gathering on a Sunday; much easier to step out in a small gathering of people you know during the week.

Thirdly, there will be more scope for sharing your needs and being encouraged and prayed for in a small group. This can happen on a Sunday of course – but this will be a natural and expected part of your small group. And having being prayed for, people can then follow-up with you how a situation has improved at the next meeting.

Fourthly, a small group is more flexible about when and where and how it meets. Large groups take a lot more organisation; small groups can alter plans quickly.

Small groups can take a variety of shapes. One effective style of group is a missional community – a group of people committed to meeting each week for a meal and a discussion in someone’s home to which interested, spiritually curious friends can be invited at any point to join in. It is accessible, friendly, informal, practical and a great way of integrating guests into the life of a growing church.

Another type of small group is sometimes called a DNA group, standing for Discover; Nurture; Apply. In other words, a group of 3 to 5 people of the same gender can meet maybe fortnightly to discover truth by reading the bible, nurture faith by asking each other how we are doing in our walk with Jesus day by day (frank honesty required here), and apply key next steps that will allow us to grow spiritually.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you belong to a small group midweek? What do you enjoy about this group? Are there areas for improvement? How could you suggest to the leaders that your group addresses these areas?
2. Do you belong to a DNA group? Is this something you would like to join? What practical steps do you need to take to make this a reality?
3. Jesus said that where two or three meet together as His followers, He is always present with them. How does this change our perspective about small group meetings – whether with 2 people or 20?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for promising to be with us when we meet together in Your name. Please help me to understand the importance of small group meetings and to be faithful in my attendance. Help me to be ready to contribute as well as to receive; to be honest and open about my needs and to encourage others who attend. Help me to work for the growth in depth and breadth of my small group week by week. Amen.

## Week 11: Day 5 Connecting with Church: Large Group

**Bible texts:**

*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hadeswill not overcome it.* Matthew 16:18

*The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.*Acts 15:12

**An Assembly of Small Groups**

The largest churches in the world grow most effectively through small groups. Some of these churches can have a membership of hundreds of thousands of people – but these members all meet weekly in small groups of 10-15. The combination of the small group for friendship and accountability with the large group for collective worship and teaching is very powerful. The most effective churches embrace both types of gathering.

The fifth habit of connecting with church needs to be expressed in both settings – attending a small group and attending a large assembly of small groups on a Sunday.

The advantages of the larger gathering include the encouragement of sung worship as a large group. It is inspiring and uplifting to join with lots of other voices in expressing our praise to God. We are immediately reminded that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves, and bigger than our small group too, important though that is.

Secondly, there is an advantage in everyone being taught from God’s Word at the same time in the same place to foster a clear sense of unity in the one church. We are addressing the same needs; we are clarifying a common vision; we are fuelling an integrated mission; we are developing a shared momentum.

Thirdly, the sharing of testimonies about what God has done among us (see the verse above) is also a key way of being kept aware of what is happening across the whole church rather than simply in our small group.

Fourthly, the large gathering on a Sunday morning can provide a great opportunity for development of certain gifts and skills. The midweek small group is unlikely to seek the services of a worship band of 8+ people – but this is a vital ministry on Sunday mornings. These musicians cannot grow their worship skills as a band if there is no larger meeting.

Fifthly, the large group provides a learning environment for children and young people. As churches grow in number, attracting more families, there is the chance for a larger number of children and young people to be able to meet together for age-appropriate activities.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you attend your church on a Sunday morning each week? If not, what stands in the way of this commitment?
2. What do you enjoy about Sunday church? Have you encouraged church leaders by telling them about these positive features?
3. Are there areas for improvement you could discuss with the church leaders?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You promise to keep building Your church worldwide. Please help me to be faithful to my local church, to attend each week, to apply what I learn, and to encourage the leaders to keep going week by week. Amen.

## Week 12: Day 1 Serving at Church with our Gifts and Talents

**Bible texts:**

*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve…* Mark 10:45

*Serve one another humbly in love.* Galatians 5:13

**Having a Heart to Serve**

The sixth habit of growing apprentices of Jesus is that of serving. Whereas the first apprentices had a tendency to jostle for position as the most important members of Jesus’ team, Jesus made clear He had come to serve others and that anyone who follows Jesus will do the same. We are not to think about how we can be served by others but about how we can serve.

This is a really important area and we will address the topic more fully later on.

There are two basic contexts for our serving: at church and outside of church. We will address church today and outside of church tomorrow.

It is such a huge encouragement to church leaders when church members have a heart for serving, rolling up their sleeves and getting involved in whatever area needs help. Perhaps there is a need for people to meet and greet at the door; perhaps there is a need for people to serve refreshments before the service; maybe there is a need for someone to project the songs for worship; maybe someone needs to move furniture; maybe some publicity leaflets need distributing in the local area; maybe your small group needs someone to bring some food or to clear-up dirty dishes. Servant-hearted people don’t mind too much what they do – as long as they are helping out.

Serving at church connects us with other people on the same team, connects us with the people we are serving and connects us with the heart of Jesus, the Servant of all. Serving is therefore a very effective way to grow spiritually.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Which servants at church have most inspired you and why?
2. Are you someone who naturally enjoys serving or is this going to be a hard discipline to learn?
3. Where do you think you would most enjoy serving at church?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You came to be the servant of all. Please help me to have the heart of a servant, following in Your steps. Help me to see what needs to be done and to have the readiness to undertake this service with willingness and diligence. Amen.

## Week 12: Day 2 Serving outside Church

**Bible texts:**

*If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.* Matthew 5:41

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* Philippians 2:3-4

**Extending God’s kingdom through service**

Service is a powerful way of giving to your church family. It is also a powerful way of extending God’s kingdom through your work outside of church, paid or voluntary.

The way of the kingdom of the world is the way of selfishness, expecting others to meet our needs quickly and comprehensively. To serve selflessly and generously speaks volumes in contrast to this prevailing attitude.

We can excel in the grace of serving at work in all sorts of ways – perhaps by making a work mate a cup of tea when they are severely stressed; or by offering to take on some extra work to relieve an overly stretched colleague; or by baking a cake unexpectedly for someone the Holy Spirit prompts you to bless; or by sending an encouraging e-mail to someone you think is being overlooked in their hard work recently.

There are a 101 ways to go the extra mile that Jesus speaks of. All of these ways will bring blessing to people and express a different way of living that is not about what we can take from others, but what we can give to others.

Serving is infectious too; the more you serve at work, the more others will be inclined to walk in time with a different drum beat – the life-giving drum beat of grace and generosity rather than the life-sapping drum beat of harshness and stinginess.

All of these efforts will point people towards the beauty and attractiveness of the Kingdom of God.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. When has someone’s act of service at work meant a lot to you?
2. Are there people you sense could do with encouragement at work right now?
3. What acts of service could you undertake to bring blessing to these people over the next few weeks?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You encourage us to live a life of service where ever we are. Please inspire me to think about ways I can serve the people around me where I work and live. Help me to undertake acts of service generously without looking for something in return. Help me to spread the good news of the Kingdom of God day by day through my acts of service. Amen.

## Week 12: Day 3 Meeting with a Mentor

**Bible texts:**

*After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves* Matthew 17:1

*When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark* Acts 12:25

*Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care.*1 Timothy 6:20

**Finding a Spiritual Coach**

When athletes want to develop their performance, they need a personal coach. When musicians want to develop their talents, they need a personal teacher. When leaders want to hone their skills, they often seek a life coach.

The same is true in the growth to spiritual maturity. Jesus had twelve apprentices but gave particular time and attention to the development of Peter, James and John. Paul and Barnabus mentored John Mark. Paul mentored Timothy.

The seventh and final habit of growing apprentices of Jesus is seeking out a spiritual mentor.

How might we choose this person?

They need to be more spiritually mature and experienced than us – though not necessarily older. If we come to faith in Jesus in our 60’s or 70’s we might well be able to meet with a younger mentor. Since we will be meeting with them on a one-to-one basis, they should be the same gender as us. They need to be someone we admire and respect since we will be seeking their counsel. They need to be someone who has time to give to us for at least one hour a month.

We also need to be clear about what area of our spiritual lives we want help with: do we need help with bible reading or prayer or journaling or serving or leading or turning away from some destructive habit? Once you have clarity on all these different factors we can then approach someone to see if they will be able to mentor us. Sometimes such people may come to us and offer help; more often, we need to approach them. They can easily say if they have time or not – but a good principle in life is not to say people’s no for them. And as you approach people, make sure that time boundaries are clear. Busy people are happy to help in this way – but they need to know that it is for an hour a month and not five hours a week. And they need to know for how long the mentoring will last: 6 months; a year? More? This can always be assessed as time goes on – but for some mentors this will be important.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you ever thought about getting a spiritual mentor? In which areas of your life do you need the help of someone wiser and more experienced?
2. Do you have any ideas about who this person might be? Construct a short-list.
3. How often would you like to meet? Where? When? What would your goals for your meetings be over the next 6 months?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the way you mentored Peter, James and John. Thank You for the way you have inspired mentoring relationships ever since. Please help me to consider where I need mentoring and who might be able to mentor me. Help me to focus how I need to grow over the next 6 months. Amen.

## Week 12: Day 4 Making the Most of your Mentor

**Bible texts:**

*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.* Philippians 4:8-9

**Applying what you are learning**

It is worth considering a few practical points in relation to being mentored.

Firstly, we noted yesterday that we need to be clear about what we are seeking to learn from each session. What are the learning objectives for this meeting? Mentoring should be more focused than simply being a cosy chat or a comfortable commendation of what you already find easy and straightforward.

Secondly, we need to take careful notes either during the meeting or immediately afterwards about what we have learned. All of us are leaky vessels and we have a tendency to forget what we hear after a few days of being bombarded with further stimulation from many different sources around us. So, it is a good idea to write down in your journal what you have learned from your mentor and what the next steps need to be.

Thirdly, we need to be intentional about applying what we are learning. Facts about spiritual maturity are futile if they don’t make a difference to our spiritual lives. We need to have a clear action plan about putting into practice the next steps we have clarified.

Fourthly, we need to be ready to be honest with our mentors about what has worked and what has not when we next meet. Gaps between intentions and reality need to be addressed. Were the goals too ambitious? Is there misunderstanding that needs clarifying? Is there some resistance within us to applying what we intended to apply? Are we having to fight some lingering apathy about personal change? Good mentors will appreciate your honesty in these areas. There is no point meeting for the sake of meeting – good mentors are far too busy for that. Your mentor wants to know that your meetings are making a genuine difference to your life – and so honest tracking of your personal progress is essential if this is going to be the case.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Are you intentional about your learning goals with your mentor? Do you have a record of these in your journal.
2. Are you intentional about taking notes about your learning? Take a look at your journal to review these notes.
3. Are you intentional about applying your goals and reviewing your progress? Does your journal provide evidence of this?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You mentored your apprentices into practical application of your teaching. Thank You that You gave them feedback and You addressed misunderstandings. Thank You that Your mentoring set in motion a movement of revolutionary faith that transformed the world forever. Please help me to make the most of my mentoring sessions and to be intentional about the application of what I am learning. Amen.

## Week 12: Day 5 Practising the Seven Habits for a Life of Growth

**Bible texts:**

*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.* Matthew 7:13-14

*We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.* Romans 5:3-4

**Keeping on going**

Over the last four weeks we have explored seven key habits for growing apprentices: worship, reading the bible, journaling, praying, attending church, serving and meeting with a mentor. If we practise these seven habits regularly and consistently then we will be certain to keep growing as an apprentice of Jesus – whatever stage of faith we find ourselves.

Someone once said that if we sow a thought, we reap an act; if we sow an act, we reap a habit; if we sow a habit, we reap a character; if we sow a character, we reap a destiny.

Along a similar train of thought, Paul observed in the verses above that perseverance with the right habits in the midst of challenges and suffering produces character and character produces hope – the hope of further growth, the hope of further ground being taken for the kingdom of God and the hope of making it to the finishing line of our lives with persistent faith and endurance.

There will be all sorts of opposition we have to face as we seek to keep practising these seven habits: discouragement; disappointments; hurts and offences from people; boredom; distractions; tiredness; stress.

We need to face these hindrances with courage and determination to keep going and to keep practising these seven habits. The rewards are out of this world.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What hindrances have you faced as you have applied these seven habits over the last few weeks?
2. How have you been able to overcome these hindrances? What have you learned through the process?
3. What have you enjoyed about learning about and practising these spiritual habits?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You taught Your first apprentices that the pathway to spiritual life and maturity is narrow and few find it. Thank You for Your example of perseverance and help me to persevere with these habits so that I can continue along the narrow way that leads to the abundant life that You want for all of us. Amen.

## **An Overview of Part Two of the Journey: Weeks 13-24**

As I said at the Part One, some people like to know something about their journey before they set out.

If you are not one of those people, please skip this section and move on to the next page.

If you are one of those people, here’s an outline of where you will be travelling during Part Two, over the next 12 weeks or so:

Weeks 13: Growing in Christian Character

Weeks 14: The renewal of our minds

Week 15: The renewal of our hearts

Week 16: The renewal of our wills

Weeks 17-18: Listening to the Voice of God

Weeks 19-20: Obeying the Voice of God

Weeks 21-24: Making the most of the Lord’s Prayer

Week 13 Day 1 Developing the Character of Jesus

**Bible texts:**

*Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever takes crooked paths will be found out.* Proverbs 10:9

*In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.* Titus 2:7-8

**Matching our Talk and Walk**

When you read a story book to a 3 year old child they expect what they hear to match what they see in the pictures in the book. If there is a difference, the child will stop us and ask why the words and pictures don’t match.

It would be interesting if people around us had a commitment to always stopping us when the words of our lives don’t match up with the picture of who we are presenting to the world through our actions. Most of us may notice that gap in other people’s lives and we may comment to others about the gap but we often don’t have the right kind of relationship to point out the difference to the person in question.

Jesus on the other hand did have that depth of relational intentionality with those around him and called out this gap when he recognised it. He would lovingly but directly say to people: you say one thing but you do another; why the gap?

One aspect of being able to match our talk with our walk is matching our private behaviour with our public pronouncements. When public leaders reveal a mismatch between what they expect of others compared with what they expect of themselves, public listeners understandably feel offended. Such leaders quickly get labelled as hypocrites. The problem with this is that we are quick to judge others, but slow to diagnose the same issue in our own lives.

This is all a matter of integrity – living an integrated life in which there is an alignment of our intentions and our actions, our words and our behaviour.

Jesus lived a life of integrity: the reason his opponents struggled to find any gap between his talk and his walk was that there was none. So, living with Jesus at the centre of our lives is about agreeing to live a life of integrity too, matching our private selves with our public selves.

Another way of expressing this is having good character: who we are when no-one is watching us.

This will be our focus for the next few weeks as we consider the challenge of growing in integrity and strength of character.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. When have you been troubled by a mis-match between the public pronouncements and private actions in some well-known leader e.g. a politician?
2. Can you think of a recent example in your own life when a similar gap has been noticeable? How would you like to change in this area of your life?
3. Can you think of public figures who demonstrate integrity? In what ways?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for your model of integrity. Thank You that You matched Your words with Your actions day by day. Please give me the desire to follow in Your steps and to be a person of integrity. Please help me to develop the strength of my character. Amen.

## Week 13 Day 2 The Character of Jesus

**Bible text:**

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.* Galatians 5:22-25

**Keeping in Step with the Holy Spirit**

When we commit our lives to Jesus as Saviour and Lord we are also able to be filled with the Holy Spirit; God comes to dwell inside us. The Holy Spirit brings us new spiritual life and starts to grow a new spiritual character in us.

One of our new commitments in this new life of faith will be to respond to the Holy Spirit’s promptings in our lives, leading us from old patterns of living and relating that are selfish and immature to new patterns of living that are Jesus-centred and mature.

In the Bible verses above Paul speaks about how the life of God’s Spirit shows itself in our lives by demonstrating new healthy characteristics that he describes as the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul lists nine qualities that become increasingly the pattern of our lives as we grow into spiritual maturity and develop the character of Jesus: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Paul says that there is no law against such qualities: in other words, no rational person could object to these characteristics; when we encounter them in others we are going to enjoy them; when we show these characteristics ourselves, there will be a good and positive sense of well-being and of demonstrating relational maturity.

It is sometimes said that a tree doesn’t have to exert effort to grow fruit – it just happens naturally. However, a tree uses a great deal of energy in the production of fruit. It is a very active process – it just happens to be silent and from a human perspective, undertaken very slowly. Stop the flow of light energy to the fruit tree and no more fruit will grow. Coupled with this observation is the fact that some types of fruit require a great deal of effort by the gardening team – for example, grapes have to be thinned out as they develop with every second grape being cut out so the remaining grapes can grow larger. If you have ever done that job you will know that it is a very energy-intensive process.

Rather than regarding character development as simply letting go and letting God do all the work, it is better to think of this process of developing the character of Christ as a partnership between us and the Holy Spirit; we are responsible for steadily and persistently removing our wrong attitudes and selfish characteristics. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit prompts us with what qualities are needed. And we are then responsible for expressing these promptings in an attitude of obedience, knowing that what the Spirit brings is always going to be good and healthy. We are invited to be actively involved in a lifelong walk with the Spirit into an experience of demonstrating the character of Jesus in ever-increasing ways.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of an instance where you were expressing a negative characteristic and the Holy Spirit has prompted you to realise that this is not the right way to speak or live?
2. Can you think of an instance where you were expressing a positive Jesus-like characteristic and the Holy Spirit has affirmed that quality as the right way to live?
3. As you look at the nine characteristics listed, where do you sense you and the Holy Spirit have made progress? Where do you think you have the most work still to do?

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, Thank You for the fruit You want to grow in my life. Thank You for the promptings You bring as we walk in step with each other. Please help me to walk in step with Your leading. When I get the steps wrong please forgive me. When I get the steps right, please affirm my progress – day by day. Amen.

## Week 13 Day 3 Building Strength of Character

**Bible texts:**

*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you*. 1 Corinthians 15:58

*Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong.* 1 Corinthians 16:13

*We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.* Romans 5:3-4

**Strength to bear the burdens of responsibility**

Maturity is about being willing and able to bear sustained responsibility. Young children are not expected to bear very much responsibility; they are almost completely dependent on their parents. We expect teenagers to bear a lot more responsibility for their lives and by the time they become adults, the older adults around them are wanting them to progress as effectively as possible towards the position of being able to bear full responsibility for their lives.

If we are to carry a 20kg rucksack for an outdoor adventure on some mountains, we need strong backs and legs. And if we are going to carry the weight of continuous responsibility we need strength in our character. Responsibility brings with it the reality of facing hardships and problems, bearing the heavy weight of challenges and difficulties. Weak and under-developed characters can often be crushed under this kind of weight.

We see this when people are given too much responsibility too soon in their lives; they simply have not developed the strength of character to be able to bear that amount of responsibility. They move into the new position with excitement and anticipation but they are ill-equipped to face the burden of problems and challenges that quickly come their way. Sadly, many such people cave in to the pressure of these hardships through some type of sin – sometimes lying to cover up their mistakes; sometimes committing fraud as the temptations of enjoying more money prove too strong; sometimes seeking comfort and affirmation through inappropriate relationships.

It is vital that we seek to grow strong in our characters so that when we are given more responsibility our characters are resilient enough to withstand the pressures that will come our way.

The affirmation of a strong character as we build integrity – matching our intentions with our consistent actions – is a great asset to be able to have our referees commend in us and to be able to include on our CV when we apply for positions of greater responsibility through our lives. Employers and team leaders are always looking for people of strong character to recruit to their teams because they know that these people will persist through future challenges. We need to partner with the Holy Spirit through this process of growing a resilient character.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of an example of someone who has been given too much responsibility too soon and has caved in under the pressure? What have you learned from this person’s experience?
2. Can you think of an example of someone who has shown great strength of character under the sustained pressure of responsibility? What have you learned from this person’s example?
3. As you reflect on your own life, where are there responsibility pressures that require you to stand firm and not give in to certain temptations? What are you learning through this experience? How do you sense that you are growing through these challenges?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the strength of Your character when You faced pressure and hardship. Thank You for sending us Your Holy Spirit to lead us through problems and hardships with courageous perseverance knowing that as we do so, You are strengthening our character, piece by piece, fibre by fibre, day by day. Amen.

## Week 13 Day 4 Character as a Fruitful Partnership with God

**Bible text:**

*God’s divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;**and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* 1 Peter 1:3-8

**Building character in order to be productive**

This week we are focussing on growing in Christ-like character – what Peter calls participation in the divine nature (see v4 above).

As we have seen this process is a partnership between us and God. Peter emphasises this partnership in this passage by speaking about the gift of God’s power and promises (v3-4) combined with our need to “make every effort” (v5) to grow in our Christ-like character.

It is a great encouragement that “God’s divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life”; in other words, we have everything we need to develop in character by having the power of God’s Spirit with us every day. There is nothing missing. We lack nothing.

Furthermore, we also have God’s “very great and precious promises” on which to build a life of Jesus-like character. These promises include the promise of God’s Presence with us always to give us the strength and perseverance we need, the promise of God’s leading and prompting at the right moments, the promise of God’s Truth setting us free from unhelpful patterns of speech and conduct, the promise of forgiveness for our mistakes along the way.

Our acceptance and belief in the truth of God’s power and promises are the foundation on which we can build Jesus-like character that includes the qualities Peter lists:

Faith; goodness; knowledge; self-control; perseverance; godliness; mutual affection; love.

The critical starting point is faith: trusting in God’s power and promises. Then the rest of the qualities can be developed, one quality prompting the next.

And the result will be effective productivity in our Jesus-centred lives. Christian character is not the final goal – it is the route to the goal of being productive for Jesus.

To use a tree analogy: the roots are the power and promises of God. The trunk is our resilient character that stands strong no matter what storms blow. Then the branches are able to bear the enduring fruitfulness of our lifelong service and work for Jesus.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What encouragement do you take from knowing that we have everything we need to build a Jesus-like character in the power and promises of God?
2. Which characteristics in Peter’s list most strike you as being true of your life right now? Where do you still need to develop more of these qualities?
3. How do you think you could be more productive in your life if these qualities were developed more fully?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the power of Your Holy Spirit at work in me and the power of Your eternal promises to me. Help me to trust in Your power and promises day by day so that I have confidence to grow in character, to become more like You and to bear fruit that will last. Amen.

## Week 13 Day 5 Love God passionately with your whole being

**Bible text:**

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.* Mark 12:30

**Loving God through building the Right Character**

This week we have explored the importance of developing mature Christ-like character. When we do so, we are able to match our intentions with our actions, our words with our conduct. People around us will recognise an inspiring integrity in us – an integrated life in which our personal faith and values shape the pattern of our attitudes and behaviour. A gap between our talk and walk creates an unpleasant odour for those around us; in contrast, an alignment of our intentions and our actions creates a great fragrance that can inspire others.

We have seen how strength of character can carry us through trials and hardships and allow us to carry on being productive through our service for Jesus at the centre of our lives.

We have seen that this process of developing character is a partnership between ourselves and the Holy Spirit who is at work in us after we put our trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. The Holy Spirit prompts us when we are failing to match our life with His life in us – and prompts us to invest effort in changing from the inside out.

Growing the right character is one aspect of our love for God. God has only ever given us His best – in creation and in redemption. And we can love God by giving Him our best in terms of our intentional pursuit of the right kind of character that demonstrates the right kind of characteristics.

The verse above encourages us to love God with our minds, our hearts and our wills (implied in loving God with all our strength). Over the next three weeks we will explore how we can live a transformed life of integrity through embracing a renewed mind, a renewed heart and a renewed will.

Our culture is very focused on image rather than core substance, surface impressions rather than heart-felt reality, superficial show rather than in-depth development. The challenge to build a resilient character is an important way of living counter-culturally.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Where do you notice the emphasis on surface pretence that neglects inner growth in our culture today?
2. In what ways does a lack of integrity offend people? In what ways does the presence of integrity inspire people?
3. How do you respond to the idea of loving God through developing the right character? How does the fact that God has given you His best inspire you to make every effort to build the right character?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that You have always given me Your best. Help me to offer You my best as I embrace the challenge of growing in Jesus-like character day by day. Help me to love You with all my mind, my heart and my will. Amen.

## Week 14 Day 1 The Renewing of Our Minds

**Bible text:**

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.* Romans 12:2

**Sow a thought; reap an act**

When someone challenges us about some past wild and crazy action, they will often say: “What were you thinking?” An action is usually the result of a thought. So, if we want to build a Jesus-like character made up of a steady stream of Jesus-like actions, then we will want to populate our minds with a stream of Jesus-centred thoughts.

This process of clearing out the rubbish from our minds and replacing this with a good, healthy and wholesome thought life is what we mean by the renewal of our minds.

When a new occupant moves into a house they may well find that the previous occupier has left all kinds of debris from their old life there; the new occupier will have to take time to get this cleared out so that they can begin the new life there that they know they want to live there.

A similar challenge faces us when we come to faith in Jesus. We have already considered the fact that as a new follower of Jesus we are a new creation – the old identity has gone, the new identity has arrived (2 Corinthians 5:17). While it is true that we may have a fresh identity as a new follower of Jesus, it takes time for our new self to clear away the debris of the old self.

It is interesting that the original word in New Testament Greek for “repentance” literally means “a changed mind” (*metanoia*). When we repent from our old life, we are changing our minds about our priorities, our core purposes, the foundation for our identity, where we find our love and acceptance. We are finding a new basis for what is true and right and trustworthy.

Paul is clear that we should not allow the broken and corrupt world around us to squeeze our consciousness into its own mould; we should partner with the Holy Spirit in developing a new way of thinking that is inspired and shaped by God’s love and truth.

When we do this Paul says, we will be able to “test and approve what God’s will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will”. In other words, we will know more clearly what God wants us to be doing with our lives, moment by moment.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world”: keep a record through today of all the times when you have felt the world around you try to make you conform to an unhelpful pattern of thinking. What do you sense would be the better way to think?
2. Keep a record of times today when you find yourself thinking negative or unhelpful thoughts. What is the result of this kind of thinking?
3. Keep a record today when you find yourself thinking positive and constructive thoughts. What is the result of this kind of thinking?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You have made me new and that You call me to renew my mind, one thought at a time. Please help me today to be aware of how my thinking is shaped by the world around me. Please help me to discern good and bad patterns of thought. Help me to recognise the power of my mind and my thinking in shaping my desires and actions. Amen.

## Week 14 Day 2 Living out of Truth not Deception

**Bible texts:**

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* John 10:10

*When the devil lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.* John 8:44

*When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth*. John 16:13

**A Life-Giving Stream of Consciousness**

So far we have not considered the biblical perspective on the existence of the devil. However, the bible is very clear that the devil is real not simply metaphorical. Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness and Jesus taught His first followers about the devil’s schemes. If Jesus took the devil seriously, so should we.

This is very important in relation to the renewal of our minds – this week’s theme - because the devil is very eager to influence our thought-life. If we are unaware of the devil’s strategies in this area of our lives, we will be more vulnerable to the devil’s attacks. Conversely, if we stay alert to these schemes, we will be both fore-warned and fore-armed.

Jesus made a very clear contrast between His goal of bringing us fullness of life and the devil’s opposite goal of stealing, killing and destroying (John 10:10). In order to achieve this goal, one of the most powerful strategies of the devil is to deceive us with lies. This is why Jesus called the devil “the father of lies”.

For example, the devil may deceive us into thinking that some action will bring us uninterrupted pleasure and delight – but when we fulfil this action we find instead that it brings us regret and shame.

The devil may deceive us into taking some ethical short-cut, making us believe that it doesn’t carry with it consequences – but when we take this alternative route that requires dubious conduct we realise too late that there are very definite consequences that have far reaching implications.

The devil is a master of pretence, masquerading as a messenger of light. However, the devil’s true identity is that of a messenger of darkness and destruction who wants to steal integrity from us and to destroy our reputation in the eyes of others.

We need the help of the Holy Spirit to be able to discern where the devil is deceiving us through some lie or half-truth and what the real truth of the matter is. Then we can walk free of deception and walk in the light of God’s truth instead.

And let’s remember too that the devil has no power to stand against the power of Jesus. Jesus defeated the devil at the cross and we are more than able to overcome the devil’s schemes through relying upon this victory every day.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you ever considered the reality of a devil at work in this world? What negative results would follow from either ignoring the devil completely or becoming too interested in his strategies?
2. When have you been aware of being led into deception in your thinking? What were the consequences? How did you become aware of the truth?
3. Can you think of any lies that you are being tempted to believe right now? How is the Holy Spirit leading you from this deception into the truth?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your victory over the devil through the power of Your death on the cross. Thank You that we can stand on this victory every day. Thank You for the promise that Your Holy Spirit is able to lead us from deception into truth, from half-truths into full truths. Please help me to hear the Spirit’s voice of truth and to follow His lead. Amen.

## Week 14 Day 3 From Fear to Faith

**Bible texts:**

*Perfect love drives out fear.* 1 John 4:18

*We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.* 2 Corinthians 10:5

**Accepting healthy fears and banning unhealthy fears**

Healthy fear would include the feeling we have in relation to some serious threat or danger – like the waves of a tempestuous sea crashing onto a rocky coastline. The healthy fear we sense in this situation prevents us from doing something rash and foolish like thinking it would be fun to have a quick dip in these amazing waves. Healthy fear keeps us safe and free from danger.

Unhealthy fear on the other hand keeps us imprisoned rather than being set free. Unhealthy fear would include the feeling that something bad that is very unlikely is definitely going to happen – for example, the plane we are taking is going to crash. Unhealthy fear would include the sense that we are not up to a task that everyone around us knows we can manage easily. Unhealthy fear would include the sense that the obstacles and hindrances that lie ahead will make our goals impossible.

Like deception, unhealthy fear is another strategy of the devil. Deception and this kind of unhealthy fear both rely on distortion of the truth which manipulates our path through life. Lies steer us away from walking the path God wants for us; unhealthy fear keeps us trapped so that we fail to make any progress at all.

The aim of God’s perfect love is to drive out unhealthy fear. So, when we are receptive to God’s love, we will be able to discern more clearly where we are being held captive by unhealthy fears and by allowing God’s love and truth into our minds, we can be set free from these fears.

We can compare the arrival of thoughts into our minds with planes circulating over an airport waiting for landing permission. Lots of thoughts may come into our minds – but we don’t need to give them landing rights; that is a choice we make. The path of mind renewal is the path of agreeing with thoughts that are healthy and true (letting these thoughts to land in our consciousness) and banning thoughts that are unhealthy and false (refusing landing rights so that these thoughts don’t impact us any more).

The renewed mind takes unhealthy thoughts captive and makes them obedient to Jesus (2 Corinthians 10:5).

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Make some notes about healthy fears and unhealthy fears that you feel right now.
2. Ask the Lord to make you attentive to moments today when unhealthy fears come into your mind. Journal about these fears so that you are clear what they are, where they are coming from, and the effects they have on your mind.
3. Journal about what you sense the Holy Spirit saying about these fears. How is the Holy Spirit equipping you to overcome these fears?

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, please help me to discern unhealthy fears that come into my mind. Help me to take them captive and to replace them with trust in Your power and goodness. Thank You that Your perfect love can drive out all my unhealthy fears. Amen.

## Week 14 Day 4 Feeding our Minds with Healthy Food

**Bible texts:**

*Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.* Romans 8:5-6

*Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.* Philippians 4:8

*Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.* Colossians 3:1-3

**Exercising authority over our mental input**

We have considered how we can exercise authority over negative, destructive thoughts and resist them; we can ban such thoughts from taking control over our thought processes and instead, we can exercise control over them and replace them with Holy Spirit-inspired thoughts.

Another aspect of shaping our thought life is to fill our minds intentionally with what is good and pure. This is Paul’s instruction in these verses above: he encourages us to feed our minds with what is true and admirable, not with what is false and shameful. He counsels us to bring spiritual and heavenly perspectives to our minds rather than being limited by an earthly perspective. Our true citizenship is in heaven – and so we need to think with a heavenly mind set.

This requires a great deal of self-discipline about what we feed our minds with. This will require self-control about what websites we visit; what blogs we read; what TV shows we watch; what movies we choose to view; what novels we read; what kind of social media posts we digest. If the Holy Spirit is nudging us with the sense that what we are filling our minds with is unhelpful and impure, then we need to respond to that prompting and take action.

We have control over what we put into our minds. We need never feel that anybody else is forcing us to engage with what we are finding offensive. We always have that choice about what we are engaging our minds with.

Living a Jesus-centred life will mean that we deliberately, intentionally fill our minds with what is helpful and constructive for developing a transformed mind that seeks kingdom perspectives.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on TV shows or movies that have been inspiring recently. How did they help your thought life?
2. Reflect on TV shows or movies that have been destructive recently. How did they hinder your thought life?
3. What kind of boundaries do you need to put in place to make sure that you are feeding your minds with what is healthy and life-giving?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You want me to have a healthy and wholesome mind. Please give me discernment about mental input that is unhealthy and the discipline to prevent this from influencing my thought life. Please give me the discipline to make sure that what I fill my mind with is edifying and life-giving each day. Amen.

## Week 14 Day 5 The Power of Spiritual Declarations

**Bible texts:**

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’ Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* Matthew 4:1-4

*If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* Romans 10:9

**Replacing false accusations with true declarations**

The devil loves to lie to us, deceive us, keep us prisoner to fear and doubt and to accuse us of being worthless and pointless – all with the aim of robbing us of our true destiny. We have explored this week the importance of removing this rubbish from our minds and replacing the garbage with life-giving truth. The renewal of our minds involves transformation of deception into truth – one thought at a time.

We see Jesus practise this essential strategy when He was tempted in the wilderness. The devil tries to sow doubt in Jesus’ mind about His identity: “if you are the Son of God…” The IF here is a clear spiritual attack. Jesus IS the Son of God. There is no IF about it. And let’s notice how Jesus responds: “It is written…” Jesus resists the attack with a declaration of the truth of God’s Word.

Regular – even daily - faith-filled declarations of God’s Word have power to bring transformation of our minds as we learn to displace lies with truth, accusation with affirmation, doubt with faith.

If I am struggling with physical self-acceptance I can declare over my body:

*You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.* Psalm 139: 13-14

If I am struggling with feelings of self-condemnation I can declare over my life:

*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus…* Romans 8:1

If I am struggling with lack of courage I can declare over my will:

*The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.* 2 Timothy 1:7

If I am struggling with anxiety I can declare over my mind:

*You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you*. Isaiah 26:3

These biblical declarations have spiritual power because God’s Word is the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17) and so an effective weapon to cut away deception. God’s Word is a light to our paths (Psalm 119:105) and so an effective means of replacing the darkness of falsehood with the illumination of eternal guiding truths.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What recurring lies, fears and doubts continue to contaminate your mind?
2. Search the internet for bible verses that address these lies, fears and doubts. Type in “bible verses about…” into your search bar and explore the bible verses that come up.
3. Write out three key bible declarations you can make every morning to assist the renewal of your mind so that you live from faith and not from fear.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your example of using scripture to defeat satan. Please help me to follow in Your steps – to identify the key bible verses that will resource my battle against the enemy’s schemes to undermine me and imprison me. Please set me free by Your truth to live the victorious life that You died to win for me; please help me to live out the glorious freedom of a transformed mind. Amen.

## Week 15 Day 1 Receiving a New Heart Transplant

**Bible text:**

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.* Ezekiel 36:26-27

**From old hearts of stone to new hearts of sensitivity**

Our hearts are amazing organs. Only about the size of our clenched fist, they successfully pump blood around our bodies around 70 times a minute throughout our entire lives. From ancient times, doctors realised how essential these organs are for our life and well-being. A damaged or malfunctioning heart is a serious problem.

Because of their essential contribution to our lives, and because of their deep and central location in our bodies, our hearts have long been seen as the core of our affections, the centre of our desires. And the word “heart” is still intrinsically connected with deep longing; just think of positive words and phrases like whole-hearted, heart-felt, having a heart to do something, having a heart-to-heart conversation; or think of negative phrases like hard-hearted; cold-hearted; half-hearted.

In our continuing use of these phrases we all recognise that most of our references to our hearts having nothing to do with cardiology but everything to do with reference to the centre and source of our passionate longings. The bible’s references to our hearts are almost exclusively along these lines.

Our reflections last week focused on developing renewed minds – the centre of our thoughts. This week we are going to reflect on the renewal of our hearts – the centre of our love and longings, desires and passions.

The text from Ezekiel above refers to an amazing promise from God about the renewal of our hearts when we put our faith in Jesus and receive His Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit brings us a new heart of flesh to replace our old heart of stone. What does this metaphor mean?

This Holy Spirit-undertaken heart transplant means we will move from having hard-hearts towards God and people to increasingly having tender-hearted hearts of compassion and sensitivity. We will move from being resistant to God’s ways to being receptive to His ways. We will move from being indifferent and uncaring about God’s instruction and purposes to being enthusiastic and willing to implement God’s commands in our lives. We will move from “I have to do what others tell me is right” to “I want to do what the Holy Spirit is showing me is right”. We all desperately need this heart transplant if we are to develop the character of Jesus.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How have you been impacted negatively by people with hearts of stone? What have been the consequences of this treatment?
2. How have you been impacted positively by sincere followers of Jesus with hearts of flesh? What have been the consequences of this treatment?
3. In your transition into faith in Jesus, how have you noticed a change within your desires and longings from experiencing a heart of stone in the past to experiencing a heart of flesh through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in your life?

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, Thank You for Your divine heart surgery in my life – removing my heart of stone that is hard and brittle and giving me a new heart of flesh that is soft and tender. Please help me to allow this new heart to beat with ever-increasing strength as I seek to love as You love with courageous compassion and deeply felt empathy. Amen.

## Week 15 Day 2 The Lord heals the broken-hearted

**Bible texts:**

*The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.* Psalm 34:18

*The Lord heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.* Psalm 147:3

**Divine Heart Surgery is promised to us**

Yesterday we explored how the Holy Spirit undertakes a heart transplant when we put our faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit also undertakes heart surgery when it comes to healing the ways our hearts have been wounded by the offensive hurts of others.

Perhaps we have suffered experiences of rejection and abandonment. Maybe we have endured serious abuse at the hands of others. Whatever heart damage we have experienced in the past, the Holy Spirit wants to restore our hearts as part of our heart renewal journey.

As part of this therapy, we need to recognise that the Holy Spirit knows exactly what we have suffered because He knows all things. There is no need to explain the past; He knows the past more fully than we know it ourselves.

The hurts we have experienced can often cause us to be locked in a prison of unforgiveness. The problem is that unforgiveness blocks the path of healing – and so if we truly desire the healing of our wounded hearts then we need to offer forgiveness towards those who have harmed us. This is a tough and courageous step to take – but an essential one all the same. Unforgiveness harms no-one but ourselves. We need to love ourselves well enough to seek the expression of forgiveness for those who have harmed us. To deny that forgiveness is to deny ourselves the freedom that Jesus died to bring us. Jesus offers us forgiveness for all our faults and failings, deliberate and unintentional. As a result of this all-sufficient forgiveness in our own lives, we need to be ready to forgive those who have harmed us.

Once we release this forgiveness to the perpetrators of the harm we have suffered, then the way is open for the Holy Spirit to bring healing to our heart wounds.

God’s promise is that He will bring healing to the broken-hearted. When we take the step of offering forgiveness, then we open the gate of our self-imposed prison and are free to walk into the fulfilment of that wonderful promise.

This is a vital part of God’s heart surgery – knowing the joy of having our wounded hearts healed and made whole again.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What heart wounds have you experienced in your past that still cause you pain?
2. Whom do you have to offer forgiveness for these hurts? What stops you offering forgiveness to them? What steps do you need to take to do so?
3. Walk through the steps of thanking Jesus for your own forgiveness for the way you have hurt others deliberately or unintentionally and then being ready to offer forgiveness to those who have hurt you.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Saviour and Lord, Thank You for your forgiveness for all my faults and failings. Thank You that Your sacrifice on the cross is sufficient to cover every sin – including the hurt and abuse that I have suffered at the hands of others. At the foot of Your cross, I choose to offer forgiveness to these people (you can name them here…). I choose to step out of unforgiveness into the wonderful freedom of forgiveness towards others. As I do so, please continue the work of healing my wounded heart and bringing me the whole and healthy heart I know You want for me. Amen.

## Week 15 Day 3 Connecting our Hearts with God’s Heart

**Bible texts:**

*After removing Saul, Samuel made David their king. God testified concerning him: “I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.”* Acts 13:22

*One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.* Psalm 27:4

**Be still with God and be transformed by God**

After Jesus, there are more bible references to the experiences of the Old Testament king named David than any other person in scripture – the same person who defeated Goliath. And as well as the sheer extent of material written about him, there is also a very unique description of why God chose David to be king: David was a “man after God’s own heart”. In other words, David’s heart resonated with God’s heart; what was important to God’s heart became important to David’s heart.

How did this close connection of hearts take place? The resonance came about because David loved to draw close to God in quietness and stillness to experience a close heart-to-heart connection. David wrote many of the psalms in the Old Testament and these songs and poems express the fact that David loved to spend time in God’s presence, gazing upon the beauty of the Lord, as we read in Psalm 27:4. Through these intimate times, David would become aware of what was on God’s heart and God’s heart steadily impacted and shaped David’s heart. We experience this same sort of interaction in all our intimate human relationships: as we spend quality time with close friends and as our love for them deepens, we begin to care deeply for what they care about; their passions become increasingly our passions too.

This is another key part of our spiritual heart renewal process: God’s longings becoming our longings too. As we find God’s desires becoming our desires, then a clear implication is that we can look forward to seeing these God-shaped desires being fulfilled – for God’s desires are clearly in line with His will and God’s will is guaranteed to be fulfilled. This is what David observed in Psalm 37 verse 4:

*Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart*.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How have you come to care about and share a close friend’s passionate interests? What has this shown you about how heart connections shape our hearts?
2. Spend some time soaking in God’s presence as you listen to some soaking worship music (you will find plenty of soaking playlists on Youtube). What do you hear God’s heart say during this time?
3. How are you experiencing the transformation of your passionate longings through times of communion with God? How do you want your deepest longings to be transformed? Speak to God about your longing for these desires to change.

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that You long to spend time with me. Thank You that You are ready to share Your heart’s longings with me. Help me to be receptive to these desires that they may become my desires too. As I delight in You, may You shape and fulfil the desires of my transformed heart. Amen.

## Week 15 Day 4 Hearts of Courageous Compassion

**Bible texts:**

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*1 Corinthians 13:4-8

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.**This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.* 1 John 4:7-12

**Channels of Unconditional Love**

While we only have one word for love in English, the New Testament writers were able to record the Holy Spirit’s revelation to them using four different Greek words for love, each referencing a different sort of love: *storge* for affection; *philos* for friendly love; *eros* for romantic love; and *agape* for unconditional love. This is the word that both Paul and John use in these passages above. This is the kind of love that God has for us of us – costly, sacrificial love that always pursues the very best for its recipient. Our Heavenly Father demonstrates this love in offering His Son as our Unique Saviour.

Yesterday we saw how as we enjoy times of communion with God and soak in His presence our hearts become aligned with God’s heart. We turn away from what undermines this heart connection – our own sinful feelings – and we turn towards what strengthens this heart connection – Holy Spirit-inspired thoughts that promote deeper understanding of people and fuel compassionate feelings for their needs.

As this process of having our hearts transformed by God’s Spirit becomes a habit for us we will find that it becomes more and more a way of life: loving people unconditionally with the unconditional love of God. To quote John: *since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*. We move from being recipients of God’s unconditional love to becoming channels of His unconditional love towards others.

This is a key part of heart renewal: moving from a heart of stone that is quick to judge to a heart of flesh that is quick to understand; from a heart of stone that is quick to take offence to a heart of flesh that is quick to forgive; from a heart of stone that is slow to be generous to a heart of flesh that is quick to offer thoughtful, loving gifts that make people feel special.

A renewed heart is a compassionate heart.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. When and how have you experienced the unconditional love of God directly?
2. When and how have you experienced the unconditional love of God indirectly through someone else?
3. What opportunities do you have today to offer the unconditional love of God to someone who needs it?

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, Thank You that You have demonstrated the extent of Your unconditional love to us through sending Jesus to be our all-sufficient Saviour. Thank You that You have poured this unconditional love into our hearts. Please help me to become a channel of Your love to those around me as you transform my heart. Amen.

## Week 15 Day 5 Guarding our Hearts

**Bible texts:**

*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.* [Proverbs 4:23](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs%204%3A23&version=NIVUK)

**Maintaining a positive emotional posture in our hearts**

This proverb expresses the truth that everything we do flows from the state of our hearts. When our feelings are healthy we have energy for life; we feel enthusiastic, upbeat, ready to meet challenges. When our feelings are toxic we resist life; we feel negative, downbeat, disillusioned and fed up.

Given the fact that our feelings have such an impact on how we conduct ourselves, if we are going to express the best characteristics we can, if we are going to be the best version of ourselves that we can be in each situation, then we need to be vigilant about the state of our hearts. We saw last week how we need to be vigilant about our thoughts; we also need to be vigilant about our emotions.

In the words of the proverb, we need to guard our hearts so that negative emotions are not allowed to settle and take root. Negative feelings can often cause a downward emotional spiral – from frustration to resentment, down into bitterness, and then down further into anger, even rage. It is important to be attentive early on in this downward spiral so that we can halt its progression early on. The deeper we descend, the harder it can be to return to an emotionally healthy place.

This habit of overseeing the state of our hearts and processing negative emotions quickly before they trigger this negative spiral is part of what it means to guard our hearts. As we develop this habit then we will adopt a new way of living in which we are slow to take offence; slow to judge; slow to anger; we are quick to love; quick to understand; quick to forgive.

As we consider the way we process our deep feelings, it is interesting to see that David felt the freedom to express a very wide spectrum of emotions in his psalms - from ecstatic celebration to profound lament, from exuberant joy to desperate sorrow. The fact that David is described as a man after God’s own heart implies that the emotions David felt resonate with God’s feelings. David’s extensive emotional vocabulary provides scope for us to express a similarly wide range of emotions in our times of communion with God – from joy-filled praise to passionate sorrow. Heart renewal does not mean that we have to be happy all the time; but it does mean that we will have freedom to express all our deeply felt emotions in the presence of a God who is no stranger to a wide range of emotions, including deep sadness. Emotions need to be expressed freely in healthy, life-giving ways. God is big enough to cope with this emotional expression – even if this means occasional outbursts of intense, pent-up feelings. Using the psalms this way is a good way of being able to process turbulent emotions like intense grief.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. The psalms provide a great way of expressing our emotions to God in healthy ways, knowing that we are expressing our feelings through God’s-inspired Word. How does this bring you freedom to express your deeply felt emotion in prayer to God?
2. Read and meditate on a lament psalm. E.g. psalm 44; 60; 74; 79; 80; 85; 90. How do these psalms bring us freedom to express deeply felt sorrow?
3. Do you recognise that negative emotions can sometimes get the better of you? Do you identify with the idea of a downward spiral of negative emotions starting with frustration and ending with anger? How can you make progress in guarding your heart against this downward spiral?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You that You want to help me guard my heart against negative emotions which undermine the renewal of my heart. Please help me to recognise unhelpful patterns and to replace these with constructive patterns that allow my heart to flow with Your love and peace and joy. Thank You for Your renewing work in my heart every day. Amen.

Week 16 Day 1 Practical Application of Our Thoughts and Desires

**Bible texts:**

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.* Matthew 7:24-27

**The wisdom of application**

As we have explored the process of building a Christ-like character, we have considered the renewal of our minds and hearts – thinking the right thoughts and hosting the right desires. We come this week to the application of our thoughts and desires to perform the right actions.

Our Christ-like character develops not simply through reflecting but also through doing; not simply through developing a desire to do the right thing but through implementing the right actions in practical ways.

At the end of one His most famous sermons (often entitled *The Sermon on the Mount*) in Matthew Chapters 5 to 7, Jesus tells a very significant parable about a wise and foolish builder quoted above. In this parable, the wise builder builds his house on solid rock; the foolish builder builds his house on sand. Interestingly, both houses endure the same rough storms of wind and rain but they experience very different outcomes: the house on the rock prevails but the house on sand collapses.

Jesus explains that the wise builder is the person who doesn’t stop at listening to His teaching but puts it into practice. When life becomes tough and difficult, the person who has applied Jesus’ teaching will have the strength of character to prevail through these challenges. Jesus also explains that the foolish builder is the person who stops at listening to His teaching and fails to put it into practice. The lack of practical application of Jesus’ teaching means this person has not developed the strength of character to withstand the onslaught of life’s many difficulties. When these stresses and strains arrive, the person who has failed to apply Jesus’ teaching will not have the resilience in their character to prevail through these challenges and their life will fall apart.

The timing of Jesus’ telling of this parable is not random. He has just delivered lots of amazing principles to his followers about how to live life well. The challenge delivered at the end of this extended time of teaching is about whether these listeners to the Word of God will become doers of the Word of God. Jesus knows that it is those who apply His principles that will develop the character to live a sustainable life of endurance. That requirement is as true for us as it was for those first followers of Jesus.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of an example of someone who has caved in during tough times through a lack of mature character?
2. Can you think of an example of someone who has endured tough times through strength of character developed through patient and persistent application of biblical truth?
3. Can you think of one biblical principle that you have been thinking about recently that you need to apply today?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your insight in placing this parable at this strategic moment – challenging Your followers towards practical application of Your practical teaching. Thank You for making the consequences of applying and not applying Your teaching crystal clear then and now. Please help me to be like the wise builder who applies Your teaching and not like the foolish builder who only listens. Please help me to build resilient character that will withstand the hardships of this life always. Amen.

## Week 16 Day 2 Growing character through doing

**Bible texts:**

*After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.*Luke 10:1

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.* James 3:13

**From theory to practice; ideas to action**

Jesus was quick to get his apprentices applying what He was teaching them. He modelled ministry to them and then He sent them out to practise what He had demonstrated. Jesus knew that the best way to learn how to do something practical is to get going with doing it. If you want to learn to swim you have to get into the water. If you want to learn to cycle you have to get on a bike. If you want to drive you have to get behind the wheel of a car. Similarly, the practical outworking of our faith requires action.

James (Jesus’ younger brother) was of the same mind as his older brother: if you consider yourself wise then you will be a doer of good deeds; if you consider yourself a person of spiritual depth and understanding then you will be someone who applies this understanding in practical actions. As we saw yesterday, Jesus considers those who apply spiritual truth in practical ways to be the wise people, not those who only listen but never get going.

It’s probable that the first apprentices of Jesus felt that they still had masses to learn before they would consider themselves fully ready to embark on these mission adventures. They most likely felt ill-equipped and inadequately prepared. They probably felt nervous and unsure. But Jesus knew that they were ready to get going and that they would learn so much through simply having a go. Of course, they might make mistakes – but we often learn so much more from our mistakes than we do from our successes.

The renewed will is ready to get going and to apply what we are learning even if we do not feel fully equipped. God equips the called – He does not call the equipped.

The renewed mind tells us we don’t know everything but we know enough and the Holy Spirit will guide us into the rest of what we need along the way. The renewed heart gives us the desire to apply what we know to be true. And then the renewed will takes these renewed thoughts and longings and turns them into decisive action. And as we turn theory into action we are propelled into a life of spiritual adventure that is always invigorating and exciting and which requires us to keep trusting the Lord rather than our own competence.

We will never live a life of faith in God’s resources if we only attempt what we know we can do in our own strength.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of a practical skill you have acquired which required you to take the step of courage to give something a go, even if you did not feel fully ready? What did you learn through this process of having to get going?
2. Can you think of a skill you would like to acquire which will require you to take the step of courage to give something a go, even if you do not feel fully ready right now?
3. What spiritual skills have you applied so far and how has your learning been accelerated through applying this skill rather than reading about it? (e.g. praying for someone, reading the Bible, talking to somebody about Jesus).

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You sent out Your first apprentices when You knew they were ready to get going – even if they didn’t feel ready themselves. Thank You that have always wanted Your apprentices ever since to be people who are ready to get going in practical acts of service because we learn the most through doing. Please give me the confidence and courage to get going in applying the skills that You are showing me. Amen.

## Week 16 Day 3 The Call to Courageous Living

**Bible texts:**

*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.* Deuteronomy 31:6

*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.* Joshua 1:9

*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* Matthew 28:20

**Courage to get going**

The phrase “be strong and courageous” is used eleven times in the Old Testament, seven of them addressed to Joshua. If we are repeatedly exhorted to be strong and courageous it is because there is a very real temptation to be weak and timid. Joshua had a big mission to accomplish – leading God’s people across the River Jordan into the Promised Land. There was plenty of reason for Joshua to feel afraid and intimidated – but God spoke courage into him so that he would rise to the challenges ahead and Joshua responded with strength and courage.

The step from theory to practice can be daunting for us; the progression from ideas to action can be scary – but the words God spoke to Joshua are the words that He speaks to us now. Be strong and courageous. If God is calling us to it, God will be with us through it. He promises to be with us always and everywhere. He will never leave us or forsake us when we are faithfully obeying His instruction and calling.

The longest journeys start with the first step. The largest projects commence with the first completed action. We can all practise this basic principle: do little things today so that you can do bigger things tomorrow.

We began this devotional journal with a reference to eating elephants one mouthful at a time. That is how this journal is laid out; one daily mouthful to chew and swallow. And if you have managed to keep going, today you can congratulate yourself that you have now consumed 84 mouthfuls of this journal’s journey. You are almost half way. Your journey to this point began with a bold decision to do something simple: engage with Day 1. And Day 1 led to Day 2 and then an ongoing daily journey that led you to this point.

The same will be true of other habits you want to develop in your journey of obedience to Jesus as the Leader of your life: take one small step today and keep going until you have developed a new habit that will allow you to live the life Jesus wants you to live – a life that expresses a solid, sustainable, inspiring character of mature faith that will withstand every challenge you have to face in the future.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you remember a step of courage that was needed in the past? What made you feel afraid? How were those fears overcome? What did you learn from that step of courage?
2. Courage is not the absence of fear – just the readiness to face our fears. What courage do you need right now to implement what Jesus is asking of you? Ask Jesus for this courage.
3. Every long journey starts with the first small step in the right direction. What small step can you take this week that will help you forward on this long journey of faith in Jesus?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You faced lots of challenges with courage. Thank You that You always stepped towards these challenges – and never away from them. Please give me courage to step into the challenges I am facing right now and not back away from them. Thank You that You promise to be with me always. Amen.

## Week 16 Day 4 Seeking Feedback and Further Instruction

**Bible texts:**

*A man in the crowd answered, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.’ …After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why couldn’t we drive out the evil spirit?’ Jesus replied, ‘This kind can come out only by prayer and fasting.’* Mark 9:17-18,28-29

*Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise.* Proverbs 15:31

**The cycle of application, reflection and feedback**

We have seen how quickly Jesus got His apprentices having a go at practical ministry after receiving His careful instruction and persistent demonstration which included preaching, healing and delivering people from evil spirits. No doubt their practical experience was a mixture of success and failure, sometimes seeing results and sometimes not.

The passage above relates to one of these experiences of not seeing the desired results: they try to drive out an evil spirit but fail. We have considered the reality of the devil previously; this passage requires us to take seriously the fact that the devil does not operate alone but works in partnership with other evil spirits. The bible teaches us that the devil was once an obedient angel but that his pride and ambition got the better of him and led him into rebellion against God, along with some other angels. Consequently, this band of rebellious angels was cast out of heaven and became what we now refer to as evil spirits (see Revelation 12:7-9). Sometimes these evil spirits can oppress people externally; sometimes they can take up residence inside a person and then they need to be cast out so that the afflicted person can be set free. This is what we mean by “deliverance ministry”.

Jesus’ apprentices have watched Jesus do this kind of ministry and then they were commissioned to have a go themselves. The passage above indicates that on this occasion they were not successful and they failed to cast the evil spirit out of a boy. After their unsuccessful attempt, they asked Jesus for His advice about what went wrong and Jesus gives them helpful further instruction.

It is comforting to know that even the people who were taught by Jesus directly didn’t get it right every time. We should be ready for experiences when ministry doesn’t go according to plan. The important point to remember is that we should take time to reflect on the event and also seek advice from a wise person about what we can learn from the experience and be better prepared for the next opportunity.

Remember that success can be seen as moving from one failure to the next without losing enthusiasm**.**

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you respond to the idea of evil spirits at work in this world? What questions to you have about their influence?
2. Can you think of an experience of failure in the past that taught you some important lessons? How have you applied those lessons?
3. If you don’t see success in an area of ministry do you have someone you can go to for feedback and advice? If not, do you need to identify that person?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for releasing Your first apprentices into ministry when they were still inexperienced knowing they would learn more as they started to apply your instruction. Thank You that You were ready to offer them feedback and advice when things didn’t go well. As I make the choice to get going in applying what I am learning please lead me to the right people who can give me helpful feedback and advice. Amen.

## Week 16 Day 5 Get going and keep going

**Bible texts:**

*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* Galatians 6:9

*You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.* Hebrews 10:36

*Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.* James 1:12

**Courage to get going; Perseverance to keep going**

We have reflected this week on the partnership we enter with the Holy Spirit for the spiritual renewal of our wills as the third part of the trilogy of personal renewal: a renewed mind to think the right thoughts; a renewed heart to host the right desires; and thirdly, a renewed will to implement the right actions.

We have seen the essential need for courage to start implementing the actions we know to be God’s call to live like Jesus. We have seen that even when we know we don’t know everything or understand everything there is still a need to apply what we DO know and to practise what we DO understand. We cannot allow our lack of full comprehension to hold us back; fuller understanding comes through fuller application.

And once we do get going, we need firstly the habit of reflecting about our practical experiences and gaining feedback from other wiser people about what has gone well and what has not been so good. Secondly, we need a commitment to persevere through setbacks and challenges.

Perseverance has been and is going to be a repeated refrain through this devotional journal just as much as it is a repeated refrain through the bible. The journey to spiritual maturity and to developing a Christ-like character is not quick or easy; it requires patient endurance. And so, the call to perseverance needs to be heard over and over again as we continually face the temptation to give in and to give up. It is a sad reality that too many people give up along the way, finding the way too tough, the incline too steep.

Equally, there is so much encouragement to be gained from remembering the unrelenting courage of those who have persevered before us, during thousands of years of redemptive history.

The bible verses above are a small selection of the many verses that call us to persist with rugged determination. All three of these verses above express the same perspective: persevere now so that you will reap the reward that awaits you. Face today’s pain in order to relish tomorrow’s gain.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the relentless perseverance of the first followers of Jesus as they battled numerous hardships in order to fulfil God’s call on their lives.
2. Whose rugged determination to persevere most inspires you right now?
3. What challenges and hardships are proving tough right now? Ask Jesus to bring you the perseverance you need to keep going and to soldier on as you develop the character of Christ.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your example of perseverance through tough times for the sake of the reward ahead of You. Thank You that You are building the right character in me as I face tough challenges. Please give me the determination to keep pressing on as I fix my attention on the future blessings that await me in this life and in the fullness of everlasting life. Amen.

## Week 17 Day 1 Listening and Obeying

**Bible texts:**

*Jesus gave them this answer: ‘Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed.* John 5:19-20

*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.* Mark 1:35

*In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.* Proverbs 16:9

**Jesus our Model for Listening and Obeying God**

Jesus is clear in these verses from John’s gospel that He did nothing of His own accord; He only did what He saw His Father doing. In other words, Jesus listened each day for direction from His Heavenly Father about where He should be going; what He should be doing; whom He should be serving.

The verse from Mark 1 indicates that Jesus had the habit of getting up early to pray and the implication from what we see in Jesus’ life is that part of that time of prayer each morning involved asking the Father for direction for the day. Jesus spent time listening to His Father’s response providing instructions for the day and then Jesus spent the rest of the day implementing these instructions in faithful obedience.

Jesus is our model for living the best and most fulfilling kind of life – and that includes the pattern of listening to the Holy Spirit for direction in our lives and then implementing that instruction in faithful obedience.

This can involve praying each morning for direction through the day; it can involve prayer at lunchtime that we will have wisdom for the rest of the day and wisdom for resolving challenges that we have met during the morning; it can involve “arrow” prayers that we shoot up to heaven quickly when we need to have insight at a particular moment of making a decision; it can involve seasons of persistent prayer when we are asking for direction for the next chapter of our lives – perhaps seeking a new job or for wisdom about relationships in our lives.

The proverb above teaches us that while humans like to think that they always know best about the direction of their lives, the reality is that our all-seeing, all-knowing, all-loving Heavenly Father is the best source of guidance in our lives. Wise apprentices will be those who are ready to listen to this wise guidance and to put it into practice.

Since this pattern of listening to the Holy Spirit and obeying His instruction is so critical for living a Jesus-centred life we are going to spend the next four weeks considering the implications of this kind of life of devotion to God and His leading.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What do you make of Jesus’ model of only doing what He heard from His Father? What are the attractions of this way of living? What are the challenges of this way of living?
2. Can you think of times when you have steered a very intentional course which in retrospect proved to be mistaken? How do you think God might have steered you differently during this time?
3. Where do you need help from God right now in steering a wise course? Ask for the Holy Spirit’s insight so that you can make the right choices.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for Your example as someone who continually listened to the Holy Spirit and put into practice what You heard the Spirit say. Please help me to follow Your example: to listen to what the Spirit is saying day by day and to have clarity, courage and perseverance to put into practice what I hear the Spirit saying. Amen.

Week 17 Day 2 Two Words for the Word of God: Logos and Rhema

**Bible texts:**

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.* Matthew 7:24

*Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* Ephesians 6:17

**The whole counsel of God and the specific counsel of God**

As we consider the theme of listening and obeying God, it is good to be reminded of the parable of the wise and foolish builders that we explored a short time ago because that story is all about listening and obeying the teaching of Jesus. Jesus states clearly that wise people don’t just listen to good words; they apply these words practically with actions.

The point of referring to this same text today is that it helps us understand two different words used in the original language of the New Testament for the Word of God. We have seen that there are four different words used for “love” in Greek; and the New Testament writers make use of two different words when it comes to the “word of God”.

The first of these is *logos* which means the whole, complete, universally applicable counsel of the Bible. The second of these is *rhema* which means the specific communication for a specific context.

As Jesus begins the parable of the wise and foolish builders, He uses the term *logos* to refer to His teaching – and so He means His audience to understand that He is referring to the complete collection of all His teaching, not specific principles for limited contexts.

The second verse above about taking up the sword of the Spirit as a powerful weapon in our battle against the forces of evil makes use of the second term – *rhema*. So, Paul means that we should apply specific truth in our battle against evil that will be relevant for that particular context.

When John writes that Jesus is the Word of God in human form (John 1:14) he uses the word *logos*. John is therefore saying that Jesus is the full counsel of God in human form – the exact representation of God’s Being and God’s Truth in a human life.

On the other hand, when Peter disowns Jesus during the night of His arrest before His Good Friday crucifixion, the gospel writers say that Peter remembers the prophetic word Jesus had spoken to him earlier that night. Here they use the word *rhema* – a specific message for a specific person at a specific time.

As we consider the practice of listening to God’s voice, it is helpful to keep in mind these two different ways of understanding the Word of God – the universally applicable truth from God and the specific, particular truth that is relevant for a particular situation we are facing.

Both kinds of listening are vital for our journey of obedience: obeying the universally true *logos* of God and also obeying the particular *rhema* of God that the Holy Spirit wants to bring to us in particular situations.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. In what ways is it helpful that the New Testament writers make use of these two different terms for the Word of God?
2. What questions come to mind as you consider the distinction of these two types of communication from the Holy Spirit? Make a note of these questions so that you can come back to them as you find answers.
3. Can you think of an example of logos and an example of rhema from the words of Jesus?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You that You have inspired both logos and rhema, universal truth and specific truth. Please help me to understand the significance of these words, to listen carefully to all your communication and to be ready to apply your counsel in my life everyday. Amen.

## Week 17 Day 3 Listening to God’s Voice

**Bible texts:**

*One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’ ‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”* Mark 12:28-30

*When the shepherd has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice…I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep.**I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.* John 10:4,14-16

**My Sheep Know My Voice**

In the verses from Mark we see Jesus point to the greatest of all God’s commandments: to love God devotedly with our whole being. It is interesting that this quotation contains two commandments: loving God but also listening to God. This is how Jesus begins the quotation from the Old Testament Law: ***Hear***, O Israel… The imperative command that begins these famous words is critical: we need to listen to God’s voice.

We considered near the start of this journey how Jesus called Himself the Good Shepherd who is prepared to lay down His life for His sheep. The verses from John 10 also explain that His sheep will follow Him because they know His voice: they are used to hearing His voice. They recognise His voice and they are ready to follow Him when He speaks.

Jesus goes on to explain that when new sheep join the flock, they also listen to His voice. In other words, when we come to faith in Jesus, we are enabled to hear His voice. And the more we hear Jesus’ voice, the more we will recognise His voice when He speaks. Practising listening to a particular voice trains our ears to hear that voice in the context of other sounds.

Devoted fathers love to speak to their children. Our Heavenly Father loves to speak to us too. The way we hear the voice of Jesus and the voice of the Father is through the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of love, peace, kindness, gentleness (Galatians 5:22). When the Spirit speaks to us, we will feel His love, peace, kindness and gentleness.

It is an awesome privilege that the God who created the universe and who sustains the universe by His power is also the God who draws close to us in order to whisper His messages of love and counsel to us. God is speaking to us all the time; the question is whether we are ready to listen.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you feel about the practice of listening to God’s voice each day? What questions do you have about listening to God’s voice? Write them down so that you can revisit them as you find answers.
2. The main way in which God speaks to us is through the Bible. What do you sense God say to you today through the Bible verses quoted above? Write these messages down and as you do so you may find that God continues to bring other messages too. As we still ourselves to listen, as we make ourselves available to His voice, then God is ready to bring further communication.
3. What steps of application follow from what you sense God say today? This might be a change of attitude or perspective just as much as some action to undertake. Listening is vital – but so is our obedience to what God is saying.

**Prayer:**

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit – Thank You that You are ready to speak to me; help me to listen and obey. Open my ears to hear Your voice; open my mind to accept Your counsel; open my heart to host Your desires; encourage my will to fulfil Your purposes; transform me through Your Truth, day by day by day. Amen.

## Week 17 Day 4 Listening to God’s Voice: the Spiritual Gift of Prophecy

**Bible text:**

*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy…the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort…the one who prophesies edifies the church.* 1 Corinthians 14:1,3-4

**The aim of prophecy: strength, courage and comfort**

The New Testament describes a series of special abilities that come as free gifts from the Holy Spirit; they are “tools for the job” – the job being serving effectively in God’s kingdom. We will explore these in more detail later on when we think more fully about finding our particular role of serving as we seek to develop God’s kingdom on Earth.

One of these spiritual gifts is the gift of prophecy which is simply the capacity to hear God’s voice. God desires us to hear His voice so that we can grow in our own personal faith – but also so that we can listen to what He is saying for other people as well so that they can be blessed too.

When we are given the opportunity to hear personal messages from God, either directly or through someone else, there are a number of significant implications:

Firstly, we know for certain that God is real. If you receive a letter from a long-lost relative you never knew about, this provides clear evidence of their existence. For the person who is convinced there is no God – or for the person who is simply unsure – a personal message from God catapults them from doubt to faith, from scepticism to expectation.

Secondly, a personal message from God indicates that God knows about our lives; He is not indifferent or uncaring, but He takes an interest in our lives.

Thirdly, a personal message from God demonstrates that God loves us enough to take time to communicate with us directly. A personal message communicates personal commitment. God doesn’t just know about us – He is passionately devoted to us.

Fourthly, a personal message from God demonstrates that God wants to use us; He has a purpose for our lives, partnering with us in bringing redemption to this broken and needy world.

For all these reasons and more that we will consider in the days to follow we should follow Paul’s advice quoted above and ***eagerly desire*** the gift of prophecy.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Paul explains that prophecy brings encouragement when we feel afraid or unsure. Encouragement is putting courage into us so that we get going and so that we can keep going in our perseverance. Where do you need to experience encouragement right now? What do you sense God saying to you that will bring this encouragement?
2. Paul also states that prophecy strengthens us when we feel weary or disillusioned. Where do you need renewed energy to prevail against tough challenges right now? Spend some time listening to God for His message of renewed strength.
3. Paul indicates that prophecy comforts us when we feel anxious or troubled. Where do you need comfort right now? Spend some time listening for this message of comfort.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for the spiritual gift of prophecy that You want to bring to my life. Thank You that You eagerly desire to communicate with me for my encouragement, strength and comfort day by day. Please help me to eagerly desire this gift and to gain confidence in its use in my own life and to bring blessing to people around me so that Your Church is built up in confidence. Amen.

## Week 17 Day 5 Practical Applications of Prophecy

**Bible text:**

*…you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. …Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy* 1 Corinthians 14:31, 39

**Seven Reasons to Eagerly Desire the Gift of Prophecy**

The apostle Paul wrote about spiritual gifts in several passages in his letters but it is significant that he singled out prophecy as the spiritual gift that deserves a special measure of intentionality on our part. One of the reasons is that the gift of prophecy – the gift of being able to hear God’s voice for yourself and for the blessing of others – is so useful. Prophecy has many applications, all of which bring blessing.

We saw in the previous session how prophetic revelation from God can bring encouragement, strength and comfort when we desperately need it.

Prophetic revelation can bring both height and depth to our worship, whether on our own or with others. As we listen to what God is saying and hear His specific message for the moment, this revelation brings us closer to God and better able to understand His heart and character.

Prophetic insight can transform our prayer lives too; as we draw into God’s presence to pray for particular people or situations we gain a fresh sense of faith if we gain insight into what God is wanting to do in these situations, how He is working and what change He wants to bring. We can pray with confidence, knowing that we are praying in line with what we have heard God say.

Prophecy can bring clarity when we are facing important decisions in life; it is vital to know God’s will in certain situations when we are dealing with a range of possible choices, for example, which job to go for; which house to buy; which person to marry. Our Sovereign God, who sees every detail of our lives, can provide much needed wisdom to make the right choice.

Prophetic insight is helpful too in discerning the way that people are shaped to serve in the kingdom of God; the Holy Spirit wants us to know how we are shaped to serve effectively so that we can get involved in the right areas of ministry and mission. It is a great blessing to pass on this insight to people who are starting out in their life of serving – for example, young leaders who need to know where they are going to be most effective when they are faced with a range of options.

We have observed previously how there is a battle raging all the time between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness; as followers of Jesus we are called to fight in this battle against the powers of darkness. Specific understanding of an enemy’s strategy is essential to win a military campaign; prophetic understanding of our spiritual enemy’s schemes is critical for gaining spiritual ground. The Holy Spirit is eager to provide this insight to help us battle against evil.

Prophecy is also extremely effective when we have opportunities to speak to not-yet Christians about spiritual life and calling. We have seen how gaining supernatural insight into someone’s life through the gift of prophecy confirms that God is real, God cares for us, and that He has a purpose for our lives. Prophetic insight can be a powerful way of overcoming doubts and removing barriers to faith in Jesus.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. As you reflect on these seven applications of prophecy, spend some time considering how you would like to grow in these different areas of application of this gift.
2. Meditate on the text of a psalm; listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you through this psalm and use these insights to deepen your worship and prayer time.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you about a particular area where you are facing a choice right now and where you need the Spirit’s wisdom to make the right decision.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You for the gift of prophecy and for all the different ways in which this spiritual gift is helpful and instructive as we follow Your leading. Please intensify my desire to grow in this gift and its effective use so that I can deepen my relationship with You and be a channel of spiritual revelation to those around me, including those who have yet to discover Your amazing love. Amen.

## Week 18 Day 1 Different Ways of Hearing God’s Voice

**Bible texts:**

*Then the Lord asked me, ‘What do you see, Jeremiah?’ ‘Figs,’ I answered. ‘The good ones are very good, but the bad ones are so bad that they cannot be eaten.’* Jeremiah 24:3

*Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face towards it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the people of Israel.* Ezekiel 4:3

*When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.*Acts 16:7

*After Joseph had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.* Matthew 1:20

*The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’* 1 Samuel 3:10

*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…*Acts 15:28

**God speaks in many ways**

It’s not surprising that our astonishing God of such infinite creative power should communicate in many different ways. It is helpful to be aware of the most important of these so that we can be open to hearing His voice through these different channels.

The most important of all is scripture – the written Word of God – through which God is always speaking. We can say about the other channels of communication that God MAY be speaking – we need to exercise wise discernment to be sure. On the other hand, God ALWAYS speaks through scripture – and that it is why it is the most important means of hearing God’s voice.

Sometimes God will speak through a picture or a vision in our minds. We see this in the example of Jeremiah above. God asks Jeremiah, “What do you see?” And then Jeremiah describes the picture that he sees with his mind’s eye.

God can speak through what we see physically around us. For example, the Jewish exiles received part of God’s message to them by watching the signs that Ezekiel was enacting for them.

God can speak through our circumstances and experiences. For example, the Holy Spirit guides the apostle Paul and his companions towards Greece by shutting the door to them in Turkey.

God can often speak through dreams; there are many examples of this in scripture. Some dreams are simply our minds processing stored information in our brains. Others may contain a message from God that we need to hear.

Sometimes we can hear God speak through an internal, audible voice in our minds. The many biblical prophets who recorded what they heard God say were most likely transcribing these texts from messages received through this kind of internal voice speaking to them.

Sometimes God can speak to us through impressions we sense in our inner being. This is not a clearly heard voice – more a sense that God is guiding us in a particular way. The verse from Acts 15 above about recognising an internal peace about a specific course of action would be an example of this.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How have you heard God speak to you through scripture recently?
2. How have you heard God speak to you through any of the other ways listed above?
3. Do you sense that God is speaking to you at the moment through any of these means?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You for the many different ways that You speak. Please help me to hear Your messages clearly through these different channels. Please help me to expand my listening capacity so that I can be led as effectively as possible by Your Loving Leadership day by day. Amen.

## Week 18 Day 2 Discerning the voice of God

**Bible text:**

*Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good…* 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21

**Distinguishing between God’s message and our own imagination**

Last week we explored the many different ways in which we can be blessed and bless others by using the gift of prophecy well – the ability to hear God’s voice for ourselves and others. And because of this amazing range of rewards, it is important that we follow Paul’s advice to “eagerly desire” the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:1).

With all powerful tools there comes a danger: that of misusing the tool so that it causes damage rather than blessing. The bible has many accounts of people who sincerely believed they were listening to the voice of God but, in reality, they were simply listening to their own imaginations. There is a great temptation to think that our own earnest desires are what God is saying. Sometimes there can be an agreement between these desires and what God is communicating but not always and so we need to be careful to stop and ask if we are genuinely confident that God is affirming our desires. We have explored the journey we are called to make in the spiritual renewal of our minds, hearts and wills. When we are led and shaped by God’s Spirit, we are progressing towards a greater and greater alignment of our desires with God’s desires – but this is a process, and so not every desire we feel is necessarily in tune with what God is saying.

Discerning the difference between what God is saying and what our own unredeemed desires want God to be saying is a very delicate art and there is a lifelong journey in learning to make this distinction well. This is why Paul says in the verse above that we should “test” prophecies by asking the question – is this really from God or is this from my own or someone else’s imagination?

When it comes to hearing God’s voice through thoughts and impressions there are some key questions that need to be answered before we can be sure that we are hearing God’s voice:

1. Are the impressions consistent with biblical truth? God does not contradict Himself and so if you are hearing a message that contradicts the clear teaching of scripture you can be sure that this is not the voice of God.
2. Do these impressions lead us closer to Jesus and His call on our lives? If they take us away from Jesus, they are not from God. This is not to say that the impressions cannot be challenging in some way; prophetic truth will sometimes challenge wrong thinking or wrong attitudes. However, even if there is a sense of challenge, this will be life-bringing challenge that feels right and wholesome rather than bringing a sense of shame, negativity and emptiness.
3. Do these thoughts linger and keep returning to our minds? When God wants to communicate to us, His Word will stay with us so that we have more opportunity to respond to His voice.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the three questions outlined above. How do they help you to have confidence in discerning what is from God and what is from our own imagination?
2. How do the necessary qualities of encouragement, strength and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3) in a prophetic message give us helpful guidance in what we feel freedom to share with other people?
3. How does the need for the recipient to test a prophetic message bring greater freedom for us to pass on what we believe to be God’s message to people?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You that You eagerly desire to speak with me and through me to others. Please increase my eager desire to hear Your voice clearly and accurately. Help me to develop my discernment to know what is Your clear communication and to know what is my own thinking. Please give me clarity, confidence and courage as I grow in this gift day by day. Amen.

## Week 18 Day 3 Three Stages of Response to Prophetic Messages

**Bible texts:**

*And the Lord asked me, ‘What do you see, Amos?’ ‘A plumb-line,’ I replied. Then the Lord said, ‘Look, I am setting a plumb-line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.* Amos 7:8

*‘What do you see, Amos?’ he asked. ‘A basket of ripe fruit,’ I answered. Then the Lord said to me, ‘The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.* Amos 8:2

**Revelation; Interpretation; Application**

In both these bible verses, the Lord asks Amos, one of the Old Testament prophets: “What do you see?” After Amos describes a clear picture, God gives him the meaning of the picture. These verses illustrate two out of the three distinct aspects of processing prophetic revelation.

The first stage is receiving the message and recognising it as a message from God rather than your own imagination. This requires the process of discernment we explored yesterday. This stage also involves being able to describe exactly what you hear or see – no more and no less.

The second stage is then interpreting the message. If the revelation is communicated through an audible voice telling you something, not much interpretation is needed. On the other hand, if you receive a vision or a dream, or you sense something about your current circumstances is a message from God, then you will have to ask: what does this mean? What is God saying through this experience? If you are not sure what a picture means, then it is good not to force your own interpretation on the revelation. It is better to pass on the uninterpreted revelation in the expectation that the recipient will understand its significance.

The third stage is application: what do we do with the revelation and its interpretation? Is the message given to us to prompt us to pray about a person or situation? Are we meant to pass the message on to someone or not? Are we meant to pass it on to a church leader? For example, just because we receive a message from God about someone does not mean that we have to pass it on to them; it may be that God is simply asking us to pray specifically for that person in the light of what He is saying to us about their situation.

Where the revelation is all about encouragement, strengthening and comforting someone then we most likely will be able to pass on this revelation to that person without there being any concerns. On the other hand, if we sense that the revelation is about a warning, or a major piece of direction (e.g. a future marriage or future pregnancy or career or the destiny of a child) or relates to a need for correction, then we need to exercise great wisdom about how we apply the message. The wisest option will be to pray for guidance about how to apply the message and also to speak to a senior church leader about what application is necessary. Prophecy is a powerful tool – but powerful tools can do great damage when not handled well. Wise application is always essential.

**For Further Reflection:**

* + - 1. Have you considered these three stages of prophecy before? What new insights occur to you as you think about these three stages?
			2. Reflect on the importance of sometimes passing on uninterpreted revelation rather than to risk getting the interpretation wrong.
			3. Reflect on the importance of getting the application right – especially in the area of guidance or correction.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, please help me to discern Your voice clearly, to interpret Your voice accurately, and to apply Your revelation wisely. I ask that You will give me greater and greater confidence to hear, understand and apply Your revelation in my own life and in the lives of those around me day by day. Amen.

## Week 18 Day 4 Passing on Prophecies with Love and Humility

**Bible texts:**

*Now eagerly desire the greater spiritual gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way.* 1 Corinthians 12:31

*If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.* 1 Corinthians 13:2

*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.* 1 Corinthians 14:1

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*Galatians 5:22-23

**The essential qualities of love and humility as we use spiritual gifts**

The sequence of Paul’s writing in Chapters 12-14 of his first letter to the Corinthian church is important for us to recognise. The main theme of Chapters 12 and 14 is his teaching about the range and use of spiritual gifts while sandwiched in the middle of these two sections is an amazing passage about unconditional love (Chapter 13). Paul is not haphazard in the way he presents his teaching in his letters; the Holy Spirit inspires him to follow a logical sequence. It is vital that we see the importance of this sequence: at the heart of application of spiritual gifts is the priority of doing so with unconditional love. Our primary motivation for using our prophetic gift has to be love; our primary characteristic in the experience of using this gift must also be love.

We previously saw how spiritual gifts are like practical tools to get the various tasks of ministry done effectively. Taking this analogy further, we can see that there are three basic requirements in relation to a power tool: the tool, the electrical power supply, and the care that is required to use the tool safely and well.

In a similar way, we can see three roles of the Holy Spirit in the use of the gift of prophecy. The Holy Spirit gives the gift to us in the first place; the Holy Spirit empowers the gift with His presence working in us; and the Holy Spirit brings the fruit of unconditional love as our motivation and desire in using the gift to bring encouragement, strength and comfort to people around us. In short, the Holy Spirit brings the gift, its empowering and the fruit of loving application of the gift.

If we are passing on a prophetic message to other people then let’s make every effort to do so in patient love, never with impatient harshness. Let’s remember that prophetic messages should bring encouragement, strength and comfort to the recipient. Before we begin passing on a prophetic message, let’s ask the Holy Spirit to give us the wisdom to communicate the message in the best possible way to communicate these qualities.

Let’s also offer the prophetic message with an appropriate sense of humility expressed with words like: “I think God may be saying this…”. It is good to avoid phrases like: “God is telling you this…”. This second kind of wording does not allow the recipient the freedom to test the authenticity of the prophetic message being offered which we saw yesterday is a very important aspect of responding to a prophetic message.

**For Further Reflection:**

Why do you think Paul emphasised the priority of unconditional love in the midst of teaching about spiritual gifts? What kind of harm could be done if the gift of prophecy is not used with love?

Reflect on the role of the Holy Spirit as the giver, empowerer and shaper of spiritual gift application. How is the combination of these three areas of the Holy Spirit’s role important?

Reflect on the importance of humility in what we offer to others. What are the negative consequences if we claim too much divine authority in what we pass on to people?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, I thank You for the gifts you provide for Your church to be effective in the tasks to which You call us. I thank You for the empowering of these gifts with Your divine presence. I thank You for the fruit of a Jesus-like character that You bring to us as we step out in using these gifts. Please help me to seek Your gifts, Your power and Your fruit in my life as I use spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. Amen.

## Week 18 Day 5 Stewarding the Prophetic Wisely

**Bible text:**

*Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience…* 1 Timothy 1:18-19

**Responding to prophecies about our future**

Many of the messages we hear from God are simple communications of His encouragement, comfort and strengthening which don’t require any active response other than thankfulness for God’s generosity in speaking to us out of His love for each one us, personally and specifically.

However, some messages from God are about a calling God is bringing to us to fulfil. In these cases, an active response on our part is necessary. We cannot simply respond passively by saying: “Well that’s a very interesting message about the future; I think I will wait to see if anything happens to bring this about.”

On the other hand, neither can we become so active in our response that we feel it is our responsibility to MAKE it happen; this would be to wrongly think we have to so engineer our future that the fulfilment becomes inevitable as fast as possible.

A middle course is the right way forward, avoiding the one extreme of sitting back and seeing what might happen in the future without any input from us and the opposite extreme of thinking it is our sole job to make this prophetic message come true, no matter what it takes.

How this looks in practice will depend on the prophetic message we have received.

An example may help. Suppose we receive a prophetic message that we are called to be a leader in a ministry among teenagers. The passive response is to wait until a teenager ministry leader contacts us to invite us to come and join their leadership team. The opposite response of over-zealous enthusiasm is to call up a teenager ministry leader and declare to them that God has spoken to you about leadership in this area of ministry and that they should immediately appoint you to a position of leadership. The middle way of wise stewardship would be to approach the relevant leader, explain that you have received this prophetic message which you want to steward well, and to explore how it might be possible for you to start helping with this area with a view to seeing how God fulfils His promise by giving you increasing responsibility over a period of time.

This middle way of faith-filled partnership is always going to be the best way of stewarding prophetic promises well. And as we commit ourselves to this middle way, it is good to make sure that we record prophetic promises in an accessible place which can be reviewed regularly to make our stewardship of these promises easier to fulfil.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Why is it important to get our response to directive prophecies right – not too passive and not too active?
2. How do you or would you record prophetic guidance given to you so that you keep track of your response to what God has spoken about the future?
3. Are there any past prophetic messages given to you that you need to go over again to see how you can steward your involvement in their fulfilment more effectively?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You that You want the very best future for me. As You guide me through prophetic messages please help me to be a good steward of this revelation – neither being too passive nor too active. Please help me to be an active partner in seeing Your promises to me fulfilled. Amen.

## Week 19 Day 1 Responding to Prophetic Messages in Obedience

**Bible texts:**

*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.* James 1:22

*The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives for ever.* 1 John 2:17

*All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock – the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The Lord your God will bless you in the land he is giving you. The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in obedience to him.*Deuteronomy 28:2-9

**The Wisdom of Obedience to God**

We have explored the importance of listening to what God is saying to us over the last two weeks; we have explored the different ways God speaks to us and how useful these messages can be in many different contexts. We have begun to explore how we can best respond to these messages from God. There is a clear need for obedience in response to what God speaks to us – and this is our theme for the next couple of weeks.

Why should we obey what we hear from God?

Firstly, the One who is speaking to us is God. Lord. King. Creator. Sustainer of all. Ruler of the universe. Redeemer. If this all-powerful King over all has spoken to us, then we need to obey what we sense God is saying to us.

Secondly, the One who is speaking to us is all-seeing, all-knowing, all-wise. He sees the end from the beginning. He understands the shape of our lives and knows what is best for us. We do well to listen and obey what He is showing us – for He knows most fully how best to live our lives.

Thirdly, obedience to the Word of God will always bring us blessing. Good things will flow into a life that is characterised by humble obedience to what God is saying. This is the clear teaching of the bible; disobedience brings trouble while obedience brings reward. The passage from Deuteronomy is an amazing catalogue of blessings that flow from obedience – blessing upon our lives at home and our lives at work; blessing upon the growth and fruitfulness of our work; blessing upon our families; blessing upon our determined efforts to oppose evil. Our infinitely generous God is ready to bring these blessings to us – if only we are ready to put into practice what He is showing us through His Word – His written Word in the Bible and His prophetic Word through the Holy Spirit’s ongoing revelation to us.

The way of wisdom is the way of obedience to God.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Which of the many blessings God offers those who obey Him speaks most powerfully to you and why?
2. How does the all-seeing, all-knowing power of God encourage you to obey God’s revelation for your life?
3. Meditate on the Sovereignty of God as King over all. Allow the recognition of His Greatness to increase and deepen your desire to follow His leading and to implement His instruction.

**Prayer:**

Loving Lord of All, Thank You for Your sovereignty over all that is – including my own life. Help me to see and understand more fully the wisdom of obeying Your Word to me day by day and help me to have a growing desire to put Your instruction into practice today and every day. Thank You for the abundant blessings that flow from our readiness to apply Your Word in our lives. Amen.

## Week 19 Day 2 Love and Obedience

**Bible texts:**

*Jesus replied, ‘Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.* John 14:23-24*And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands.*2 John 1:6

**Obeying God from a place of Loving Devotion**

While honour is a key incentive for obedience, love is a much deeper incentive.

Honour provokes respect for a person’s instruction and respect provokes the discipline of following that instruction.

While this is important and helpful, heart-felt love is a much stronger source of guidance towards obedience. When we truly love someone we will WANT to follow their instruction because our hearts are engaged with their hearts.

As we saw previously, the renewed heart is increasingly filled with the desires of God; there is an alignment of our longings with God’s longings, God’s purposes with our purposes.

This is an important transition to make: from HAVING to do the will of God to WANTING to do the will of God; from “I OUGHT to do this” to “I LONG to do this”; in short, from duty to joy.

As the Holy Spirit works in us to transform us more and more into the likeness of Jesus, to bring renewal to our minds, hearts and will, we will find that our thoughts, desires and intentions become increasingly aligned with the purposes of God. As a result, our obedience to the leading of God will become more and more our intrinsic desire. Our obedience will then flow from our deep love for God.

Let’s read again what Jesus said: *Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them*.

The implication is that the more we obey God, the more of God’s presence we will experience as God comes and makes His home in our lives. And the more of God’s presence we experience, the more we will be transformed into the likeness of Jesus and the more we will want to obey God’s will. As a result, the virtuous circle continues to revolve as we move forward on our journey of transformation.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you see love being a more powerful force to nurture obedience than respect?
2. Reflect on the virtuous circle of our loving obedience to God inviting God’s presence into our lives more fully so that the character of Jesus is formed in us more fully. You might like to draw a picture of this circle of transformation and make notes around it.
3. Do you sense that your growing love for God motivates your growing obedience to God?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Your perfect love for Your Heavenly Father inspired Your perfect obedience to His commands. May Your presence in my life deepen my love for You so that I can obey Your commands and instruction from a place of love as well as duty. Amen.

## Week 19: Day 3 Embracing Covenant Obedience

**Bible texts:**

*From everlasting to everlasting the****Lord****’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.* Psalm 103:17-18

*In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.* Luke 22:20

*…the new covenant is established on better promises.* Hebrews 8:6

**Our Covenant Calling**

Throughout the Old Testament we see God making a series of covenants or pledges with various people – for example, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. These covenants were based on God’s initiative in offering promises of protection and provision as long as God was offered human obedience to His laws. Obedience to God’s Law would bring covenant blessings; disobedience would – and often did - bring God’s judgement.

At the Last Supper before His crucifixion, Jesus introduced a New Covenant based upon His perfect sacrifice on the cross of Good Friday on behalf of imperfect humanity. As followers of Jesus, we have entered into this New Covenant which replaces the Old Covenant because it is based on better promises. The Old Covenant promises relied upon obedience to a set of laws; New Covenant promises rely upon God’s grace to us in Jesus. We deserve punishment for our sin – but God takes that punishment upon Himself on the cross in the person of His Son. The Book of Hebrews in the New Testament is an amazing description of how much greater the New Covenant is compared with the Old Covenant – well worth reading.

There are a number of key differences between the biblical view of the New Covenant and a secular business contract which are important to understand. Firstly, whereas a business contract exists between equal partners – contractor and client - the New Covenant is drawn up between unequal partners – God and humans. A business contract is based on Law; the New Covenant is based on God’s lavish grace to us – loving us in ways we simply don’t deserve. A business contract is based on consistent human performance; the New Covenant is based on Jesus’ perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father. A business contract is based on human effort; the New Covenant is based on God’s love. A business contract is time-restricted; the New Covenant is everlasting and eternal.

In our reflection upon our obedience to God’s revelation there are two implications from the light of the New Covenant.

Firstly, since the New Covenant is a Covenant of Grace not Law we can have no fear that our failure to obey God’s revelation will mean that we are somehow excluded from His covenant. This truth should keep us from any sense of condemnation when we fail to obey God’s revelation. When we get it wrong, God still loves us, still welcomes us, still longs for us to draw close to Him. This is the glory of a covenant that is based on Jesus’ work on our behalf and not our performance for God. We would do well to confess our mistakes to God and say we are sorry – but then we can be assured of His never-failing forgiveness.

Secondly, in the light of this astonishing grace, this all-surpassing forgiving love, this supreme kindness to us from God we should find ourselves eager to obey His revelation to us. The New Covenant is opposed to earning God’s approval through our good works – but it is not opposed to genuine, consistent and persistent effort on our part to honour God with our loving obedience to what He is asking of us.

So, in summary, our covenant calling releases us from condemnation for our failures but brings us to a higher incentive for obedience – a response of eternal gratitude to our Loving Saviour.

**For Further Reflection**

1. Have you thought about the differences between the New Covenant and a business contract before? Which differences strike you as being most significant?
2. How do these differences inspire your gratitude for God’s generosity to you in Jesus?
3. The New Covenant is opposed to earning God’s approval but not opposed to our effort in obeying God. In what ways do you sense a fresh eagerness to commit yourself to obedience in the light of God’s grace to us in Jesus?

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your grace to us in Jesus, allowing us to freely enter into the New Covenant made possible through the shedding of His precious blood on the cross. Thank You for Your forgiveness for my faults and failings as I respond to Your revelation to me. As I remember the price that Jesus paid, Holy Spirit would You inspire me to a greater level of obedience to Your revelation day by day. Amen.

## Week 19: Day 4 The Fruit of Obedience

**Bible texts:**

*All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God…* Deuteronomy 28:2

*Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.* Psalm 1:1-3

**Releasing the Resources of Heaven**

The bible is clear in its teaching that obedience to God prompts His blessings while disobedience towards God prevents His blessing.

Obedience to God makes clear in practical ways that we honour God above all else, that we take His revelation seriously, that we want to live in alignment with His instruction. It is one thing to say that we will obey God; it is another to do what God requires of us. The implementation of God’s instruction is the proof that is needed that we take God’s instruction to heart.

The collection of psalms is the most amazing gathering of songs and poems about the life of faith, its ups and downs, challenges and consolations. It is so important that this collection of 150 psalms begins with a psalm that is all about our readiness to position ourselves among those who obey God and not among those who disobey God. The first psalm invites us to live a life of faithful obedience, taking to heart what we hear God say as we meditate in His presence, as we take time to listen to His wise and compassionate voice.

And the psalm makes clear the fruit of this kind of obedient living: we will be like an ever-green tree planted beside a river that never dries up so that we will never wither, we will produce good fruit at the proper time and we will experience prosperity in all our activities. In short, we will receive persistent life, productive life and prosperous life through our obedience to God’s revelation.

Abundant blessing flows from careful and persistent obedience. Let’s take this insight to heart as we continue on our journey of intent listening and courageous obedience.

**For Further Reflection**

1. The promise of Psalm 1 is that the tree of our lives will not wither when we practise obedience to God’s revelation. How does this encourage our obedience?
2. The promise of Psalm 1 is that the tree of our lives will bear good fruit when we practise obedience to God’s revelation. How does this strengthen our obedience?
3. The promise of Psalm 1 is that all our activities will prosper when we practise obedience to God’s revelation. How does this motivate our obedience?

**Prayer**:

Loving Heavenly Father, thank You for Your eternal promises. Thank You for the promises of Psalm 1 that have yielded their precious fruit for thousands of years to those who have listened and obeyed their insights. Please help me to meditate on Your revelation day by day and to put into practice what I hear you say, so that I too may receive Your blessing of persistent life, productive life and prosperous life. Amen.

## Week 19: Day 5 Obedience Releases Supernatural Power

**Bible text:**

*Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, ‘If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.’ …So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, ‘Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.’*

*But Naaman went away angry and said, ‘I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn’t I wash in them and be cleansed?’ So he turned and went off in a rage.*

*Naaman’s servants went to him and said, ‘My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, “Wash and be cleansed”!’ So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.* 2 Kings 5: 1-3, 9-14

**Responding to Unexpected Revelation**

This is a remarkable story of a supernatural healing. What makes it especially interesting is that it teaches us a profound lesson about how responding in obedience to unexpected revelation from God releases supernatural power. Naaman, a Syrian Army Commander, suffering from leprosy, is very close to responding badly to the prophetic revelation from a prophet named Elisha who instructs him to go and immerse himself in the River Jordan seven times in order to be healed. This instruction is not what Naaman was expecting at all; he was expecting the prophet to come and pray for his sickness in person. When he receives a different set of instructions, he responds with dismissive indignation and storms off in a rage.

Naaman’s servants – who clearly admire and honour their boss as a great man – persuade him to reconsider the revelation from the prophet about the key to accessing his healing from God. Naaman listens to them, obeys the prophetic word and experiences a miracle of healing. His leprosy is instantly healed.

This is a really important story with lots of significant insights. For now, the important lesson for us is that when we receive revelation that is not what we are expecting to hear we should make sure that we don’t dismiss it immediately but take time to consider if God is speaking to us through this unexpected message. And when we are ready to respond in obedience to what is a surprising message from God, we will find that God releases His supernatural resources to bring surprising blessings. It takes courage to respond to an unexpected revelation from God – but great rewards will flow from our courageous obedience.

**For Further Reflection**

1. Can you think of other examples of surprising revelation from God in the bible? How did the people in these accounts respond?
2. Have you ever experienced a surprising revelation from God? How did you respond?
3. Reflect on the important lesson of this story: resist the temptation to reject unexpected revelation from God; obedience to surprising revelation releases supernatural power.

**Prayer**:

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You for all the revelation that You bring to me – some of it expected and reassuring; some of it unexpected and challenging. Please give me the readiness to resist the temptation to quickly reject what I find surprising, to discern wisely the truth of what You are asking of me and to obey what I sense You are saying with faith and courage. Amen.

## Week 20 Day 1 A Tale of Two Sons: the gap between intentions and fulfilment

**Bible texts:**

*There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.” “I will not,” he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, “I will, sir,” but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? ‘The first,’ they answered.* Matthew 21:28-31
*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.* 2 Corinthians 1:20

**The importance of turning intentions into actions**

The passage above from Matthew’s gospel is an important story about obedience that leads to action. The first son at first refuses to obey but then changes his mind and does what his father is asking. The second son immediately says that he will follow the father’s instruction but he fails to do so. Jesus makes a point of commending the first son over the second; God’s approval is always going to be with those who might be reluctant at first but then deliver the goods rather than with those who say they will do something but then fail to go through with it. God’s commendation is for those who act upon His Word not those who stop at the level of good intentions.

We need to make sure that we are not like the second son, promising much but delivering little. Jesus said that we should let our “yes” genuinely mean “yes”. If we say “yes” to God’s instruction, then we need to follow through with the appropriate actions. If we don’t, then our “yes” counts for little; our “yes” really means “maybe” or “I will see how things go” or “I will do this if no better alternative shows up first”.

God’s promises to us are always “yes” in Christ; God always fulfils His promises of blessing towards us in Jesus. In the light of that faithfulness, we need to be the kind of people who will say “yes” to God and make sure that we mean what we say.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you recall an occasion when you said you would do something but then you failed to do it?
2. Do you recall an occasion when you said you would not do something but then you changed your mind and completed it?
3. Reflect on the ways in which God’s promises to us are always “yes” in Christ. How does this reality increase your motivation to be the kind of person to say “yes” to God and really mean it?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, thank You that all Your promises to us are “yes” in Christ. Thank You that when You speak You act; when You promise You deliver. Please help me to become more and more the kind of person who follows through with my intentions to listen to Your Word and to obey Your Word, knowing that Your Will is always the best way to live. Amen.

## Week 20 Day 2 Four Different Responses to the Word of God

**Bible text:**

*‘Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: when anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.’* Matthew 13:18-23

**Four Types of Ground; Four Kinds of Heart**

Jesus loved to teach with parables and this parable of the seed falling on different kinds of ground has so much to teach us about different responses to revelation from God. Each type of ground can be seen as a particular condition of our hearts that leads to a different response.

The first type – where the seed falls on the hard path - we could describe as that of the hard-hearted response; the listener is unreceptive, not interested in understanding what the revelation means. The revelation from God is quickly removed from our minds.

The second type – the rocky ground - could be described as the weak-hearted response. The challenges of trouble and hardship overwhelm the quick but superficial response; this response lacks the deep roots of commitment that provide determined resilience through tough times and so is quickly lost.

The third type – the thorny ground - could be described as the half-hearted response. The distractions of this life and the competition of other pressing priorities take over our time and energy; our obedience is compromised by these other factors so that it fails to bear fruit.

The fourth type – the good soil - is the whole-hearted response where understanding and obedience combined with the water of the Holy Spirit and the soil nutrients of truth and integrity bring a rich harvest that multiplies the impact of the initial revelation from God.

These four conditions can represent four different types of people; they can also represent four different types of response in the same person depending on the state of our hearts. At times, if we are not vigilant, we can be guilty of being hard-hearted, weak-hearted and half-hearted, failing to obey God’s Word because of resistance, hardship or distractions.

Let’s make every effort to be whole-hearted in our obedience to God’s Word – biblical and prophetic – so that God’s revelation brings the full harvest of blessing that it is intended to bring.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What measures can we take to avoid the hard-hearted response of obstinate resistance to God’s Word?
2. How can we avoid the weak-hearted response that cannot withstand the scorching heat of tough times?
3. How can we avoid the half-hearted response that gets easily distracted by secondary priorities?

**Prayer**:

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your whole-hearted obedience in listening to the Holy Spirit’s revelation about different kinds of responses and being ready to turn that revelation into this amazing parable. Thank You for the way You modelled what it is to make a whole-hearted response to the Spirit’s revelation that brings such a rich harvest of inspiration for others. Please help me to make the same kind of response as I listen and obey Your Word day by day. Amen.

## Week 20 Day 3: Casual Complacency as a Barrier to Obedience

**Bible text**:

*As for you, son of man, your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, “Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.” My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.* Ezekiel 33:30-32

**Revelation Reveals the State of our Hearts**

The revelation that was coming through Ezekiel to God’s people was certainly creating a stir; the local people were talking together about these amazing prophetic insights that Ezekiel was bringing and they were busy encouraging each other to come along and listen to what he had to say. There was nothing wrong with their curiosity; the problem lay in their lack of obedience. The Lord makes clear to Ezekiel that they were guilty of casual complacency about the application of what they were hearing. God’s revelation should have provoked them to obedient action; instead, they are content to be entertained by Ezekiel’s declarations, treating him as a talented singer who sings and plays really well, purely for passive enjoyment rather than the active response of listeners.

The revelation from God revealed the state of their hearts: their mouths spoke of love but their hearts were greedy for unjust gain. In other words, they were happy to say all the right things but there was no integrity about their speech because their hearts were motivated by selfish gain. Had their hearts been in the right place, they would have listened to God’s Word through Ezekiel and then been ready to apply this revelation, recognising the urgency of their willing pursuit of God’s purposes. The mismatch between their outward speech and their inward priorities was revealed by their reluctance to apply what they were hearing.

This week we will consider some barriers to obedience; hindrances that get in the way of us applying what we hear God say. In the light of this passage from Ezekiel, we need to make sure that we resist the temptation to be casually entertained by prophetic revelation from God. There is no doubt that we can experience a sense of excited fascination with what God is saying. While there is nothing wrong with being fascinated by God’s revelation, we must make sure that this fascination produces a readiness to embrace what we are called to do and to be in response to this revelation.

We are bombarded by information all day long through our mobile phones; most of this information requires little or no response from us. The information we receive through the Holy Spirit is different; His information is given to us to bring eternal transformation.

God’s Word is spoken with a deliberate purpose in mind. Let’s make sure that we are ready to discern what this purpose is and then be ready to act upon it. God’s Word is released to bring persistent transformation in our lives not casual entertainment.

**For Further Reflection**

1. In what ways do we acknowledge a sense of fascination about prophetic revelation? What are the positive qualities of such fascination? What are the dangers?
2. In what ways does our response to God’s revelation reveal the state of our hearts towards God?
3. What practical steps can you take to guard against treating prophetic revelations from God as interesting insights that fall short of provoking deliberate action?

**Prayer**

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You for Your readiness to communicate with me day by day. Please help me to guard against casual responses to Your revelation but instead help me to discern the application that is needed and to follow through with persistence. Amen.

## Week 20 Day 4 Sacrificial Obedience

**Bible texts**:

‘*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’* Isaiah 55:8-9

*‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’* Jeremiah 29:11

**Responding in Obedience to a Surprising Word from God**

This verse from Jeremiah is often quoted as a reminder of the truth that God has great plans for our lives; God’s purposes for our lives are to bring us hope and prosperity.

While this is clearly true, the context of Bible verses is very important in our understanding of their significance. The context of this promise is the revelation that the enforced exile of the people of God in a foreign country would last for seventy years. In contrast to this devastating news, the Jewish exiles desperately wanted the trauma of their unexpected exile to be short – a few years at most; then they could quickly return back to their familiar life in Israel.

God had other plans in mind; they would be in this foreign land for the next two generations. As a result, He instructed them to put down roots in this foreign land – to build houses, develop their self-sustaining gardens and increase their families. In the midst of this instruction about their future for the next seventy years, God brings the promise that – surprising and perhaps unappetising as they may seem – God’s plans are ultimately for our blessing and not for our harm.

Sometimes, we may face the same experience: hearing a prophetic word from God that we find very surprising and quite possibly off-putting. It might seem irrational; it might seem far too demanding; it might seem a step in the wrong direction according to what we think is the right way forward; it might seem like a price too high; a sacrifice too great.

In this experience of hearing a surprising word from God that is going to require personal sacrifice, we can take comfort from Jeremiah 29:11 – God’s purposes are always for our blessing, never for our harm. God sees the big picture at a level of comprehensiveness, detail, authority and foresight never possible for us as humans. If we are confident that we have heard God right, then we have to trust that God knows best and that we need to be obedient to this surprising word. And then we have to continue to trust that in the fullness of time, we will see that God’s promises to bring blessing and fulfilment will be shown to be eternally true.

When we feel fearful about responding in obedience we can remember how Jesus demonstrated to us supremely that sacrificial and courageous obedience releases God’s rich blessings.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of other examples of people being given challenging prophetic instruction that required self-sacrifice? What blessings flowed from their obedience?
2. How does the perspective of God’s understanding of the whole of our future lives bring us confidence to obey what may seem surprising to us?
3. Have you heard God speak any surprising revelation to you? What feelings did this revelation bring to you? How did you respond to this revelation?

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, I praise You as the One who knows all things, understands all things, has authority over all things. Thank You that Your thoughts are so much higher and greater than mine. When I hear You bring surprising revelation, please help me to be ready to obey Your Word, even when it is costly to do so. Help me to follow in the steps of Your Son, our Saviour, as He responded to Your Word in humble obedience. Amen.

## Week 20 Day 5 Our Rhythm of Listening and Obeying

**Bible texts:**

*Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase…* Deuteronomy 6:3

*Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.* Luke 11:28

*God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.* John 4:24

**The Spirit brings truth-filled revelation; the Spirit inspires truth-honouring application**

We come today to the final session in our four week-long exploration of what it means to listen to God’s revelation and to obey that revelation.

We have considered the different ways that God speaks to us; we have considered the blessings that flow from our faithful obedience to that revelation.

As we finish this section today, it is helpful to consider our partnership with the Holy Spirit in living this daily rhythm of listening and obeying.

Jesus said that we should worship in the Holy Spirit and in truth. As we draw close to God in worship, we come with the expectation that we will worship in the power of the Holy Spirit and therefore have a spiritual encounter with God. As a result, we will hear His voice bring enduring encouragement, comfort and strength to us; we will also hear His voice bring fresh instruction that needs applying in our lives. God’s truth requires our obedience; otherwise we are clearly in the place of questioning its truth.

The Holy Spirit is involved in both the revelation and the application; we will experience the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in bringing this truth-filled revelation to us and then we can receive the help of the Holy Spirit in applying this truth-filled revelation in our lives.

This movement from revelation to application brings a sense of regular rhythm: the rhythm of entering God’s presence in worship with an expectation of receiving holy revelation from the Spirit and then departing in an attitude of holy obedience to the Spirit.

This is a great way of seeing all our times of engaging with God: living out this life-giving, faith-building, character-shaping rhythm of listening and obeying, receiving and applying, hearing and practising.

We can even see this rhythm as being like the tick-tock rhythm of a clock that can provide a helpful pattern to our lives as growing apprentices of Jesus: we listen (tick); we obey (tock).

Let’s enjoy living this amazing adventure of being shaped by the tick-tock rhythm of holy listening and holy obedience day by day.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do we have a ticking clock anywhere in our home? Is this something that we could acquire to remind us of the tick-tock rhythm of listening and obeying?
2. In a world of ever-increasing complexity, how do we respond to the simplicity of this daily rhythm of listening and obeying?
3. How do you respond to the idea of entering God’s presence in holy expectation of listening to God’s revelation and departing in holy obedience to what we have heard? What have you heard God say today that needs your obedience?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You for the promise of bringing fresh revelation to us day by day. Thank You for the promise of Your help in applying this revelation day by day. Please help me to listen carefully and to obey courageously as I seek to become more like Jesus. Amen.

## Week 21 Day 1 The Prayer that Jesus Taught His Apprentices to Pray

**Bible text:**

*This, then, is how you should pray:*

*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.* Matthew 6: 9-13

**The Rich Implications of the Lord’s Prayer**

The text of this prayer has been used by followers of Jesus for over two thousand years. It is often called the Lord’s Prayer because it is the prayer that our Lord Jesus taught us to pray. Let’s remember though that Jesus would not be able to pray this pray in its entirety because it includes asking for forgiveness of sin and Jesus was without sin in every way.

Every phrase of this prayer is rich in meaning and significance and the prayer has a great deal to teach us, not only about prayer, but also about the character of God and our calling in Christ. Because of the broad and deep implications of each section of the prayer we are going to take four weeks to explore its meaning.

This is a prayer that we can pray in 30 seconds. Equally, it is a prayer in which each phrase can be a springboard into meditation and reflection for as long as we want.

We begin with reflection upon the nature of God’s kingdom which we touched on in Week 3 when we thought about our calling to extend God’s kingdom, along with what is implied by asking for daily bread.

Then we will reflect on the Father heart of God and the Names of God as Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Next, we will come to the importance of giving and receiving forgiveness.

Finally, we will explore resisting temptation and deliverance from evil.

There is so much richness in this prayer and so much we can learn from its phrases about how we are to live a Jesus-centred life. We can be so grateful to Jesus that He gave this prayer to His first followers and that we can cherish its deep significance as a resource for our own lives of devotion to the King of kings and His everlasting Kingdom.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you ever thought about why Jesus could not pray this prayer because of His sinless perfection?
2. Have you ever thought about using this prayer as a springboard into meditation?
3. Have you ever thought about using this prayer as a means of understanding God, His character and our calling as followers of Christ more fully?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for the gift of this amazing prayer with all its wide and deep implications for my life of listening obedience. Please help me to grow in my appreciation of its significance so that it can be an inspiration for meditation and a means for understanding Your character and Your call on my life more fully. Amen.

## Week 21 Day 2 Your Kingdom Come

**Bible texts:**

*Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.* Psalm 45:6

*Seek first God’s kingdom…and all these things will be given to you as well.* Matthew 6:33

*Jesus appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.* Acts 1:3

*Paul witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God…He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ – with all boldness and without hindrance.* Acts 28:23,31

**The King and His Kingdom**

In the opening sessions of this devotional journal, we reflected on the identity of Jesus, first as Saviour and then as Lord over all. Jesus is the King over all the kings and rulers of this Earth. And since every king needs a kingdom, the greatest of all kings is enthroned over the greatest of all kingdoms.

We have seen before how the theme of the kingdom of God was the main focus of Jesus’ teaching. It is also deeply significant that during the forty day period after the resurrection of Jesus on the first Easter Sunday and before His return to Heaven, Jesus chose to speak about the kingdom of God. This was clearly a critical time for His first apprentices – and Jesus deliberately chose to teach them about the kingdom.

We see the same priority in the teaching of Paul in Rome near the end of his life: we read in the verses from Acts 28 above that, from morning until evening, Paul devoted himself to bold explanations about the kingdom of God without hindrance.

What we focus on in our last opportunities to speak with people on this Earth clearly shows our main priority; and also what needs to be the main focus of our listeners’ lives. Jesus and Paul are united in their passion for the priority of the kingdom of God and in communicating that this priority needs to be shared by all followers of Jesus.

When we pray “Your kingdom come” this is our clear request: “Lord, King of kings, may Your kingdom be extended on the Earth to impact our lives with Your blessings.”

There is a lifetime of exploration of this critical theme in the bible and there is a lifetime of adventure in partnering with God and each other to see the kingdom of God become an ever-increasing reality on Earth as it is already complete and perfect in Heaven.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect upon the significance of Jesus and Paul devoting themselves to the message of the kingdom of God in their last conversations with people before leaving the Earth.
2. Reflect on the phrase: “Your kingdom come”. In what ways do you desire to see God’s rule and reign of justice and compassion, truth and grace become more fully expressed in your own life? How do self-centred priorities hinder the priority of the kingdom of God?
3. In what ways do you desire to see God’s rule and reign of justice and compassion, truth and grace become more fully expressed in situations around you?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that in Your last days on this Earth before Your return to Heaven You chose to speak about the kingdom of God. Please help me to make Your kingdom my priority in my life and my work day by day. Amen.

## Week 21 Day 3 Your Will be Done on Earth as in Heaven

**Bible texts:**

*Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.’* John 18:36

*‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.’* Rev 11:15

**Heaven’s Resources Transforming Earth’s Problems**

Your will be done on Earth as in Heaven: these nine words have the power to revolutionise our lives forever.

Let’s reflect on what we are asking for with these nine words given to us by Jesus.

We are asking that God’s will and purposes will be increasingly fulfilled on Earth as they are perfectly fulfilled in Heaven. This is a revolutionary prayer.

Let’s remind ourselves of the fact that there are only two spiritual kingdoms: the kingdom of this world, ruled over by the powers of darkness and deception, and the kingdom of God, ruled over by the One True God of the universe, the Glorious Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit who – as One Radiant Being - is completely and perfectly full of light and truth.

The kingdom of God is the domain of the King: wherever the King is reigning in power. Our God and King is enthroned forever over a kingdom that brings life in all its amazing colour and diversity, wholeness in all its richness and splendour, joy in all its celebration and beauty, truth with all its power to enlighten us and set us free forever. The kingdom of God is everything that humans need, life in abundance, forever.

Jesus was incarnated to teach us about this kingdom and to make our entry into this kingdom possible through His supreme sacrifice. The Holy Spirit was released at Pentecost (Acts 2) to bring profound understanding of this supernatural kingdom, to bring a whole-hearted passion for seeing this kingdom become reality on Earth as it is in Heaven, and to bring us the resources we need to see our visions of God’s kingdom become incarnated piece by piece, life by life.

In praying these nine words we are praying for love to replace hatred, forgiveness to replace bitterness, truth to replies lies, justice to replace injustice, generosity to replace greed, humility to replace pride, understanding to replace ignorance, healing to overcome sickness, freedom to replace oppression; and so this amazing list of kingdom transformations could go on.

Will we see complete perfection in this life here and now? No, because that perfection awaits the creation of the New Earth when the kingdom of God will replace the kingdom of the world forever (see Revelation 11:15 above). However, will we see enough transformation on Earth to keep us faith-filled and faithful? Yes, if we pray consistently as if it is all up to God and work diligently as if it is all up to us.

Nine words to inspire us; nine words to transform both us and the world around us. This is the dynamic adventure of kingdom-focused prayer.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Where do you want to see the kingdom of God impact your own life and circumstances? Turn these desires into prayers.
2. Where do you want to see the kingdom of God impact situations around you? Turn these desires into prayers.
3. Where do you want to see the kingdom of God impact the world right now? Turn these desires into prayers.

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, I praise You that You have chosen to work in partnership with our prayers and acts of service in transforming this broken world with the life-changing resources of Heaven. Give me a clearer vision of how that transformation can take place in my life, in situations around me that I am praying for today. Give me faith to believe that as I pray and work, work and pray, these transformations will come into being piece by piece. Help me to persist in my partnership with You in seeing Your will be done on Earth as in Heaven. Amen.

## Week 21 Day 4 Give us today our Daily Bread

**Bible texts:**
*Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you.* Exodus 16:4

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord****’****s favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.* Isaiah 61:1-3

*Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Human beings shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’* Matthew 4:4

**The Distinctive Bread of the Kingdom of God**

Jesus taught us that God’s Word is to be our spiritual daily bread bringing the spiritual nourishment and energy that we need every day. While we recognise that God is our Provider and that He will bring what we need by way of physical resources, this verse also reminds us that we need spiritual food to remain strong and that spiritual food is revelation through God’s Word.

In turn, when we are asking God to reveal His plan and purposes for our daily lives, this revelation will lead us to understand more fully the kingdom transformations that God wants to bring in us and through us to others around us; all of these insights about the kingdom transformations that He intends to bring are examples of our daily bread.

And if we want to be reminded of the kind of transformations that God wants to bring, then we can be inspired by the passage from Isaiah 61 that Jesus quoted near the start of His ministry (see Luke 4:16-21); these verses describe the kind of kingdom transformations that the world desperately needed then – and still needs now. And as Jesus’ apprentices today, we are called to partner with the Holy Spirit in bringing these same transformations through our obedient service.

Jesus’ calling then and our calling now is to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.

And each aspect of that calling to bring into being kingdom transformation is an example of our daily bread – not basic, cheap, unwholesome bread from the supermarket shelf but heavenly bread that brings the most amazing fresh, invigorating fragrance, taste and nourishment into our lives.

When we comfort those who mourn and provide for those who grieve, we are bringing them the finest kind of bread from heaven.

When we bestow on those who are struggling with disappointment and rejection a crown of beauty instead of ashes, we are bringing them the most nutritious bread from heaven they could ever imagine.

When we provide the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair for those going through painful times, we are passing on daily bread that you will never find in a shop, no matter how exotic.

Receiving our daily bread is about listening to God for the revelation about kingdom transformation that God wants to bring to situations and then turning that revelation into reality through our persistent prayer and obedient service. There is nourishment in the revelation and even greater nourishment in seeing the revelation become reality.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What is your favourite kind of bread? Reflect on the special nature of this bread and how this can remind us of the special nature of God’s kingdom purposes.
2. Have you thought before about how our daily bread can mean not only physical provision but the provision of revelation from God’s Word?
3. What kinds of special daily bread do you feel stirred to pray for today?

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, I praise You for Your abundant generosity in bringing us bread from heaven – daily revelations of Your kingdom purposes to transform this starving world. Help me to develop a hunger for this kind of spiritual bread; help me to receive this daily bread of revelation with faith; help me to turn this revelation into prayer; help me to obedient in working to see this revelation becoming reality; and to bring the nourishment of Your kingdom resources to those who desperately need it, day by day. Amen.

## Week 21 Day 5 The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory Belong to God Forever

**Bible texts:**

*Praise be to you, Lord, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.* 1 Chronicles 29:10-11

*The son of man was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.* Daniel 7:14

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,**and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.* Revelation 1:5-6

**The Adventure of God’s Everlasting Kingdom**

The Lord’s Prayer finishes with these words:

*For the kingdom, the power and the glory are Yours, now and forever. Amen.*

Although the text of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 does not include this final sentence, we can see from the three passages above that the final words of the Lord’s Prayer are entirely consistent with what we read about God and His kingdom in other parts of the bible.

The final sentence of the prayer celebrates the fact that the kingdom advancement for which we are praying belongs to God as King over all; God is Sovereign over His perfect kingdom.

The final sentence of the prayer also celebrates the fact that the God to whom we are praying is a God of infinite power; He has all that is needed to be able to implement our prayers.

The final sentence of the prayer celebrates the fact that the God to whom we are praying is a God of glory; when we see His kingdom transformations replacing the ugliness of this world’s brokenness with the resplendent beauty of His grace, we see more fully the radiance of His astonishing, unrivalled, redeeming love that changes our lives forever.

The final sentence of the prayer declares the fact the God to whom we are praying is the God of the present moment – the now - and the God of every future moment – the forever. Our God is eternal – literally, outside of human time. The kingdom for which we are praying is an everlasting kingdom, without end. This is what Daniel prophesied 2,500 years ago: *God’s dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.* Daniel 7:14

And what of the final word: Amen? We are used to ending prayers with this word, but what does it mean? “Amen” comes from a Hebrew word meaning “truth”. When Jesus says: “Truly, truly I tell you…” in the original language of the New Testament, the text says: “Amen, Amen, I tell you…”

So, when we finish a prayer with this deeply significant word we are giving our agreement to all that has been prayed; we are saying that we believe what we have prayed is true and right, and it is something to which we are deeply committed in our heads, in our hearts and with our hands.

When we consider the full depth and breadth and height of what this prayer contains, it is entirely appropriate that we should finish with this one word acclamation of our personal commitment. Our Amen at the end is declaring that this prayer is completely true from beginning to end and that we are fully committed to the calling of living out this extraordinary adventure of kingdom transformation for the rest of our lives. Amen? Amen!

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How does the declaration of God’s power at the conclusion of this prayer increase our faith as we finish?
2. How does the declaration of God’s glory at the conclusion of this prayer deepen our worship as we finish?
3. How does the declaration of God’s everlasting sovereignty over His everlasting kingdom intensify our expectations as we finish?

**Prayer:**

Lord of all, I praise You for Your power and glory, I praise You as King of all kings, I praise You for the wonder of Your kingdom blessings that are everlasting, eternal and without end. And I want to give my Amen to seeking Your kingdom first above all else for the rest of my life – for abundant life in Your glorious kingdom is why I have been created and it is the greatest reward that I can ever receive. Thank You for calling me to be part of this adventure – forever and ever. Amen.

## Week 22 Day 1 Our Father in Heaven – Part 1

**Bible text:**

*Jesus continued: ‘There was a man who had two sons.****12****The younger one said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” So he divided his property between them.*

***13****‘Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.****14****After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.****15****So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.****16****He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

***17****‘When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!****18****I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.****19****I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.”****20****So he got up and went to his father.*

*‘But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.*

***21****‘The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

***22****‘But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.****23****Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.****24****For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.* Luke 15:11-24

**The Father Heart of God – Part 1**

The Lord’s Prayer begins with the words: “Our Father in Heaven…” Opening words are important. Jesus wants us to come to a broad and deep understanding of the character of our Heavenly Father, and especially His passionate love for us as His precious children.

Today and tomorrow we are going to explore eight aspects of the Father Heart of God, eight aspects of His love for us, expressed through Jesus’ parable of the lost son returning home. Jesus’ parables are more than colourful stories; they were told to teach us essential truths. The character of the father in this story is deliberately described to teach us about our Heavenly Father.

1. Freeing Love: the Father’s love gives permission for this younger son to express himself and to go off to find adventure; the Father does not control His son. Sadly, the younger son squanders this freedom. In contrast to this misguided response, we can cherish the freeing love of the Father to become the best we can possibly be; this love can free us to become the people we were always meant to be.
2. Expectant Love: the Father is waiting for His son’s return; He is not indifferent and disinterested. Our Father in heaven is watching and waiting for us to return home when we become distant. He is always the Father of the second chance.
3. Reckless Love: the Father is reckless in His expression of love for us – no matter how messed up we are. His recklessness is shown in his readiness to run to His son and to hug a son that was most likely still smelling of the pigs with which he had been working. When we remember the Jewish context of this story, we can see that this kind of work would be considered outrageous. The Father has no interest in dignity at this point; He simply wants to rush and hug His son.
4. Generous Love: the Father demonstrates extravagant love by providing four significant gifts: firstly, a robe to cover his son’s dirty clothes; secondly, a ring that provides authority; thirdly, sandals that restore the son’s identity as a precious child (servants would not wear sandals); and fourthly, a feast that expresses celebration.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Our earthly fathers usually try to do the best they can for us, putting into practice what they have received from their own fathers. The problem is that what has been received from an earthly father is often inadequate and so what is offered to us can often be inadequate too. Are there negative aspects of what we have received from our own human fathers that need to be acknowledged and laid aside as we consider the perfect way that God loves us?
2. How do these four aspects of the Father Heart of God help us to appreciate the intensity of His love for us?
3. Where do you see other examples of these aspects of God’s love through the bible and in our own experience?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, thank You that Your love for me is freeing, expectant, reckless and generous. Please help me to understand Your love more deeply and to respond with deeper and more generous, more reckless love in my worship day by day. Amen.

## Week 22 Day 2 Our Father in Heaven – Part 2

**Bible text:**

(It would be good to re-read the text from yesterday that precedes the passage below).

***25****‘Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.****26****So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.****27****“Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”*

***28****‘The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.****29****But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.****30****But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”*

***31****‘“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.****32****But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”’* Luke 15:25-31

**The Father Heart of God – Part 2**

Yesterday we started our exploration of the Father Heart of God: His freeing, expectant, reckless and generous heart. Today we continue with four further aspects of His amazing love.

1. Partnering Love: the father’s gift of the signet ring allows the son to be able to press soft wax with the family seal demonstrating his authority to be involved with the family business. Our Heavenly Father welcomes us into the family business of transforming lives with reckless, extravagant love. God’s love draws us into partnership with him to bring change and restoration, healing and wholeness to a broken and hurting world.
2. Joy-filled Love: the father immediately organises a party to celebrate his younger son’s return. God is the most joyful being in the universe. And His perfect love has the power to give us joy even in the worst of circumstances. Where life can often throw us pain and heartache, the love of our Heavenly Father can restore our joy once again.
3. Persuasive Love: the father in the parable goes out of his way to persuade his older son to come and join the party. God is passionately longing for us to know His love – His love that makes all the difference to us. The Father knows the difference His love can make in our lives. If we are in a place of bitterness, the Father wants to lead us into forgiveness. If we are in a place of angry resentment, the Father wants to lead us into reconciliation. If we are in a place of envy, the Father wants to lead us into understanding that His provision is for all of His children. His love persuades us to move out of pain and into peace.
4. Inclusive Love: the father in the parable wants to include those who remain faithful (the older son) along with the returning prodigals (the younger son). If you’ve always trusted God, He loves you just as much as those who have turned away from His love and then come back. Everyone is invited to the party. No matter who they are. No matter what they have got wrong. No matter how angry or resentful or bitter or confused. The Father wants us to be part of His family and to know His all-encompassing love.

In the light of these insights from this parable, we can see that praying the words “Our Father in Heaven” carries with it a huge amount of blessing when we truly recognise the astonishing dimensions of God’s Father Heart towards us and we position ourselves to receive His love.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you respond to the idea of God wanting to partner with you in building His kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven?
2. Where do you need to feel more connection with the joy of the Father?
3. How do you sense God’s love persuading you to join in His kingdom adventure?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, I praise you for Your all-encompassing, gracious, joy-filled love that wants to include me in the adventure of Your kingdom being made real on Earth as it is in Heaven. Thank You for the honour of inviting me into partnership with You. When I need persuading, help me to listen to Your persuasion and to join in this kingdom adventure with faith and determination. Amen.

## Week 22 Day 3 Hallowed by Your Name

**Bible texts:**

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless.* Genesis 17:1

*Moses said to God, ‘Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” Then what shall I tell them?’ God said to Moses, ‘This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I am has sent me to you.”’* Exodus 3:13-14

*Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the Lord, who makes you holy.* Leviticus 20:8

*The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’* Romans 8:15

**Names Reveal Character and Purpose**

There are many occasions in the bible when God deliberately chooses to re-name people. For example, in the Old Testament, Abram (father) is re-named Abraham (father of many) to indicate that Abraham would become the ancestor of a large nation. Simon is renamed Peter – the Rock – because Jesus said Peter would be a key founder member of His Church. These re-namings indicate that names matter to God.

We can see this also in the way that God reveals many different names and titles for Himself in the bible. A small selection of the many different names of God are shown in our bible texts today.

The Genesis passage reveals that God is called El Shaddai, God Almighty.

The Exodus passage reveals that God is called I AM, in Hebrew, Yahweh or Jehoveh.

The Leviticus passage reveals that God is called Yahweh M’Kaddesh, the God who sanctifies me and makes me holy.

These titles indicate God’s power and strength, His might and majesty.

Equally, God is loving and compassionate, gracious and loving.

This is shown in the Romans passage where God is called Abba, a title of closeness, best translated, Papa or Daddy.

In Hebrew culture, names reveal character and character reveals purpose.

If God reveals His name to be Yahweh Jireh – the God who provides (see Genesis 22:14) – then this is because God’s character is one of generous provision for His people. And if God has this name and character, then we can understand more fully that He intends to provide for us; that is His purpose.

If God reveals His name to be Yahweh Rapha – the God who heals (see Exodus 15:26) – then this is because God’s character is one of desiring healing for His people. And if God has this name and character, then we can understand more fully that He intends to bring healing to our lives; that is His purpose.

Near the start of the Lord’s Prayer, we pray the phrase: “Hallowed by your name” or “Your name is Holy”. When we pray these words reflectively we can consider the many different revelations of God’s Names in the bible, each one declaring something important about God’s character and purposes. Each and every one of these names can stir faith in us as we pray.

If we want to pray for peace, we can remember God’s Name is Yahweh Shalom (God of Peace).

If we want to pray for guidance, we can remember God’s Name is Yahweh Rohi (God our Shepherd).

If we want to pray for strength, we can remember God’s Name is Yahweh Shammah (God’s Presence is with us).

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you know what your different names mean? Are there ways in which your names can indicate how God sees you?
2. Have you thought about how God’s Names reveal His character and purposes? How does this encourage faith as you pray today?
3. Which of the Names of God outlined above is the one which you would like to meditate on today and use in your prayers?

**Prayer:**

Lord of all, Thank You that You reveal Your character and purposes for our lives through Your many names. Please bring me to a deeper and broader understanding of these names so that I can express faith and expectation of Your many blessings when I come to prayer each day. Amen.

## Week 22 Day 4 Hallowed be the Names of Jesus

**Bible texts:**

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” John 6:35

Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life” John 8:12

“I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” John 10:9

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” John 10:11

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. *The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.*” John 11:25

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” John 14:6

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser” John 15:1

*Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”* John 8:58

**Revelation about the Character and Purposes of Jesus**

The many significant names of God through the Bible are complimented and enriched by many significant names for each person of the Holy Trinity. We can interpret the names we considered yesterday as names of God the Father. Tomorrow, we will consider names of the Holy Spirit. Today, we will consider some of the many names and titles given to Jesus.

Eight of these titles come from the “I am” declarations of Jesus in the Gospel of John quoted above.

Once again, just as we saw yesterday, these names indicate the character and purpose of Jesus.

If Jesus declares himself to be the bread of life, it is because He comes to bring us spiritual food that will last forever.

If Jesus declares himself to be the light of the world, it is because He comes to bring us light that will illuminate our path through life.

If Jesus declares himself to be the door of life, it is because He comes to invite us to enter the Kingdom of God through finding faith in Him as Saviour and Lord.

If Jesus declares himself to be the good shepherd, it is because He wants to bring us protection and guidance.

If Jesus declares himself to be the resurrection and the life, it is because He comes to bring us the assurance of everlasting life that will last forever.

If Jesus declares himself to be the truth, it is because His words and His actions express and model the truth from which we are meant to live.

If Jesus declares himself to be the vine, it is because He is the source of life-giving spiritual nutrients that will keep us growing spiritually throughout our lives.

If Jesus declares himself to be “I am”, which we saw yesterday is the divine name Yahweh revealed to Moses in Exodus 3, it is because Jesus and the Father are One Indivisible God; Jesus is the exact representation of God the Father in human form. The purposes of the Father are the purposes of the Son.

Each and every name describes the many glorious facets of the character and purposes of Jesus, our amazing Lord and Saviour.

And since there are almost 200 different names and titles of Jesus in the bible, there is a lifetime of reflection on the ways that Jesus’ many names offer us insights into His astonishing character and abundant purposes for our lives.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Which of the names/titles of Jesus quoted above inspires you the most today? Spend some time turning your inspiration into prayers of praise and thanksgiving.
2. Which of the names/titles of Jesus brings a sense of needing to say sorry to Jesus for a lack of faith and trust? Spend some time turning your thoughts into prayers of confession and repentance.
3. Which of the names/titles of Jesus brings a sense of expectation for God to transform situations of need around you? Spend some time turning your reflections into prayers of intercession.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for the way You reveal Your character and purpose through Your many different names. Please inspire my meditation upon these revelations so that I can deepen my faith in Your power, extend my hope because of Your irresistible resources, and intensify my love towards You as my gracious Lord and Saviour. Amen.

## Week 22 Day 5 Hallowed be the Names of the Holy Spirit

**Bible texts:**

*The Spirit of God has made me; the Breath of the Almighty gives me life.* Job 33:4

*The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.* Luke 1:35

*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth.* John 14:16-17

*The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.* John 14:26

**The Names of the Spirit reveal the character and purposes of the Spirit**

We have explored the names of God the Father and God the Son; today we consider the names of God the Holy Spirit.

The verse from the Book of Job describes the Holy Spirit as the Breath of the Almighty who brings us life. The Holy Spirit is the source of our spiritual life; He comes into our lives and lives within us when we make the decision to make Jesus our Lord. He breathes spiritual breath into us and helps us to sustain that breath every day.

The verse from Luke 1 describes the Holy Spirit as the Power of the Most High. The Holy Spirit provides us with powerful resources to live a life of obedience to the purposes of God.

The two verses from John 14 describe the Holy Spirit as an Advocate; other translations use the word “Counsellor” or “Comforter”. The Holy Spirit is therefore One who speaks up for us to defend us, as legal advocates do in court. When we are accused by our enemy – the devil – the Holy Spirit is at work in us to speak the truth that will overrule the harmful and deceitful lies of the devil.

These same verses explain that the Spirit’s counsel brings insight and understanding of spiritual truth and reminders of these truths when we need them.

And let’s not forget the insight about another of the Spirit’s key purposes – bringing holiness to our lives. He is called the Holy Spirit because He is a Spirit of Holiness and He brings a desire for purity in our lives and the capacity to live out that purity in the face of temptations to do otherwise.

Life; power; defence; counsel; comfort; insight; understanding; holiness: these are the many different purposes of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

As with our recognition of the many names of God the Father and God the Son, the numerous names and titles of God the Holy Spirit can bring us renewed faith and expectation for His blessings to enrich our lives as those who live by the Spirit’s power every day.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Which of the names/titles of the Holy Spirit quoted above inspires you the most today? Spend some time turning your inspiration into prayers of praise and thanksgiving.
2. Which of the names/titles of the Holy Spirit brings a sense of needing to say sorry to the Holy Spirit for a lack of faith and trust? Spend some time turning your thoughts into prayers of confession and repentance.
3. Which of the names/titles of the Holy Spirit brings a sense of expectation for the Spirit of God to transform situations of need around you? Spend some time turning your reflections into prayers of intercession.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for the many names that You have inspired in the bible, each of which explains Your character and describes Your purposes. Please forgive me for the ways I have overlooked these truths. Help me to understand Your character more fully so that I can receive Your blessings with a greater depth of appreciation, day by day. Amen.

## Week 23 Day 1 Forgive us our sins

**Bible text:**

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.* 1 John 1:8-10

**The importance of daily confession**

When we first commit ourselves to Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we receive a fresh start as someone who has been adopted into God’s family. It is our faith in Jesus that brings us complete assurance of our salvation. Through our continuing relationship with Jesus, we can know with certainty our destiny beyond the gateway of death.

Even though we have this confidence of being redeemed by Jesus, the reality is that we all continue to sin. We carry on making mistakes, sometimes wilfully, sometimes unintentionally. We also fail to think, say and do all the good things that the Holy Spirit would like us to think, say and do. Even though we are making progress in our lives of obedience to the Lord, we will all experience the reality of falling way short of God’s perfect standards.

Let’s think about the analogy of making a mistake in a relationship with a close friend or our spouse if we are married. The mistake doesn’t end the friendship or marriage – but it needs to be confessed. If we truly love this other person, we need to say that we are sorry. Similarly, our mistakes in relation to God don’t end the relationship we have with God – but they do need to be confessed if we truly love God.

It is because of this ongoing track record of committing sin on a daily basis, that we need to develop the daily discipline of confessing our sins to God. This is the implication of the words in the Lord’s Prayer where we say: “Forgive us our sins”.

In the last session, we considered the identity of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of holiness; the One who comes into our lives to reveal what true holiness is like. The Holy Spirit is able to shine His light into our lives to illuminate where we need to confess sin; where we have fallen short of His standards for our life. Before we pray a prayer of confession, it is good to take a few moments to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us where we need to say sorry.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Think about a recent occasion where you needed to say sorry to a friend or your spouse. Reflect upon the importance of this apology and how it has strengthened your relationship.
2. Reflect on the fact that our ongoing sin is not only about the wrong things we think, say or do but the good things we fail to think, say and do.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you about what you need to confess to God today and then pray the prayer of confession that follows. You might like to include this prayer of confession in your prayer time each morning from now on.

**Prayer:**

Almighty and merciful God, we have sinned against You in thought, word and deed. We have not loved You with all our heart. We have not loved others as Christ loves us. We are truly sorry. In Your mercy, forgive what we have been, help us to amend what we are, and direct what we shall be; that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways, to the glory and praise of Your name. Amen.

## Week 23 Day 2 Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us

**Bible text:**

*Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

*At this the servant fell on his knees before him. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.”**The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.*

*But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. “Pay back what you owe me!” he demanded.*

*His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.”*

*But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.* Matthew 18:23-31

**Recognising the Unpayable Debt that has been cancelled**

To fully appreciate the implications of this parable we need to understand the relative sizes of the two debts featured in the story. The smaller debt represents about 4 months of wages for an average worker at the time. The larger debt represents 200,000 years of wages. In other words, the larger debt is completely unpayable.

This is the key message of this parable: the first debt that has been cancelled is unpayable. It is completely impossible for it to be paid back, ever. In an act of astonishing grace, the master takes the step of cancelling this vast, unpayable debt.

The expected response would be one of prompting the forgiven servant to act graciously towards others and where possible, to cancel sums owed to him by others. Sadly, far from showing generous forgiveness to others, this outrageously blessed servant – set free from crippling debt by extravagant grace - soon shows ugly, self-centred harshness in refusing to cancel the debt of his fellow servant that is 600,000 times smaller. It is not surprising that the other servants in the story are disgusted and go and complain about this appalling attitude and shocking action to their generous master.

The parable is told to illustrate to all of us the extent of our unpayable debt towards God that has been cancelled through the extravagant grace of God shown on the cross of Good Friday. Our unpayable debt of sin has been cancelled forever by our awesome God of forgiving compassion. In response to this unrivalled act of grace, God expects us to be able to find the necessary mercy and love to forgive those who wrong us.

When we consider the bridge of grace that has been built over the infinitely wide, infinitely deep chasm that exists between sinful humanity and the infinite purity and perfection of our Holy God, our persistent sense of humble gratitude should motivate us to be able to extend a hand of grace to others who have wronged us and be able to say to these powerful words: “as a forgiven sinner, who has received God’s amazing grace, I am willing to forgive you.”

God’s amazing grace to us requires us to be those who are willing to forgive others.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. We explored unforgiveness in Week 15 when we were reflecting on the way that God brings healing to broken hearts. Review your key learning points from that session and how you have been able to embrace these learning points during the weeks since then.
2. Reflect on the unpayable debt in the parable and the unpayable debt towards God that has been cancelled through the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross. How does this inspire gratitude in your heart today?
3. Are there continuing areas of unforgiveness that need to be dealt with in your life? In the light of Jesus’ teaching through this parable, are you ready to take decisive steps towards releasing forgiveness to those who have hurt you?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You for Your amazing grace towards my unpayable debt of sin. Thank You that Jesus’ death on the cross means that this debt is cancelled forever. Please transform my heart to become more fully a heart of grace that is ready to forgive those who hurt and offend me and not to harbour unforgiving resentment against others. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

## Week 23 Day 3 Lead us not into temptation

**Bible texts:**

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.* Hebrews 4:15

*When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.* James 1:13-14

**Temptation is not the same as sin**

When the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that we have a high priest who is able to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, the writer is speaking about Jesus. Jesus is able to feel this sympathy because He was “tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin”. So the writer is making two important points.

Firstly, this verse makes clear that experiencing temptation is not the same as committing a sin. Jesus was tempted and yet Jesus was sinless; so clearly, the fact that you experience temptation is not sin.

Secondly, this verse makes clear that when we face temptation we have a choice to make. The choice is about what we do as a result of the temptation. Do we resist the temptation and stay free from sin – as Jesus did - or do we follow it through with actions that are sinful?

The verses from James make clear that temptation never comes from God, because God is entirely good and will always inspire us towards goodness. Temptation comes from other sources. For example, temptation can come from our own “evil desire” as James puts it in verse 14. We are all a mixture of good desires and evil desires. Though we all want to create a third category of “neutral” desires, the bible is clear: desires are either good or evil. If they don’t belong to one category, they must belong to the other.

Secondly, temptation can come from the evil of the broken and distorted world around us. As we interact with this world hour by hour through our daily lives, we are continually bombarded with temptations: the temptation to take what is not ours; the temptation to judge and criticise others; the temptation to lie and exaggerate in order to make ourselves look better, and others look worse; the temptation to act on lustful desires; the temptation to use coarse and crude language; the temptation to idolise people and things. The list could go on and on. There is no shortage of temptation that comes our way simply by living in a fallen world.

Thirdly, temptation can also come from personified evil in the shape of the devil which we will explore more in the next session.

So here are two clear insights about temptation: temptation can come to us through three sources: the fallen world around us, our own evil desires inside us and a spiritual source that we call the devil. Secondly, temptation is not the same as sin; resisting temptation when we face it keeps us free from sin.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you recognised before that temptation is not the same as sin? Why is this distinction important to remember?
2. Reflect on some frequent temptations that come from your own evil desires. Pray for the strength you need to resist these temptations.
3. Reflect on some frequent temptations that come from the world around us – for example, your workplace or through the internet. Pray for the strength you need to resist these temptations.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You faced temptation as we do, and yet You did not sin. Please help me to stand strong in the face of temptation as You did, so that I can live the life that You want for me every day. Please help me to stay strong in the face of these specific temptations I will face today: (you can list some specific temptations that you will probably face today…). Thank You for Your ever-present help in times of temptation. Amen.

## Week 23 Day 4 Lessons from the Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness

**Bible text:**

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.*

*The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.’*

*Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “People shall not live on bread alone.”’*

*The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, ‘I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.’*

*Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”’*

*The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ‘If you are the Son of God,’ he said, ‘throw yourself down from here.**For it is written:*

*‘“He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”’*

*Jesus answered, ‘It is said: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ‘*

*When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.*

*Luke 4:1-13*

**To be fore-warned is to be fore-armed**

There are many reasons why Jesus chose to tell his first apprentices about his wilderness temptations so that His experiences could be recorded in the gospel narratives. One of the most important reasons is so that we could learn from Jesus’ experience and apply these lessons in our own lives.

While the passage looks like a story of three temptations, there are other temptations implicit in the text. For example, there is the implied temptation to doubt our identity. Immediately prior to this experience in the wilderness, Jesus has been baptised by the Holy Spirit, and at that time He hears His Heavenly Father say to Him: “You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased.” (Luke 3:22). The devil wants to sow doubt in Jesus’ mind by saying the words: “If you are the Son of God…” This is a classic scheme of the devil: to undermine our God-given identity and calling.

The devil then tempts Jesus to turn a stone into bread; after all, Jesus is extremely hungry after 40 days without food. Jesus resists the temptation by remembering that transient material food is less important than everlasting spiritual food.

Next, Jesus is tempted to worship the devil in return for the kingdoms of the world. Jesus resists this temptation to grab onto power by remembering that He is called to serve His Father alone.

Then, Jesus is tempted to throw Himself off the Temple roof, trusting that angels will protect Him from harm. Jesus resists this temptation by remembering that we are never to test God.

There are many lessons to learn in this passage.

Firstly, we can learn that remembering key bible verses is an effective way of resisting temptation. With each temptation, Jesus remembers a relevant verse from scripture which He had previously memorized.

Secondly, we can learn that we need to exercise discernment in knowing which bible verses are relevant in each situation. The devil tries to defeat Jesus at His own game by quoting a bible passage to Him. Jesus has the discernment to realise the deception that lies behind the suggestion of this bible passage at that moment. The wrong timing for the application of a specific biblical truth may lead us to a wrong choice. Care in the application of scripture is always needed.

Thirdly, we can learn that the devil will tempt us in the areas where we are vulnerable. These specific temptations were relevant for Jesus at the start of His ministry. We need to be vigilant in our own specific areas of weakness.

As we learn these lessons, we will be ready to face temptation with increased resolve.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What are your most vulnerable areas of temptation?
2. Memorising relevant bible verses is an important line of defence against temptation. Do you have specific bible verses that can help you in times of temptation?
3. How has the devil tried to undermine your identity and calling?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that for the way You resisted these temptations in the wilderness. Thank You for Your example to us. Please help me to learn from Your determination and discernment so that I can resist temptations that come to me. Amen.

## Week 23 Day 5 Resources for Resisting Temptation

**Bible texts:**

*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.* Mark 14:38

*No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* 1 Corinthians 10:13

*Because Jesus himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.* Hebrews 2:18

**Seven Resources for Resisting Temptation**

These three bible texts provide reliable revelation about seven key resources to help us in the face of temptation:

1. Being watchful about pitfalls ahead. We need to anticipate temptation and be ready for it when it arrives. Better still, we can avoid temptation by taking evasive action.
2. Praying to be able to resist temptation. Not only can we pray for determination to avoid temptation but we can also pray in the midst of temptation for the resources to resist temptation.
3. Being realistic about what you are facing: you are not experiencing anything unusual or uncommon. Countless people have faced exactly the same temptation countless times before. Resist the temptation to think that your situation is unique!
4. Have faith in God’s faithfulness: God will not let you be tempted beyond what He knows you can bear. Resist the temptation to think that what you are facing is unbearable.
5. Look for the open door: God will always provide a way out from the temptation that avoids sin. Resist the temptation to think that you are ever going to be cornered without an escape route. We need to ask for discernment to see where the escape route lies in each and every situation of temptation.
6. The past example of Jesus: Jesus suffered during His own temptations and so He empathises with us in our experience of temptation. We can have confident faith that Jesus knows what it is like to be tempted.
7. The present help of Jesus: Jesus is present to assist us when we face temptation. As One who knows the reality of temptation from His life on Earth two thousand years ago, Jesus is able to provide the specific help we need in our times of facing temptation.

Equipped and empowered through these seven sources of strength, encouragement and help, we can have confidence that we can resist temptation when it arrives and stand strong in obedient faith, trusting in all that the Lord wants to bring us in testing times.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Are any of these seven resources something new that you have not thought about before? How do they provide fresh encouragement about resisting temptation?
2. Which of these seven resources do you find the most important to rely on?
3. Try to memorise the most relevant of these verses so that you can remind yourself of the text when you are next facing strong temptation.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You experienced suffering in the midst of temptation. Thank You that You offer me resources and strength in the midst of temptation. Help me to recognise this help when it is available and to make full use of it so that I can resist temptation. Amen.

## Week 24 Day 1 Deliver us from evil

**Bible texts:**

*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.* 1 Peter 5:8-9

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.**For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* Ephesians 6:10-12

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

*…the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.* 1 John 3:8

**The Reality of Spiritual Warfare**

The theme of spiritual warfare is a recurring one throughout the New Testament. From the gospel accounts onwards, each writer is prompted to communicate the importance of the spiritual battle we are called to fight.

From these passages -a few of them quoted above - we can draw out some key principles.

Firstly, our enemy is a spiritual enemy not a physical one. We are not fighting against people but against spiritual forces. Our enemy may make use of people in his schemes, but we need to recognise that the battle is not against these people but against the spiritual forces at work behind them.

Secondly, our enemy is fierce, compared with a roaring lion looking for easy prey to devour. Jesus explained that the devil comes to steal, kill and destroy. This doesn’t mean we need to be afraid, but we do need to take his opposition seriously.

Thirdly, our enemy is scheming and devious. The devil is not very creative or original – he keeps using the same strategies over and over again – but nevertheless, these tried and tested strategies work very well for him. So, we need to be very discerning about his methods and resist them when we see them at work.

Fourthly, Jesus has won a decisive victory over our enemy, triumphing over the devil through His finished work on the cross (Colossians 2:15). The devil is a fallen and corrupted angel while Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity. There is no match between them. And we have Jesus’ full authority in our battle against the devil throughout our lives as His apprentices. If we are obedient to Jesus and using Jesus’ authority in our battle against the powers of darkness, we can have full confidence that we will see victory, time after time.

We are fighting this spiritual battle now in a phase between the decisive victory of the cross on Good Friday and the final complete destruction of all demonic spirits including the devil. The analogy which is often used to illustrate this phase of the fight is the period between D-Day in June 1944 and the final end to World War 2 in Europe in May 1945 (VE Day). The D-Day landings secured the final victory in World War 2 but there were many battles still to fight before that day arrived. In a similar way, the cross of Christ secured the final victory in our present spiritual fight but there are many battles still to fight before the devil and his minions are finally destroyed.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the decisive victory of the cross and the uneven match between Jesus and the devil. How does this give you confidence about engaging in this battle?
2. Are there any situations you currently face that seem to involve a spiritual battle being fought? In what ways is it important to remember that you are not fighting against people but against spiritual forces?
3. How is Peter’s reminder that all the members of the family of believers throughout the world are involved in fighting this spiritual battle a source of encouragement?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your decisive victory over the devil through Your work of the cross on Good Friday. Thank You that You came to destroy the works of the devil – past, present and future. Give me confidence in Your victory, Your authority and Your persistence in this battle so that I may have the courage to fight alongside You, day by day. Amen.

## Week 24 Day 2 Taking your stand against the devil’s schemes

**Bible texts:**

*Now the snake was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden”?’* Genesis 3:1

*You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.* John 8:44

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* John 10:10

**Fighting the spiritual battle effectively**

An important part of winning against your enemy in war is to be aware of your enemy’s strategies and this is certainly true of the spiritual battle in which we are all enlisted.

The devil has several tried and tested strategies that he uses to great effect.

One of these is the use of lies and half-truths to trick us into wrong thinking and then wrong actions. This is why Jesus called him “the father of lies”. We explored this demonic strategy in Week 14 when we were considering the renewal of our minds through the power of truth to replace lies (see Day 2 of that week for a review of this topic).

We see this strategy at work in Genesis 3 where the devil is portrayed as a snake. The devil craftily sows doubt in Eve’s mind by undermining the command that God had previously given by asking: “Did God really say…?”

This account also shows the devil using an exaggerated lie to trick Eve by asking if God had said that Adam and Eve were not to eat the fruit from any tree in the Garden of Eden. The truth is God had said that they were allowed to eat from any tree except one which would cause them harm.

Through this strategy of sowing doubts, half-truths, exaggerations and lies the devil hopes to trick us into making wrong choices. He will even trick us into thinking that temptation is the same as sin; once we have thought the wrong thought, he makes us think that we have committed a sin already and so we might as well go the whole way and turn the temptation into a completed action. Remember what we saw last week: temptation is not the same as sin.

The devil will also use accusation; once we are in a place of temptation, then he will make us feel terrible about ourselves so that we feel worthless and with this lowered self-esteem, we feel that there is no point making any effort to obey God any longer. And if he has successfully managed to get us to commit a sinful act, then accusation becomes even easier for him to throw at us. This is why he is also called “the accuser”.

The devil loves to break up community as well; he hates people being connected in compassionate, genuine love for one another. That is why he loves to undermine relationships, for example, through causing team disunity. In strong, committed, Christian community we are much better placed to withstand the devil’s schemes; in contrast, when we are separated from that community we become much more vulnerable. Just think about the careless impala that gets separated from the rest of the herd; the isolated individual is much more likely to be picked off by the prowling lion – the simile we considered yesterday that describes the identity of the devil as a fierce enemy who is looking to steal us away from others, kill our faith and destroy our lives forever (see John 10:10).

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What lies, half-truths and exaggerations has the devil sown in your mind recently? How did you manage to resist them?
2. What accusations has the devil sown in your mind recently? How did you manage to resist them?
3. How has the devil undermined your relationships in the past? Are there any signs of that scheme at work right now? For example, through persistent misunderstanding or unresolved disagreements? How can you resist this strategy of the evil one?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, please give me the discernment to recognise the strategies of the evil one when he tries to sow doubt or lies in my mind or when he brings accusation or tries to undermine my relationships with others. In these situations, please bring to mind the spiritual truth that I need to overcome the devil’s schemes so that I may stand strong in my faith. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

## Week 24 Day 3 Put on the full armour of God

**Bible text:**

***10****Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.****11****Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.****12****For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.****13****Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.****14****Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place,****15****and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.****16****In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.****17****Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* ***18****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.* Ephesians 6:10-18

**God’s gracious provision of armour**

Soldiers expect to be well-equipped for the battles they need to fight; to be ill-equipped is to be dangerously vulnerable. In His abundant generosity, God has provided all we need for the spiritual battles we need to fight against the powers of darkness. Paul lists these essential pieces of spiritual armour in Ephesians 6:

The belt of truth: we have seen how the devil loves to speak lies to us to trick and deceive us into sin and separation from God. Separated from the Lord, we are powerless; connected with God we are invincible. We need to maintain our engagement with the truth in our minds and hearts at all times.

The breastplate of righteousness: the metal breastplate provided protection of a soldier’s heart and lungs. Spiritually speaking, our heart is the centre of our longings and the lungs are the means of breathing in the Presence of the Spirit. We need to remember that our righteousness before God is not based on our good performance or personal merit but on our faith in Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf. When we remember this, our longing for God is protected and strengthened and we will be inspired to breathe in the Presence of God’s Spirit that brings us the oxygen of His grace, love and wisdom.

The boots of gospel readiness: a soldier’s boots are critical for advancing decisively and safely. Our advance against the enemy is made secure and decisive through remembering the truth of the gospel of peace: Jesus has won the victory over darkness at the cross so that we can become victorious over darkness through our faith in Him. Equipped with this confidence, we can progress into battle without fear.

The shield of faith with which we can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one: the devil is skilled at firing flaming arrows of deceit, doubt, lies, exaggeration and temptation. All of these can be extinguished through our skilled use of the shield of faith – trusting in God’s truth to defeat lies and God’s power to overcome temptation.

The helmet of salvation: soldiers’ helmets protect their heads and therefore their thinking. Our spiritual helmet protects our patterns of right thinking about our true God-given identity and God’s character and purposes for our lives.

The sword of the Spirit is the word of God. Revelation from God is a sharp sword with which to attack the devil and all his sordid schemes of lies and deceit to undermine us and disempower us. We need to listen to the Holy Spirit’s insights as we face spiritual battles because all that He shows us can be used effectively to overcome the devil’s strategies.

Praise and prayer: Paul continues his catalogue of armour with a call to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. Our list of armour is incomplete without referencing this essential weapon against the powers of darkness, for our prayers connect us with the power and presence of God through which we can always defeat satan.

Paul goes on to say that we should always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Our commitment to pray for one another provides us with a collective shield, reminiscent of the “turtle”-like shelter the Roman armies would create by holding their rectangular shields side by side in front of them and above their heads to protect themselves from enemy fire. As we pray for one another, we are committing ourselves to provide this shelter from the devil’s arrows.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How does this list of armour demonstrate the need for engagement with God’s truth when we engage in spiritual battles since the helmet, the belt and the sword all relate to revelation from God?
2. How do you respond to the idea of providing shelter for your spiritual brothers and sisters through your commitment to pray for them?
3. Reflect on your spiritual footwear for battle. Are your feet fitted with comfortable boots of gospel readiness? Do you need to re-locate these boots? Repair them? Find new laces? Give them a shine?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You for providing strong, secure armour and resources for battle. Help me to use this armour with skill, determination and persistence so that I can overcome the evil one each and every day. Amen.

## Week 24 Day 4 Taking ground from the enemy

**Bible texts**

*Jesus said: I will build my church, and the powers of death will not overcome it.* Matthew 16:18

*In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:37-39

**Standing Strong within the Protection of Jesus**

In the verse from Matthew’s gospel quoted above, Jesus promised that His church would never be defeated or overcome by the powers of death; in other words, the kingdom of darkness will never gain victory over God’s Church.

Paul affirmed that we are “more than conquerors through him who loved us” and that demons will never be able “to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

While the spiritual battle in which we fight is fierce, God’s power and love are always present to protect us. We have affirmed the decisive victory that Jesus won over the devil at the cross and that the sacrifice of Christ and the authority of Christ mean that we can now live without fear of any of the devil’s tactics. We have explored the power of God’s armour and its capacity to defeat the strategies and schemes of satan when we make full use of its resources.

It is good to be able to live each day in the light of these assertions, set free from fear, and set free to live boldly and faithfully in the midst of this fierce battle.

Our faith in God’s readiness to fulfil His promises to us can inspire us to pray a simple prayer of protection from evil as we begin our day. This is a great daily habit to practise. A suggestion of this kind of prayer is offered as today’s prayer.

The cross of Christ is the bedrock of our faith in God’s power over evil. There is no greater symbol on Earth with which we can declare our God-given victory over evil. You might find it helpful to hold a palm-size wooden cross as you pray this prayer. Alternatively, you might find it helpful to make the sign of the cross as you pray the prayer by marking out a vertical line from your head to your heart and then a horizontal line across your chest from one shoulder to the other and back to your heart. As you draw the symbol of the cross over your head and upper body, you are declaring your trust in the power of the cross of Jesus to bring you the protection you need over your mind (head), your desires (heart) and your actions (hands). Our prayerful, faith-filled actions can speak as loudly as our words.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the promise from Jesus that nothing and no-one can overcome His Church.
2. Reflect on Paul’s assertion that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.
3. How do you respond to the idea of praying a prayer of protection as you begin each day? Is this a habit you consider worth developing?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You came to destroy the devil’s work. Thank You that we are more than conquerors through Your willing sacrifice and Your invincible authority. Today I pray Your protection over my health, strength, safety, possessions and relationships. In Your powerful Name, Amen.

## Week 24 Day 5 A Transforming Prayer of Faith

**Bible texts:**

*The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.* 2 Corinthians 10:4

*Our Father in heaven,* *hallowed be your name,* *your kingdom come,* *your will be done,* *on earth as it is in heaven.* *Give us today our daily bread.* *And forgive us our debts,* *as we also have forgiven our debtors.* *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.* Matthew 6: 9-13

*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.* James 5:16

**God’s Ever-Advancing Kingdom**

Through our four-week exploration of the Lord’s Prayer we have seen that there are only two kingdoms that have influence on Earth: the kingdom of darkness under the rule of satan and the kingdom of light under the rule of God. There is no neutral territory. As one kingdom advances, the other kingdom loses ground.

As we sincerely, thoughtfully, expectantly pray the powerful words of the Lord’s Prayer, we are wielding the invincible weapons of love, truth, faith, forgiveness, hope, confidence and obedience – all of them able to demolish the strongholds of evil and darkness around us, sometimes within us. As these strongholds are demolished, the kingdom of darkness is losing ground, step by step and the kingdom of God is advancing, step by step.

As we seek to live a Jesus-centred life, living in a place of knowing His forgiveness and celebrating the fact that we are made righteous through His forgiving love, then we can have confidence that our prayers are powerful and effective – as James clearly declared in the verse above – including every occasion when we pray this astonishing, life-changing prayer.

There is a lifetime of adventure in praying this prayer and seeing its truth impact our lives and the lives of people for whom we pray. Whether we take 30 seconds to pray it quickly and confidently, or 30 minutes to pray through it reflectively and meditatively, its words have power to defeat satan and power to demolish his strongholds. As we declare this prayer faithfully, our words have power to extend the glorious kingdom of God, forever and ever. Amen.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do we respond to James’ declaration that the prayers of a faithful follower of Jesus are powerful and effective?
2. Do you fully appreciate that your weapons of faith and truth have power to demolish the enemy’s strongholds?
3. What aspect of your reflection on the Lord’s Prayer has most impacted you over the last four weeks and why?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for giving us this amazing prayer. Help me to pray it with increased understanding. Help me to recognise that this prayer has power to demolish strongholds every time I pray it with genuine faith, trusting in Your readiness to hear us and answer us. Amen.

## **An Overview of Part Three of the Journey: Weeks 25-36**

If you are not one of those people who like to know your journey details beforehand, please skip this section and move on to the next page.

If you are one of those people, here’s an outline of where you will be travelling during Part Three, over the next 12 weeks or so:

Weeks 25-28: Growing in confidence in sharing our faith with others

Weeks 29-32: Developing our life of serving Jesus effectively

Week 33-34: Developing as leaders who train leaders

Week 35-36: Cultivating perseverance

## Week 25 Day 1 The Key Priority of Evangelism

**Bible texts:**

*Then Jesus told them this parable: ‘Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.* Luke 15:4-7

*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.* Luke 19:10

*Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.* Matthew 4:19

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humankind by which we must be saved.* Acts 4:12

**Inviting People into the Kingdom of God**

During the last four weeks of this journal we have explored the Kingdom Prayer that Jesus taught us. God’s Kingdom is meant to be an ever-expanding Kingdom in terms of its influence but also in terms of the numbers of people who are positioned to benefit from its many and rich blessings.

This aspect of a Kingdom that is growing in number of people who follow the King of kings and who want to seek God’s Kingdom above all else relates to the call of Jesus to share with Him in the task of encouraging people into personal faith. Luke 19:10 could be called a mission statement of Jesus: He came to seek and save lost people. When He invited people to become apprentices, He did so with the intention that they join with him in “fishing for people” (see Matthew 4:19).

Evangelism – sharing the good news of Jesus’ redeeming love and purposes with other people – is a key priority for all of us as apprentices. Why should this be so?

Evangelism is a priority because – as we have just seen – Jesus was committed to this task and He lost no time in calling His apprentices to the same task. His apprentices today are no exception.

Evangelism is a priority because it is only through faith in Jesus that we can be receive eternal life (see Acts 4:12). We are not saved through our good efforts or positive track record; we are saved through trusting Jesus as our Saviour. If people are to find assurance of everlasting life beyond death, they need to find faith in Jesus and be set free from the myth that salvation is the reward for a life of good works.

Evangelism is a priority because life with Jesus is good news. Following Jesus is the best way to live a life of fullness and well-being. Good news is always worth sharing with others. Would doctors keep silent about a powerful new treatment for some deadly disease? Would courageous philanthropists keep silent about a new strategy for eradicating global poverty? Why would we – as recipients of the greatest and most powerful gift of love ever given to humankind – stay silent about its blessings?

Evangelism is a priority because of the desperate need for people to find faith in our nation. The parable of the lost sheep speaks about ninety-nine sheep that are home and secure with one being lost and needing to be found. The current statistics for Wales are roughly speaking the other way round: 1% of the nation is spiritually home and secure while 99% have yet to discover the wonders of personal faith in Jesus. The need for effective evangelism is urgent.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Jesus often used the language of entering the Kingdom of God as a way of describing personal faith. In what ways do you find this a helpful way of viewing personal faith?
2. Why do you think Jesus called His first apprentices from the very beginning into a life of “fishing for people”?
3. In the light of the current statistics about personal commitments to Jesus in Wales, if you began each day from the perspective that 99% of Welsh “sheep” are lost, would this make a difference to how you prayed and lived out your faith each day?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Good Shepherd, Thank You that You searched for me, found me and brought me Home on Your strong shoulders. Thank You that You have called me to be Your apprentice. Help me to be clear about my calling to join with You in seeking and finding lost sheep and bringing them home. Help me to be faithful in my prayers and actions to partner with You in bringing Home the lost sheep around me. Amen.

## Week 25 Day 2 The Great Commandment and the Great Commission

**Bible texts:**

*‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.* Matthew 22:36-37

*Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’* Matthew 28:18-20

**Love God and Make New Disciples**

Our first bible text from Matthew 22 reveals the Greatest Commandment – to love God. Our second bible text from Matthew 28 reveals the Great Commission – Jesus’ command to go and make new disciples.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest of all God’s commandments, He made clear that worshipping God with all that we are is to be our primary act of obedience.

Along with our songs of thanksgiving and our acclamations of praise, our readiness to engage with evangelism is one of our clearest acts of worship. When we are ready to sacrifice our personal comfort - and maybe also how other people view us - in pursuit of the goal of sharing our faith with others, we are demonstrating how much we love God. We reveal how precious someone is to us when we are prepared to pay a great personal price to honour them in front of others. Our willingness to get involved with evangelism therefore also reveals our heart for worship. Our eagerness to commit ourselves to a life of mission demonstrates our posture of thanksgiving to the God who has redeemed us from sin forever. Our personal evangelism is a sign of our heart-felt worship; our commitment to the Great Commission reveals our obedience to the Greatest Commandment to love God above all else.

It is important to remember too that the Great Commission from Jesus is not a gentle suggestion from Jesus. It is a clear commandment spoken as an imperative direction: go and make disciples of all nations. Let’s not receive this as a possible, occasional activity that we might get involved with one day in the distant future, when we are in the right mood and when all the circumstances seem safe, favourable and attractive.

The first apprentices of Jesus were clearly obedient to the Great Commission through fulfilling their part in the unfolding drama of redemption; we can read all about that obedience in the fifth book of the New Testament: the Acts of the Apostles. The title of this amazing book is important; not the good intentions of the apostles, or the wise deliberations of the apostles but the ACTS of the apostles. When it comes to evangelism, action is vital – not just good intentions.

Over the next four weeks, we are going to explore six practical aspects of fulfilling the Great Commission and engaging with personal evangelism using the acronym A.C.T.I.O.N. – because personal action is always going to be necessary if we are to be fruitful in evangelism.

The A stands for “Always a Priority” – because Jesus commanded us to do so throughout our lives of faith.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the ways that our heart for evangelism reveals our heart for worship. In turn, how does inspiring worship motivate our readiness to be involved in evangelism?
2. How are you inspired by the courageous obedience of the first apprentices of Jesus to the Great Commission?
3. What concerns or fears do you have about pursuing evangelism and sharing your faith with others?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your Great Commission to go and make new disciples of all nations. Thank You for those who have been obedient to this Great Commission in the past who can inspire me to be obedient to this Great Commission now. Please equip me with all I need to fulfil the Great Commission as an important priority every day. Amen.

## Week 25 Day 3 Growing Apprentices who can Grow Apprentices

**Bible texts:**

*Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’* Matthew 28:18-20

**The never-ending spiral of apprentice development**

Because of its critical importance as the final commission given to His first apprentices, we are going to spend a couple more sessions exploring the significance of Jesus’ Great Commission.

It is important that we remember that Jesus commissioned His apprentices to go and make disciples who would obey everything that Jesus commanded. “Everything” is an important word in this commission from Jesus. “Everything” includes the Great Commission itself since it is a commandment from Jesus, not a suggestion. In other words, the first apprentices were to go and make disciples who would also carry out the Great Commission so that one generation of apprentices would train the next generation to engage in the same kind of evangelism that is continually growing new apprentices.

The Great Commission therefore expresses the clear principle of continual reproduction as one generation of apprentices works together to grow the next generation who will grow the next generation and so on through the rest of redemptive history until Jesus returns again.

Our generation of apprentices is no exception to this principle: we are to make disciples for Jesus who are also commissioned to make more disciples. It is therefore not enough to bring people to faith in Jesus; we must also train and equip them so that they have the necessary understanding and resources to be able to train these new apprentices to make further apprentices in a never-ending sequence of apprentice multiplication.

We will come back to this principle at the end of our exploration of personal evangelism but for now let’s keep in mind that evangelism is not simply bringing people to faith in Jesus; it is also about developing new apprentices to a place of maturity where they have the capability and confidence to be able to make new apprentices themselves.

This is one reason why the family is a great metaphor for fruitful church life. Parents produce new offspring who are developed and trained to the point where they are also ready to become parents themselves. What the children experience as they grow up, they are then able to put into practice when it is their turn to reproduce and develop their own children.

The successful fulfilment of the Great Commission over 2000 years has led to the expansion of the Church from 12 apostles to a worldwide family of over two billion apprentices today. We need to do all we can to continue to see the Great Commission bring transformation to our not-yet family and friends.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you reflected before on the principle of continual multiplication that is expressed in the Great Commission?
2. Reflect on the sequence of apprentices who developed the apprentices who influenced your own decision to put Jesus at the centre of your life. How far back can you trace your spiritual family line?
3. What are the pitfalls that might hinder this continual multiplication?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You deliberately worded the Great Commission to include the principle of continual growth and multiplication of Your Church. Help me to take to heart this principle of reproduction and to earnestly desire to gain the skills and commitment necessary to be an effective apprentice-maker for the rest of my life. Amen.

## Week 25 Day 4 Knowing God’s Authority and Companionship in our faith-sharing

**Bible text:**

*Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’* Matthew 28:18-20

**God’s Permission and God’s Presence is with our evangelistic initiatives**

Whenever we see a “therefore” in the bible we need to ask: what is it there for?

The “therefore” in the Great Commission follows on from Jesus’ declaration of the fact that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him as the Resurrected Saviour of the world. In the light of that complete, divine authority, we are called to go and make new disciples. The Great Commission brings with it the assurance of this supreme authority in our mission. We are not going in our own limited authority; we are going in the uniquely powerful authority of Jesus.

The Great Commission therefore starts with great encouragement. It also finishes with great encouragement: “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”. Jesus’ promises his first apprentices and, by implication, all future apprentices of His ever-continuing Presence to guide and strengthen us when we feel weak, ill-equipped, uncomfortable, disillusioned or overwhelmed with the task before us. We do not undertake this commission alone; we undertake it in the awesome company of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who is always in the business of hunting for lost sheep.

Here are two great sources of encouragement for us as we respond to the Great Commission from Jesus: divine authority and divine companionship. God Himself blesses us with the right to declare His love to a broken world. God Himself blesses us with His partnership in the adventure of evangelism, sharing the best of all possible news that anyone can hear.

Firstly, we get to share the good news that Jesus offers us the free gift of eternal life through faith in Him. Secondly, we get to share the good news that Jesus welcomes us into His kingdom of transforming love and to be his co-workers in growing His kingdom across the Earth.

Divine authority; divine partnership; a glorious message of redemption; an exciting plan of global transformation. This is why it is not only a good commission. It is the Great Commission.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the fact that we have God’s authority in sharing the good news of Jesus’ redeeming love and His kingdom. How does this bring you fresh encouragement for the task of evangelism?
2. Meditate on the fact that we have God’s companionship in sharing the good news of Jesus’ redeeming love and His kingdom. How does this bring you fresh incentive for the task of evangelism?
3. The Great Commission states that new disciples are to be baptised. Has this been accomplished in your life of faith yet? Is this something you need to consider?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your authority and Your partnership in fulfilling this Great Commission. Give me fresh confidence and motivation to partner with You each day in sharing my faith with others in words and actions. Amen.

## Week 25 Day 5 Loving God and Loving Others

**Bible texts:**

*‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”* Matthew 22:36-39

*The Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’* Acts 20:35

**Kindness opens up people’s hearts**

We have seen how our readiness to share our faith flows from our worship: the more we are connected to the love OF God, the more we will demonstrate love FOR God in worship; and the more we are able to express our love for God, the more we will be inspired to share our faith in God with others; we simply want them to experience the same blessings that we enjoy.

It is interesting that when Jesus was asked to declare the greatest commandment – to love God – He immediately went on to declare the second greatest commandment – to love our neighbours. Jesus had not been asked to declare this second most important commandment but in His heart, He knew how closely linked these commandments are. When we love God, we are connected to His heart of compassion; and when we are in tune with God’s heart of compassion, we will also experience a flow of the most amazing compassion for other people. Loving God well soon spills over into loving people well.

Our acronym for this series exploring our commitment to person-to-person faith-sharing is the word ACTION. We move today from the A of “Always a Priority” to the C of “Courageous Compassion”.

Before we share good news we need to convince people that we ARE good news by bringing blessing to their lives. Generous kindness is one of the strongest bridges over which the good news of Jesus’ love can travel from one person to the next. Before we get to the point of sharing our faith verbally, we need to express our faith practically through loving people well.

One of the most powerful ways of loving people well is through the gift of good food. For example, we might want to invite neighbours round for a meal. Sharing a meal together is a powerful way of turning people from being “familiar strangers” to being friends. We might feel prompted to bake a cake for colleagues at work. We might be inspired to give out cookies to our neighbours along the street. We might decide to make jam or chutney or marmalade to give out to people who are acquaintances right now but who might become good friends very soon.

These simple acts of kindness are not difficult or expensive; even if it is buying some good food to give away, we can all do one of these actions to bring blessing to people’s lives and to express the fact that we love them. We need to be a blessing to others before we can expect people to listen to our stories of the One who is the ultimate source of all blessings.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the deep connection between loving God well and loving others well. How have you seen this expressed in other people?
2. Reflect on the way that kindness has deepened your friendships in the past. Where have you experienced this most powerfully?
3. Think about the people you could bless with a gift of food – whether a meal or some home-baking or buying something special. Write down their names, what your next steps of kindness towards them will be and when and how you will fulfil these steps.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the clear way that You connected loving God with loving others. Thank You that You model for us courageous compassion so brilliantly. Help me to grow in courageous kindness to people around me so that they experience Your generosity flowing through me. Amen.

## Week 26 Day 1 Courageous Compassion through Words of Encouragement

**Bible texts:**

*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.* 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

*We love because God first loved us.* 1 John 4:19

*Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* 2 Corinthians 9:6

**A commitment to generous encouragement**

Along with the giving of gifts like food, another great way of showing courageous compassion is to pass on carefully chosen words of encouragement to people.

The verses from 2 Thessalonians above demonstrate that we have been given eternal encouragement from God. Since the verse from 1 John reminds us that we are to love others because God first loved us, we can also say that we are called to encourage others because God first encouraged us. We are to be channels of God’s gracious compassion to us; as we are loved and impacted by God’s grace, we can pass that same gracious compassion on to others.

Everyone loves to receive words of encouragement; there is no-one alive struggling under the burden of too much encouragement. The reverse is usually the case: people are usually struggling because they don’t receive enough encouragement. They receive tasks and deadlines from others but often these are not given with appropriate words of encouragement.

The general lack of generous encouragement makes the intentional delivery of encouragement all the more powerful. Against the silence of little or no encouragement, the music of genuine encouragement sounds all the sweeter.

We can pass on encouragement in all sorts of ways: texts; messages; phone calls; e-mails; maybe a card or letter in the post. The most powerful of all is a face-to-face conversation when we tell someone directly how much we appreciate them, how much we value their contribution, how much we respect and honour some aspect of who they are and what they are doing.

Hopefully, we know the blessing of being encouraged by others. Let’s use that personal experience to motivate us to be warm encouragers of others. This kind of personal appreciation is another way of expressing genuine compassion that deepens relationships and facilitates conversations about faith.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Who has been the greatest encourager in your life so far?
2. Over the last year, when and how have you received encouragement from people? How has this made you feel?
3. Who needs your words of encouragement right now? When and how can you pass on this encouragement to them?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for the eternal encouragement that You bring to my life. Please help me to listen to Your prompting to encourage people around me. Help me to know what encouragement is needed and when it is needed and help me to deliver this encouragement in the best possible way at the best possible time. Help me to be generous in sowing words of encouragement because You love a generous sower. Amen.

## Week 26 Day 2 Courageous Compassion through Giving People Time

**Bible texts:**

*Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.*Galatians 6:2

*Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.* 1 Timothy 6:18

*And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.* Hebrews 13:16

**Being generous with our time**

We have seen how giving gifts and speaking words of encouragement and appreciation are two powerful ways of showing courageous compassion to people outside of our family of faith. A third way is giving time to people.

For example, we can take time to listen to someone sharing a challenge they are facing and then being able to offer the encouragement needed to tackle this challenge.

We can take time to offer practical help to someone if they are needing to undertake some task that is difficult or stretching for them but easy for us to help with.

In the intense pace of 21st century life, we are all often time-challenged – needing to do more and more with less and less time available. The offer of time to spend with someone is therefore a very significant gift that communicates the extent of our love for them.

When we pass on from this life, the pressing deadlines and lengthy “to do” lists that we have successfully accomplished will not be important any longer. What will be important is that we have lived a life that has been full of generosity to people who have needed our time, and who have been blessed by receiving that time, given freely and joyfully.

If we are too busy for the people around us who need to receive some compassionate help, we are simply too busy.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Think of some key occasions when someone has chosen to give you some precious time to listen or help with something. How did that make you feel?
2. When someone asks you for some of your time to listen or help, how do you generally respond? Is there a need for any change in your general response?
3. Who can you bless with some of your time this week to help them or listen to them?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that during Your three years of intense ministry, You were someone who always took time for the one person who needed Your attention at that moment. Please help me to eliminate rush from my life so that I have time to give to people in need of my attention. Please help me to live a life that is able to offer people time when they need it and to offer it generously and joyfully. Amen.

## Week 26 Day 3 The Power of Praying for People to Find Faith

**Bible texts:**

*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* 2 Corinthians 4:4

*The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.* 1 Corinthians 2:14

*The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.* 2 Corinthians 10:4

*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.* James 5:16

**Supernatural weapons for a supernatural battle**

Our acronym for this series on faith-sharing is the word ACTION. We have looked at the letter A (Always a Priority), the C (Courageous Compassion) and now we turn to T – Talking to God; in other words, prayer.

Paul makes clear that supernatural forces are at work to blind unbelievers to the truth about Jesus. It is not simply a matter of misdirected human reason that keeps a person from seeing the truth. The demonic forces at work in human lives keep people trapped in a prison of unbelief. Since evil supernatural forces are working to maintain that prison of blindness, God’s supernatural forces are going to be needed to unlock these prison doors so that people can escape the darkness and enter the light to be able to see Jesus for who He really is and understand why they need to trust in Jesus as their Saviour. A supernatural battle requires supernatural weapons if we are to see victory – and our prayers are those weapons.

Persistent prayer for our friends and family to find faith is therefore essential. Prayer has power to change human circumstances like no other force on Earth. God chooses to work through our prayers. God chooses to release supernatural resources in response to our requests in prayer. This is why prayer is so powerful and effective (see James 5:16).

A commitment to a life of faith-sharing is a commitment to a life of persistent prayer.

What kind of prayers can we pray?

We can pray that the power of satan to blind people would be broken through the infinitely greater power of Christ.

We can pray that the minds of unbelievers would become open to the truth of Jesus – that they would step from darkness into light.

We can pray that the Holy Spirit would allow unbelievers to understand the truth about Jesus since spiritual truth is spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14).

We can pray that the Holy Spirit would work in unbeliever’s hearts and wills to give them the desire and determination to step from unbelief into faith.

Let’s always remember that our prayers have power to prepare people’s minds, hearts and wills for hearing, understanding and responding to the truth of the glorious news of Jesus’ redeeming grace.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you considered before that the devil blinds people to the truth about Jesus? How does this inspire us to pray for effective evangelism?
2. Have you considered prayers as supernatural weapons before?
3. Have you considered the vital role of the Holy Spirit in empowering people to be able to receive and understand the gospel of salvation through Jesus? How does this shape our prayers?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for Your work in helping us to understand spiritual truth. I pray for Your work in the minds, hearts and wills of my unbelieving friends so that they might be set free from their prison of unbelief to see and understand the truth and enter the glorious freedom of new life in Christ. Amen.

## Week 26 Day 4 Empowering Faith-sharing through Lifestyle Prayer and Strategic Prayer

**Bible texts:**

*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him*. 1 John 5:14-15

*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.* Ephesians 6:18-20

**Combining continual prayer and strategic prayer**

Paul encourages us here to live a lifestyle of prayer – praying on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. As we shower, get dressed, travel to work, get going with our daily schedule, work, eat, meet with friends – in all of these activities we can live a lifestyle of prayer, asking God for help and strength to live our day well and to be alert so that we see opportunities for sowing seeds of faith in others.

Paul encourages us also to persist in prayer: “always keep on praying”. Don’t give up. Just as much as we are called to start praying, we are called not to give up praying. It is vital that we persevere in prayer because it is so important in the spiritual battle that we are fighting.

Along with a lifestyle of prayer, there is also a place for strategic prayer. For example, we can ask ourselves the question: who are we praying for? We can ask the Lord to show us the people around us who are spiritually ready and open to receive the good news of Jesus’ redeeming love.

One prayer strategy some people find helpful is the 6-4-2 strategy. This involves praying regularly for **six** specific people who are not yet followers of Jesus in the expectation that you will have an opportunity to speak to **four** of them about faith in Jesus and that **two** of them will come along to a missional community meeting or a church event or service.

When it comes to identifying who the six people might be, you could reflect on six areas of your life where you might be interacting regularly with someone who has yet to find faith in Jesus. These six could be: family; friends; work colleagues; neighbours; people connected with your hobbies and recreational interests; people connected through some kind of service or business you receive.

Remember to exercise faith and expectation for God to move in these people’s lives. Sometimes the most unlikely people come to a life-changing commitment to Jesus – against all our human expectations. Paul was an unrelenting persecutor of Christians and then had a dramatic conversion to become the most prolific missionary and church-planter in the whole of the New Testament. If the Holy Spirit chooses to bring someone like Paul to faith in Jesus, He can bring ANYONE to faith in Jesus.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the six possible areas of your life in which you can identify the six people you feel prompted to pray for regularly to find faith. Write down the six names in your journal. Don’t be straight-jacketed by reason; exercise faith and listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying. You might be surprised by the people the Holy Spirit brings to mind.
2. Clarify when and how you will pray for these six people regularly – at least once a week. Make a note of this in your journal and enter a diary prompt on your phone to remind you to pray on a specific day at a specific time for these six people. Alternatively, you could pray for one person each day for six days each week. The exact pattern of prayer matters less than the fact that you are going to persist in praying for these six people until you see results.
3. Reflect on what it means to live a lifestyle of prayer, continually praying for all kinds of prayers and requests to the Lord. Is this the kind of lifestyle you live? If not, what gets in the way?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You modelled a life of prayer for Your first apprentices. Please help me in my prayer life so that I can live a lifestyle of prayer that demonstrates my continuous dependence on You and Your grace at work in my life, every day, everywhere. Amen.

## Week 26 Day 5 The Power of Praying with Not-Yet Christian People

**Bible texts:**

*You will be my witnesses…to the ends of the Earth.* Acts 1:8

*Declare the Lord’s glory among the nations…* Psalm 96:3

**Declaring God’s faithfulness through our prayers**

Next week we will consider how we can engage in intentional conversations about faith with our non-Christian friends. As well as talking specifically about faith, we can also model faith by offering to pray with people – even before they find faith.

When suitable opportunities arise, we can easily offer to pray with our not-yet Christian friends. Maybe we have been chatting about a crisis they are facing, in which they need direction and encouragement; maybe we have been talking about a health need they have or someone close to them needs; maybe we have talking about a decision they need to make that needs wisdom and insight. In all of these situations, we can naturally and easily suggest that we take a moment to pray for God’s help and power to make a difference. You might feel it is appropriate to ask first before you pray; sometimes, you can simply suggest it would be a good idea to pray and then go for it before any objections are expressed. Most people will appreciate the fact that you care about them enough to want to take the time to pray for their specific need, right there and then.

Prayer expresses faith in God’s readiness to hear and answer us. Prayer therefore makes clear to your friend the character of God as One who cares about our specific needs. We are declaring to our friend that if a topic matters to us, then it also matters to the God who made us and who knows everything about us.

Prayer is therefore a very significant way to help our friends understand what God is like, that we can talk to Him anywhere, any time, about anything. Prayer is a powerful way of showing what a life of faith looks like. Rather than talking about faith – important though that is - we are demonstrating faith in action.

As we pray, we don’t need to close our eyes; we don’t need to use weird vocabulary; we don’t need to speak loudly. Especially if we are out in public somewhere, we can speak naturally, conversationally and quietly as we talk to God, demonstrating that talking to God can and should be as easy as talking to a friend.

By being naturally supernatural in this kind of way, we are helping to de-mystify God while also fulfilling Jesus’ command that we should be His witnesses wherever we are – expressing what we have seen and heard and what we know to be true about Jesus’ all-encompassing love and compassion.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you ever prayed with a not-yet Christian friend before? If so, reflect on your experiences of doing so. What have you learned through taking this step?
2. If not, is this something you think you are ready to do? What might hold you back?
3. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal an opportunity you might have this week to pray with a not-yet Christian friend. The Holy Spirit might also reveal what and how you are to pray.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You that You empower our prayers. Please give me confidence and clarity to pray with my not-yet Christian friends in the right way at the right time so that I help them to understand Your love and faithfulness to us in times of need. Amen.

Week 27 Day 1 Faith-Sharing through Intentional Conversations Part 1: God’s Story

**Bible texts:**

***Jesus*** *sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God …so they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news…* Luke 9:2,6

*Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.* Acts 8:4

*Peter will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.* Acts 11:14

*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes* Romans 1:16

*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.* Romans 10:17

**Faith comes by hearing the message of the gospel**

As we consider Jesus’ call to faith-sharing, we are using the acronym ACTION to guide us through a series of important priorities. This week we come to the letter I – standing for intentional conversations.

Somebody once said: “preach the gospel every day; use words if you have to.” The conviction behind this statement is that we can model the gospel of a Jesus-centred life by living out our faith for others to see that living with Jesus at the centre of our lives is the best way to live. While this observation is certainly powerful and true, so is the way the quotation finishes: use words if you have to. The reality is that we have to be able to use words in faith-sharing; we have to be able to explain what and Who we believe in. We have to be able to explain how faith makes a difference to our lives. Words of explanation about this are essential; clear communication of our personal faith in Jesus is critical.

Paul explained that faith comes by HEARING the gospel proclaimed. How can people come to faith if they never hear the good news of salvation being clearly explained? Faithful, committed followers of Jesus need to live out the gospel in a life of integrity but they also need to be able to clearly and concisely explain the astonishing story of salvation through Jesus.

This is what we see happening in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts: the first apprentices were obedient to Jesus’ commission to go and proclaim the gospel and their faithful proclamation brought about amazing results: people put their faith in Jesus having heard the gospel explained to them.

As we make this journey of deepening our devotion to Jesus, it is vital for us to develop confidence in being able to share this amazing story of salvation so that our friends can hear the message clearly. While they may choose not to accept Jesus as Saviour, it is essential that their decision is based on a clear and biblical understanding of why and how humans need to be saved.

Paul was not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. The gospel has always been powerful; it is as powerful today as it always has been. The gospel deserves to be confidently shared. Let’s commit ourselves to be among those who are equipped to share it convincingly.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. We all need to feel confident that we can share the gospel simply and clearly. Watch the Bridge illustration being explained on You Tube (simply search for “The Bridge Illustration”). Make notes in your journal about the key points that need to be shared.
2. Watch the Three Circles illustration being explained on You Tube (again, simply search for “Three Circles”). Make notes in your journal about the key points that need to be shared.
3. Which of these two illustrations do you find clearest and most compelling? Which do you think you would be able to use most effectively in your gospel explanation? Have a go at drawing out the necessary pictures and words. Commit yourself to practise this every day for the next week.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that You sent out Your first apprentices to tell people the good news of salvation. Thank You that as they did so, they saw results and people responded. Please help me to gain confidence and clarity in being able to explain the gospel to my friends. Please give me courage to use opportunities to explain the gospel to people with the expectation that they will respond and find faith. Please help me to trust that the gospel is as powerful now as it was then and to be excited about the privilege of sharing this good news with those who are ready to hear it. Amen.

Week 27 Day 2 Intentional conversations Part 2: Sharing our Story of Finding Faith in Jesus

**Bible texts:**

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word.* Luke 1:1-2

*You will be my witnesses…* Acts 1:8

**Being ready and willing to explain how and why we became Christians**

Intentional conversations about faith require us to be able to explain our own story of finding faith – sometimes called our “testimony”. Sharing your personal experience of the love and power of Jesus is a very important part of helping your friends find faith in Jesus.

Luke explains at the start of his gospel account that he was able to write this narrative of the life of Jesus because eye-witnesses who knew Jesus told him about how they had encountered Jesus personally. Jesus prophesied over His first apprentices that they would be His eye-witnesses: relating to others what they have seen and heard. This is what court case witnesses are called to do: speak about what they have seen and heard that helps their listeners to reach an important decision about the truth.

In Acts 26, there is an account of how Paul shared his testimony with a king called Agrippa. Paul’s testimony provides a very good model for how we can structure our own story of coming to faith in Jesus.

Paul’s account begins with what his life was like before he became a follower of Jesus:

*I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth… I was so obsessed with persecuting them* (i.e. Christians) *that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.* Acts 26:9, 11

Secondly, Paul explains how he came to put his faith in Jesus:

*On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Then I asked, “Who are you, Lord?” ‘“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” the Lord replied.* Acts 26:12-15

Thirdly, Paul explains how his life has been different since putting his faith in Jesus:

*So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.* Acts 26:19-20

The three sections of Paul’s story of finding faith are a helpful way of structuring our own story of finding faith:

1. How my life was before I met Jesus.
2. How I decided to accept Jesus as my personal Saviour and Lord.
3. How my life has changed since.

It is a good idea to reflect on these three areas so that we are able to share our testimony when it is appropriate.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on how your life was different before you became a follower of Jesus. Write out some key points.
2. Reflect on the experience of deciding to follow Jesus. For some this was a gradual process; for others, this was a clear decision made on a specific day. Write out some key points.
3. Reflect on the changes that have happened since you decided to follow Jesus. This might be changes in your sense of identity, or character, or your conduct, or your sense of peace, or your relationships or your priorities. Write out some key points.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for saving me through the power of Your sacrificial death. Please help me to craft my story of finding faith in You so that I am ready to share it with others in the hope that they too will come to trust in You as Saviour and Lord. Amen.

## Week 27 Day 3 Intentional conversations Part 3: Hearing People’s Stories

**Bible texts:**

*And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* Colossians 4:3-6

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect…* 1 Peter 3:15

**Sharing each other’s stories**

Paul was eager that his readers should be wise in the way they acted towards non-Christians (outsiders); he encouraged them to make the most of every opportunity. He asked his readers to make sure that their conversation was always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that they might know how to answer every question that came their way.

What does it mean for conversations to be seasoned with salt?

Salt brings flavour to food and salt is used as a food preservative. Both these aspects of salt’s usefulness are important for thinking about our conversations with non-Christians. We should try to make our conversations spiritually significant (bringing flavour) and we should try to make sure that we move conversations away from dwelling on negative, destructive, futile themes (bringing life-giving preservative).

A great way of doing this is to invite people to share their life-stories. Hearing people’s stories is always interesting: what has shaped them? What has made them to be the people they are today? Where and how have they experienced pain and hardship? Where and how have they experienced encouragement and achievement?

By understanding these aspects of our friend’s life, we are better able to understand how our story of finding faith and God’s story of redemption fit with the contours of our friend’s life. There will always be good points of connection to be made between our friend’s experiences and our own experiences of God’s redeeming love.

Often, once someone has finished telling us their story, they will be interested to hear our story too. And that provides a great way of “making the most of every opportunity” as Paul puts it, as we are invited to share our life-story which will include our story of finding faith in Jesus.

Peter’s advice in the verse above is important too: you should “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have”. Sharing our faith-story in response to hearing our friend’s life-story provides a good opportunity to explain the reason for the life of confident hope that we are living. When the conversation is intentionally steered in this way, we will often have a chance to describe our own journey into faith and explain what we believe about God’s plan of salvation.

Intentional conversations are a vital part of sharing our faith with others. We can model a life of faith – but we also need to speak about faith if our friends are to understand their need for finding faith too.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you considered the spiritually significant opportunities that emerge through inviting people to share their life-story? Have you done this in the past? How has this been fruitful?
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the people He would like you to meet with in order to find out more about their life-stories. When and where will you meet them?
3. Have another go at speaking out your personal testimony and also explaining the story of salvation through Jesus with your preferred illustration (e.g. the bridge or the three circles).

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You that during Your three years of ministry You were always so interested in people and influencing their future faith. Help me to be intentional in hearing people’s life-stories and being ready and willing to share my story of finding faith and Your story of redemption clearly and effectively. Amen.

## Week 27 Day 4 Opportunities for Next Steps: Meeting-up

**Bible texts:**

*When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.’ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.* Luke 19:5-6

*The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’* *Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked.**‘How can I,’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.* Acts 8:29-31

**Personal interactions with spiritually curious people**

The Holy Spirit inspired Jesus to meet Zacchaeus personally to build a relationship with him and to have the opportunity of a personal one-to-one conversation about faith.

The Holy Spirit directed Philip to meet-up with an Egyptian official so that he could have an intentional conversation about faith.

The gospel accounts and the book of Acts describe many one-to-one meetings where faith is shared and where faith is explained. These personal conversations were vital then and they are vital now for the purpose of encouraging spiritually hungry and curious people to find faith.

Through intentional conversations we can begin to discern who among our circle of friends and contacts are spiritually open and when we do so, it is good to offer to meet up again to continue and develop our spiritual conversations.

When Philip asks the Egyptian official if he understands what he is reading, he replies: ‘How can I unless someone explains it to me?’

If people are to find faith and grow in faith, they need a willing friend who will meet with them one-to-one and explain to them spiritual truth and offer answers to their spiritual questions.

This is a vital next step for spiritually curious people.

And this brings us to the next letter in our 6 letter word: ACTION. The O stands for “Opportunities for Next Steps”. Once we know that a person is spiritually hungry and open, we need to discern next steps for them in their journey into faith. And very often, the next step will be a personal conversation where we can consider spiritual truth more deeply.

The Egyptian official was reading scripture when he met up with Philip; this is a great idea for our meetings with spiritual open friends – beginning to read the bible together.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Consider your own journey into faith. Are you able to see the sequence of steps that were important for you in your journey? E.g. a significant meeting with a Christian friend.
2. Do you have any spiritually open and hungry friends right now? Write down their names in your journal.
3. What do you think might be the best next step for these friends? Are you able to meet up with them one-to-one?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for modelling the importance of discerning next steps to encourage people to find personal faith. Please help me to discern clearly what next steps are needed among my friends and to have the courage and compassion to provide these next steps at the right time in the right way. Amen.

## Week 27 Day 5 Opportunities for Next Steps: Missional Community Invitation

**Bible texts:**

*As Jesus walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. ‘Follow me,’ Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him.*Mark 2:14-15

*The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.* Acts 10:23-24

**Evangelism as Team Work**

In the previous session, we explored the importance of meeting up with spiritually hungry friends one-to-one. Along with this next step, there is also the next step of inviting friends to try out a missional community meeting.

After Levi had been called by Jesus, he hosted a dinner party with many of his friends. This gathering was very much like a missional community meeting: a mixture of people of faith and people interested in finding out more.

Cornelius also organised a meeting in his home that was also a mixture of people of faith and people finding faith. He invited his family and friends to come and be part of this gathering.

Missional communities are important ways of encouraging people to find faith. They work well because guests have the opportunity of meeting more people of faith rather than simply meeting one-to-one. They have the opportunity of making further significant friendships with other people of faith. They have the opportunity of asking questions of a wider group of believers. They have the opportunity of seeing faith at work in the midst of a spiritual family – and faith is meant to be a family affair, not an individualistic practice. For all these reasons, we can see that evangelism is meant to be a team effort and an invitation to attend a missional community is an important next step in encouraging people to find faith.

It is important that when we invite friends to a missional community meeting that they know what they are coming to. You could explain that there will be a shared two course meal followed by a discussion about spiritual life. Then your friends are prepared for the fact that this is different from a casual, social meeting; there is a spiritual purpose that is being intentionally pursued.

It is also important that they have freedom to come and try the missional community meeting once; there is no pressure for them to return if they don’t want to do so.

And it is important when they attend, that no pressure is placed on them to have to speak or contribute. They are welcome to do so if they want to; but if they want to watch and observe, that is fine too.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How has connection to a missional community helped your faith develop?
2. Reflect on your first experience of a missional community meeting. What was positive that you would want your friends to experience? What was negative that you would not want your friends to experience?
3. Which friends could you invite to a missional community meeting over the next few weeks? Pray for wisdom about when and how to invite these friends along.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, thank You that You were present at missional community meetings two thousand years ago. Thank You that You promise to be present at missional community meetings today. Please show me which friends can be invited along to a missional community meeting and please provide me with good opportunities to invite these friends to attend and with the right words of invitation. Amen.

## Week 28 Day 1: Opportunities for Next Steps: Inspiring Resources

**Bible text:**

*Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.* Romans 10:17

**Directing Friends to Access Rich Spiritual Resources**

As we have explored opportunities for next steps following on from significant intentional conversations, we have seen the importance of one-to-one meetings with spiritually open friends along with invitations to attend missional community meetings. There is also a need for directing our friends to great resources that can help them to find faith more effectively. And the quality and quantity of resources have never been greater.

For example, friends will need access to a bible of their own. We might want to buy them a good, contemporary translation of the bible as a gift. We will definitely want to explain to our enquiring friends how they access good bible resources on their smartphone. You Version is one example: lots of great translations and lots of great reading plans. You might like to direct your friend to an audio bible app that provides explanation each day about what they are reading e.g. Bible in One Year; Daily Audio Bible; Lectio365.

Next, they also need to access the amazing musical worship resources that are available, for example on YouTube or Spotify or Apple Music. You can explain to them how to search for inspiring sung worship. You could provide a list of great worship bands they can listen to e.g. Bethel; Hillsong; Housefires; Upper Room; Maverick City; Cageless Birds. You could even help them create inspiring playlists of worship songs – a playlist of upbeat, exuberant worship and one that is quieter, slower and more suitable for meditation, reflection and soaking.

Your friends also need access to great podcasts from the finest Christian communicators around today. From your knowledge of your friend’s personality, preferences and ponderings, you can suggest a good selection of appropriate podcasts. If you are not familiar with these, then ask around to find some recommendations. Again, make sure that your friend is able to access these on their smartphone easily. Suggest that they listen to podcasts as they commute or exercise or cook or do practical jobs so that they are not having to find more time to do so.

Thanks to the rich resources of the internet, we have never had more opportunity to invite spiritually open friends to enjoy and press into the most amazing next steps. All of these can be powerfully used by the Holy Spirit to encourage people into faith.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. As you think about the friends who are spiritual curious, what would be the best bible resources for them? Make a list.
2. What would be the best worship resources for them? Make a list.
3. What would be the best podcast resources for them? Make a list.

**Prayer:**

Holy Spirit, Thank You for the amazing resources that are available as next steps for my friends. Please help me to clarify the best resources for each of my friends and to be able to communicate these in a compelling way so that my friends are encouraged to find and develop their faith as effectively as possible. Amen.

## Week 28 Day 2        Making new disciples

**Bible texts:**

*Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.* Ephesians 4:15

*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever! Amen.* 2 Peter 3:18

**Growing in Spiritual Maturity**

Paul and Peter demonstrate in these two verses above that they were both committed to encouraging their readers to spiritual growth towards maturity. Their letters are full of great advice and counsel about how we can continue to grow to become mature followers of Jesus.

When we come to faith in Jesus we are like newly born infants – and infants need to grow to become first children and then adults. This metaphor is used specifically in the New Testament since it describes so graphically a pattern for spiritual development. Here’s an example from the book of Hebrews:

*In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.* Hebrews 5:12-14

These words clearly show that we are not meant to remain as we are when we come to faith in Jesus; we are meant to continuously grow to become more mature in our faith, character and conduct.

When Jesus gave us the Great Commission he said: “Go and make disciples” not “go and make new converts”. This is an important distinction to make because a disciple is an apprentice who is developing their understanding, their competence and their skills. Jesus expected his followers to be intentional about instructing new believers to grow in their faith, character and conduct.

As we consider our lifestyle of evangelism, we need to be committed to the calling to make new disciples for Jesus. While we can creatively use all the strategies we have explored over the last few weeks in encouraging people towards faith in Jesus, we need to remember that the decision to follow Jesus is only the beginning of a long journey towards greater and greater maturity. We cannot abandon our friends at the start of this journey any more than we could abandon a newly born infant at the start of their new lives. Physical growth requires continual nurture, care and intentionality; spiritual growth does too.

For this reason, the final letter of our acronym ACTION stands for “new disciples”. Our evangelistic action is only complete when we encourage our friends to join the road to spiritual maturity and to stay on that road.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on how you have been encouraged to join the road to spiritual maturity. Who and what has been helpful?
2. What have been some of the key turning points along this road to spiritual maturity? Why have these been important?
3. What has kept you going along this road to maturity? How will these factors help you to encourage others along their own journey into maturity?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You that You draw people into faith and that You accompany them on their path into maturity. Please help me to understand more deeply the importance of this journey for my own life and for my friends who are drawing closer to Jesus day by day. Help me to be a faithful companion to my friends as they put Jesus at the centre of their lives so that I can fulfil Your command to make new disciples. Amen.

## Week 28 Day 3        Growing disciples in small groups

**Bible texts:**

*After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.*Luke 10:1

*Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.*Matthew 18:20

*Jesus did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.*Mark 5:37

*As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, ‘Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?’*Mark 13:3-4

**Disciple-making is a team activity**

Jesus was committed to the importance of growing disciples in pairs since He sent his disciples out in pairs, knowing that they would help each other to grow and deepen their faith as they travelled and served together. This provides a solid basis for the importance of meeting up with one other person to grow in faith and to seek out opportunities to serve together. For example, if we are going to be undertaking an important ministry task, can we take another person with us so that they can also learn through the experience? They can be a support to you; and your experience can help bring insight to them. Perhaps we are going to prepare a bible study for a small group meeting – we can invite someone to help us in this process. Maybe we are going to visit a sick person to pray for them – we could invite someone to come along with us to help and to be trained in praying for the sick. Growing in twos is vital.

Along with this commitment to the importance of pairs of people growing together, Jesus was also committed to the importance of a small group of three to five for growing disciples since he developed two pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John in this way (see verses above that mention these brothers). On several occasions we read that Jesus took time to be with these men, extending their experience and developing their faith.

A group of 3-5 people of the same gender is a very effective way of developing disciples because we have the chance of gaining more insight through more people being present sharing their perspectives. We have more chance of developing friendships because there are more people present. We have the chance of praying for more needs because there are more people present to share their current challenges. We have more chance of developing continuity and commitment since a single absentee doesn’t prevent the meeting happening as is the case when we have to cancel a meeting with one other person because either you or they can’t make it. We have a great opportunity to hear from God because there are more people who are listening to God’s voice as you meet in His presence.

Suppose you are in the position of wanting to see four friends of the same gender grow to spiritual maturity. Meeting them all individually for an hour a week will require four hours of your time. Meeting them together in one group of five will only take one hour of your time and bring all the advantages listed above. This means of growing disciples is therefore a lot more sustainable as the Holy Spirit brings numerical growth to His church.

Once this small group grows to six people then it can bud into two groups of three and continue the process of making more disciples as effectively and efficiently as possible.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How have you grown through meeting with one other Christian?
2. Have you had the experience of growing through meeting with 2-4 other Christians? If not, is this something that you might be able to engage with soon?
3. In addition to the advantages listed above, can you think of other strengths in the model of growing as a disciple in a group of 3-5 people of the same gender? Why is it important that the group contains either men or women but not both?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for Your model of growing disciples in small groups. Please give me the readiness to follow Your model and to grow as a disciple in a small group of 3 to 5 people. Please let me find the right group and to persevere in this way of meeting so that I can continue to grow as Your apprentice throughout the rest of my life. Amen.

## Week 28 Day 4        Making New Disciples: The Importance of Baptism

**Bible texts:**

*When Lydia and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us.*[Acts 16:15](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2016%3A15&version=NIVUK)

*At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptised.*[Acts 16:33](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2016%3A33&version=NIVUK)

*Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised.*Acts 18:8

**Making a public declaration of faith**

When Jesus gave us the Great Commission to go and make new disciples, he also commanded us to baptise new disciples.

It is interesting to read the accounts in the book of Acts about new believers being baptised – often very soon or even immediately after making a decision to follow Jesus.

While it is important to see disciple-making as a process of extending and deepening commitment over a period of time, it is also essential that we encourage new believers to be baptised.

We have explored the significance and symbolism of baptism in a previous session (see Week 7 Day 5). Baptism is accompanied by making a public declaration of faith in Jesus and this is an important step to take. We are saying in the presence of our spiritual family that we have now crossed the line of faith and that we are now ready to affirm that Jesus is now the Lord of our lives, day by day by day.

Baptism is also an opportunity to pray for new disciples to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that they have all the strength they need to live a life of faith.

There are only good reasons to be baptised and to encourage our friends to be baptised when they decide to follow Jesus. Let’s make sure we do everything we can to encourage new believers to take this vital step.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you been baptised? If not, what is hindering you from making this step? Is it time to do so?
2. Review the baptism promises: I turn to Christ. I repent of my sins. I renounce evil. How are you living out these declarations in your life at present?
3. Do you have friends who might want to be baptised? Is it time to speak with them about this?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for instructing us to baptise new believers. Please be at work in my friends to bring them to the place of wanting to be baptised so that they can build their faith through this step and receive Your presence more fully to gain the strength they need to live a life of obedience. Amen.

## Week 28 Day 5        Faith-sharing through the Power of the Holy Spirit

**Bible texts:**

*Jesus gave them this command: ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about… you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*Acts 1:4, 8

*My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power…*1 Corinthians 2:4

*Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction…*1 Thessalonians 1:5

**A Lifestyle of Being Witnesses to Jesus’ Redeeming Love**

Today we complete our exploration of living a life of sharing our faith in Jesus with those around us. We have used the word ACTION as an acronym to remind us that faith-sharing requires us to be active and also to remind us about some key ingredients in our commitment to be generous to others in our desire to share what we have gained in Christ. Here they are as a reminder as we finish:

A – Always a priority for us; C – Courageous Compassion; T – Talking to God (prayer); Intentional Conversations; O – Opportunities for Next Steps; N = New Disciple-formation.

It is good to remember that the story of the first disciples fulfilling Jesus’ command to go and make disciples is called the ACTS of the Apostles. Not the meetings of the apostles or the dreams of the apostles or the intentions of the apostles but the ACTS of the apostles. They were active in sharing their faith. And the results are amazing to see. Have a read through the book and see the impact of what they achieved because they were active in their response to the Great Commission.

It is also good to remember that at the very start of this account in Acts, Luke states clearly that Jesus wanted His disciples to wait until they were empowered by the Holy Spirit before they started their work of faith-sharing and spreading the good news of the kingdom of God. This empowering happened at Pentecost, recounted in Chapter 2 of Acts. The disciples were empowered for mission and then their mission became fruitful.

God’s empowering then is just as necessary now as it ever has been. These first disciples were missionaries in non-Christian contexts just as we are today. Very few people today have any meaningful exposure to the bible’s truth about God and His message of salvation in Jesus. We desperately need God’s power to make a difference and to be heard above the noise of all the other sounds of influence in people’s lives.

The verses above from Paul’s letters to Corinth and Thessalonica in Greece remind us that Paul’s evangelism was not simply a matter of wise words but also a demonstration of the truth of these words through Holy Spirit power, for example, through words of prophetic revelation and through miracles of healing.

We need to remember that we will be most effective in mission when we rely on the Holy Spirit’s power to demonstrate the truth of our words. Let’s ask the Holy Spirit to empower our words of truth and our actions of compassion so that our evangelism is as effective as possible. We have a supernatural message to proclaim; let’s do so with supernatural resources – the power of God’s Holy Spirit at work in us and through us every day.

Evangelism was always meant to be a Holy Spirit-inspired adventure.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the need for evangelism to be empowered by the Holy Spirit.
2. Reflect on examples in Acts, from your own reading and from your own experience where the Holy Spirit has made evangelism amazingly fruitful and effective.
3. Reflect on ways in which you want to ask the Holy Spirit to empower and transform your faith-sharing.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You that You enter our lives to bring power and effectiveness to our evangelistic efforts. Please fill my life in a fresh way today as I respond to the Great Commission of Jesus and seek to go and make new disciples who will also be empowered in turn to go and make new disciples. Please increase my faith to believe that I can and will be fruitful in living an evangelistic lifestyle every day. Amen.

## Week 29 Day 1 The Servant Heart of Discipleship

**Bible texts:**

*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him.* John 13:3-5

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.* 1 Peter 2:21

*God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.* 1 John 4:16

**Following in the footsteps of Jesus**

Last week we considered the pathway of growth to spiritual maturity – becoming disciples of Jesus so that we can in turn make new disciples for Jesus. As we encourage our friends on that road to spiritual maturity, we are called to reflect the pattern of Jesus’ life so that others can see what is required of them as they become more like Jesus. We demonstrate the life of Christian commitment not only by speaking the words of Jesus but by living out the actions of Jesus. And these actions include a lifestyle of serving others.

It is fascinating that when John is retelling the story of the Last Supper and the astonishing act of Jesus washing His disciples feet, John anchors the story in Jesus’ understanding of His God-given identity, purpose and power. We see this in the way that John connects Jesus’ action with Jesus’ self-understanding:

*Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;****so*** *he got up…*

Jesus knows with confidence that God the Father has put everything under His power and authority since He is God in human flesh, God Incarnate. Jesus knows with perfect clarity His divine origin – He has come from God – and His divine destiny – He was soon to return to be with the Father in Heaven. So, Jesus has perfect understanding of His divine power, His divine identity and His divine destiny. And then John goes on to say: “SO Jesus got up to serve…”

In other words, the servanthood of Jesus flows out of His identity, purpose and power.

There is a fascinating sequence of ideas in this narrative. We could well understand it if John had written: “Even though Jesus was fully aware of His divine identity, purpose and power, nevertheless He still continued to get up and serve His disciples…”

The humble servanthood of Jesus is not IN SPITE OF His divinity; His compassionate actions here are BECAUSE OF His divinity. God is love – and those who live according to God’s ways will always desire to live in love and live out that love in practical acts of kindness.

To be a disciple of Jesus, we need to be a servant of Jesus and a servant like Jesus. His model is our goal; His pattern of service is our pattern of service; His lifestyle of practical kindness is our lifestyle too.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect and journal on the way that the divine identity, purpose and power of Jesus was the springboard for His selfless service of His apprentices.
2. Reflect on the way that our identity as apprentices of Jesus, our purpose of proclaiming the kingdom of God and our access to the power of the Holy Spirit living within us are able to provide us with a springboard into selfless serving of others.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit about today’s equivalents of washing feet. What are some of the ways you can humbly serve people this week?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for the way You demonstrated a lifestyle of servanthood. Thank You that Your clear understanding of Your identity, purpose and power motivated you to serve in such selfless ways. Please help me to follow in Your steps so that my understanding of who I am, where I am going, and Your power at work in me, motivates me to serve whole-heartedly, generously and courageously day by day. Amen.

## Week 29 Day 2 Servanthood as a Calling

**Bible texts:**

*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* Mark 10:45

*Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’* John 20:21

*But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.* Romans 7:6

*You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.* Galatians 5:13

**Serving in the new way of the Holy Spirit**

Jesus was sent by the Father, not to be served, but to be the servant of all. And as Jesus was sent by the Father to be a servant of all, so Jesus sends us to do likewise – to respond to the call to serve others. This is one aspect of our serving: that we are responding to Jesus’ call.

However, while we recognise that we are called by Jesus to serve, we can also be encouraged that God has placed His Spirit within us to motivate our serving so that our serving does not have to be done out of simply being obedient to a divine command. This is what Paul means when he encourages us in Romans 7:6 to serve in the new way of the Holy Spirit, not the old way of the law.

What are the implications of serving in the new way of the Spirit?

When we are filled with God’s Spirit, we will find that our service will be motivated by love not duty, spontaneity rather than the need to respond to a burden, eagerness not reluctance. The Holy Spirit is a Generous, Giving Spirit who empowers us to be willing to serve.

As the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of Holiness, we will find that service motivated by the Spirit is not done with mixed motives – it will be freely offered from a place of not needing to get anything in return.

As the Holy Spirit inspires humility in us and turns us away from pride, we will find that service prompted by the Spirit is offered in an attitude of humility, treating others as better than ourselves, and making us ready to do even mundane tasks if that it is what is required.

As the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s faithfulness, we will find that our gratitude for all that God has done for us will cause us to want to serve God whole-heartedly.

As the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of joyfulness, we will find that serving brings spiritual refreshment to us – another of the paradoxes of the Kingdom of God.

As the Holy Spirit fuels perseverance, we will find that His Presence in our lives will enable us to keep serving even when the circumstances are tough.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the way that serving is a response to the calling of Jesus.
2. Reflect on the different ways that the Holy Spirit can fuel and motivate our serving.
3. When and how have you found the Holy Spirit demonstrating these aspects of His working in our lives as servants?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, thank You for the many ways that You can inspire and energise my life of serving. While I want to be ready to respond to the call of Jesus to serve well, I ask that You will fill my life in fresh ways today so that I have Your resources and inspiration to serve from a place of joyful eagerness and not a place of reluctant obedience. Amen.

## Week 29 Day 3 Serving as the Pathway to Maturity

**Bible text:**

*To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it…So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,**to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up**until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.**Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.**From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.* Ephesians 4: 7,11-16

**A Growing Body of Servants**

There are many metaphors of the Church worldwide in the New Testament. One of these is a human body which provides lots of insight into the amazing richness of what God intends for His Church as a community of faith around the world.

There is the insight that Christ is the Head of this Body because He is the One who has authority over all that goes on in His Body. There is the insight that this Body has a vital unity through all the different parts being held together by appropriate structures. There is also the insight that the Body is made up of lots of parts that are working together to help the Body to stay healthy and effective. There is the insight that young human bodies grow towards adult maturity – and God’s Church is meant to grow towards maturity through all the different parts serving well together.

Paul references five specific areas of service in the life of God’s Church: apostles (those who build new ministry initiatives); prophets (those who reveal God’s specific priorities in each season); evangelists (those gifted to explain the redeeming love of Jesus); pastors (those who minister God’s compassion to people) and teachers (those gifted to teach the Bible). It is significant that Paul says that these ministry roles function to equip God’s people for works of service. In other words, these important roles are not given by Jesus to His Church so that they get on and do all the necessary work themselves. They are given by Jesus to His Church so that they mobilise the rest of the Church in serving effectively. And the goals of this serving are made clear: so that “the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”.

Jesus gives ministry servants to his Church first of all to bring unity in our faith: as we serve together, we build unity together. The best teams are always teams that promote unity and have a resolute determination to overcome any divisions. Serving is a great way of deepening community.

Secondly, our serving together enriches our knowledge of Jesus. It is not that we have perfect knowledge at the start and this motivates our service; rather, our continuing service leads us to a fuller, deeper, clearer knowledge of Jesus. We grow in understanding through serving well and serving whole-heartedly. As we go, we grow.

Thirdly, as the whole Church is mobilised into ministry, we become spiritually mature, attaining the fullness of what Jesus intends for each one of us. We can only fulfil our true spiritual potential through serving. There is no other way. We cannot attain maturity through thinking or reading or studying alone – important though these practices are. We can only reach full spiritual maturity through living a life of serving effectively with others in God-shaped unity.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What inspires you about the metaphor of the human body describing the wonder of God’s Church?
2. Reflect on the priority of all ministry leaders to equip others to serve effectively and not do all the work themselves.
3. Reflect on the ministry goals of unity, intimacy with Jesus and spiritual maturity.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for giving these leadership roles to Your Church so that we can all be released into serving as One Body, deepening our love for You and becoming everything You want us to be. Please give me understanding of where and how You want me to serve in the life of Your Church and please give me the courage and perseverance to keep serving whole-heartedly, day by day. Amen.

## Week 29 Day 4 Faith-filled Service and the Power of God

**Bible text:**

*Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias),****2****and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing those who were ill.****3****Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.****4****The Jewish Passover Festival was near.*

***5****When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’****6****He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.*

***7****Philip answered him, ‘It would take more than half a year’s wages[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%206&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-26265a)*] to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!’*

***8****Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up,****9****‘Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?’*

***10****Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there).****11****Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.*

***12****When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, ‘Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.’****13****So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.* John 6:1-13

**Faith for the Miraculous as we Serve God**

Apart from the miracle of the Resurrection of Jesus, this miracle of feeding a large crowd of perhaps over 10,000 people (there were 5000 men present) is the only miracle that is described in all four gospels. It clearly carries a very special significance when all four gospel writers were inspired to include it in their account of Jesus’ ministry.

One reason for its significance is that it is the only miracle of Jesus that directly involved Jesus’ apprentices. Of course, these apprentices watched many other miracles, but this was the only miracle that was experienced as a team effort. The disciples served alongside Jesus in seeing the miracle happen. They were involved in organising the crowd, organising the distribution of food to the crowd and in collecting the leftovers after this amazing picnic finished.

Hand in hand with this sense of teamwork was their obedience to Jesus. Had the apprentices been left to their own devices independent of Jesus’ instruction, the crowd would have stayed hungry that day. Listening and obeying God is a vital aspect of effective and fruitful service.

Another reason for its significance is that it demonstrates the power of a generous offering. While from the perspective of lunch for 10,000 one pack lunch looks like a small amount, for the child who was prepared to offer his lunch at the start, the offering is very generous; in fact, the offering is everything that child had to eat. When we bring a generous, even sacrificial offering to God, we can have the joy of watching God multiply our contributions to produce something that goes way beyond what is humanly possible, at times, even humanly imaginable. God loves to turn sacrificial offerings into abundant provision for many.

A further key ingredient in the mix is faith: expectation that God can and does work miracles when we are in desperate need. When we serve, we need to serve with faith, anticipating the fact that God is a generous God who knows our needs and wants to bless us abundantly.

The story is important because it reminds us that when we serve faithfully in obedience to Jesus’ commands, God is willing and able to release miracles. Our lifestyle of serving together willingly and generously can release many miracles of provision leading to many miracles of changed lives. If we are committed to the adventure of persistent, generous serving we will have the exhilaration of participating in many great miracles that will hold eternal significance.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the significance of serving together as a team in this story.
2. Reflect on the importance of being willing to offer a generous contribution in order for miracles to happen.
3. Reflect on the need for obedient faith in releasing miracles as we serve.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for this amazing story of Your miraculous love and provision. Thank You for the way that You included Your apprentices so that we can see the power of teamwork in response to Your commands. Help me to be willing to play my part, offering my whole-hearted contribution, in obedience to Your leading day by day. Amen.

## Week 29 Day 5: Clarifying where we are called to serve

**Bible texts:**

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.* 1 Peter 4:10

*Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.* Psalm 37:4

*Also I have given ability to all the skilled workers to make everything I have commanded you...* Exodus 31:6

*Each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.*1 Corinthians 7:17

*‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’* Matthew 4:19

**Five key ingredients to bring to our serving**

We have seen this week how important it is for us to serve whole-heartedly as we grow in spiritual maturity. It is also essential that we each work how we serve most effectively – both in our workplace and in our church community. There are many roles to be undertaken – and God wants us to be happy and fulfilled in our servant roles, not constantly miserable and resentful.

This is obvious in the work place: if we hate numbers, then we are clearly not going to do a great job in an accounting role. If we hate cooking, we are not going to be great in a catering role. The same is true in our church serving as well. If we can’t sing in tune, we should not be the lead vocal in the worship team. If we don’t enjoy the playful banter of teenagers, we should not join the youth team.

How can we work out where we are best positioned in serving?

S.H.A.P.E. is a helpful acronym that can assist us in working out where we are going to be most effective.

S stands for spiritual gifts: we will explore this next week, but for now, let’s remember that the Holy Spirit gives every believer several spiritual gifts to be identified, used and developed. (see 1 Peter 4:10 above)

H stands for heart: what is our heart or passion for making a difference? What excites us about serving? Where do we have the greatest sense of vision and anticipation for seeing lives impacted? (see Psalm 37:4 above – God loves to partner with us in fulfilling the desires He places on our hearts).

A stands for aptitude: what transferable skills do we have that we can bring to our serving in the life of our church? (see Exodus 31:6 where we hear God speak about the way He has skilled particular people in particular ways for particular jobs).

P stands for purpose: what specific purpose is God calling us to pursue in serving? (see 1 Corinthians 7:17 for an encouragement from Paul about pursuing our calling from God.)

E stands for experience: what life experiences do we bring to our serving that can provide insight and wisdom for the future development of our role of serving? (see Matthew 4:19 above where we see Jesus saying to Simon and Andrew that He would use their experience of fishing to give them insight into fishing for people.)

Together, these five different strands of insight can be woven together into a colourful and strong cord that provide amazing levels of self-fulfilment and enjoyment as we serve God in the life and advancement of His kingdom and His Church. We will explore all five of these strands over the coming weeks, beginning with spiritual gifts next week.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Do you find serving hard or easy?
2. What motivates you to serve?
3. Reflect on the idea of these five strands being woven together to create a strong, reliable cord that can make our service both long-lasting and effective.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You came to be the Servant of All and You came to resource Your Church with defined and specific ministry roles. Please help me to gain a higher, broader, deeper, longer vision of what it means to be a missional servant day by day. Help me to identify exactly how You have shaped me for serving. Amen.

## Week 30 Day 1 Gifts of the Holy Spirit

**Bible text:**

*Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed…****4****There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.****5****There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.****6****There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.* ***7****Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.****8****To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit,****9****to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,****10****to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.****11****All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.* 1 Corinthians 12:1,4-11

**Paul’s teaching about spiritual gifts**

The apostle Paul’s teaching about spiritual gifts is contained mainly in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. In the passage above he makes a number of important points.

Firstly, we can consider the Greek word that Paul uses for spiritual gift: *charisma*. *Charis* means “grace” and so here is the first key point about spiritual gifts: they are “gifts of grace” not “trophies of merit”. None of us deserves these gifts; they are given freely out of God’s grace to us.

Secondly, Paul wants his readers to be informed about spiritual gifts. It is important that we understand what these gifts are and how we can use and develop them.

Thirdly, all the spiritual gifts come from the same divine Source and have the same divine Power working through them – the Power of God. Since they have the same Source, the gifts should always be used to honour that divine Source and to fulfil the important purposes of that Source.

Fourthly, spiritual gifts are given for the common good – for the edification of God’s Church. They are therefore meant to be used not ignored, stewarded not stored.

Fifthly, there are many spiritual gifts. Paul goes through a list of nine here and he adds to these nine in other parts of his letters. Different bible scholars will come up with different total numbers but most agree with a number around 20 or so.

Sixthly, we don’t have all the spiritual gifts because Paul speaks about particular gifts being given to particular people. The implication is that each person is given a selection of these spiritual gifts. We need to identify what these particular gifts are and how we can use them effectively.

Seventhly, the Holy Spirit determines the distribution of the spiritual gifts to each person. The distribution is a divine initiative, given out of God’s perfect wisdom. The distribution is not up to human preferences but divine insight into every aspect of our lives, past, present and future. We can trust in God’s wisdom in how He has chosen to impart spiritual gifts in our lives.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Why is it important to remember that spiritual gifts are not given as trophies for human merit but rather are gifts of God’s grace to us?
2. How can the divine Source of our spiritual gifts motivate us to gratitude and active serving with our spiritual gifts?
3. Write out a list of the nine spiritual gifts listed above. Reflect on their application.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for Your gifts to Your Church to empower us to serve You more effectively. Please lead me into a deeper and clearer understanding of spiritual gifts and how I can develop my gifts to serve You more fully day by day. Amen.

## Week 30 Day 2 One Body, Many Parts

**Bible text:**

***4****For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,****5****so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.****6****We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith;****7****if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach;****8****if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.* Romans 12:4-8

**Embracing unity and diversity in the use of our spiritual gifts**

While a human body is one body, it is made up of many organs with different functions. The health of the body depends on these many different organs performing their different functions in a co-ordinated way. Health depends upon both diversity – many organs doing different jobs – combined with unity – the organs functioning together for the good of the whole body.

Physical unity does not mean uniformity. The best state of the whole is when the parts are working differently not identically.

The human body is a rich metaphor for the Christian Church used many times in the New Testament. As members of Christ’s Church we need to embrace a commitment to both unity (working in a coherent way) with diversity (performing our different roles with a sense of satisfaction that we can contribute something significant for the health of the whole body).

Paul is eager that his readers should not only know about their spiritual gifts but use their spiritual gifts; we need both clarity about our spiritual gifts and a readiness to use and develop our spiritual gifts.

How can we gain clarity about the specific spiritual gifts we have received from God?

First of all, there is insight that comes from the Holy Spirit. He is the One who distributes these gifts to the Church and so He is able to reveal to us how He has gifted us. It is important to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal our spiritual gifts to us.

Secondly, there is insight that comes from the personal experience of serving. We need the wisdom that comes from of a few years of serving to gain this necessary experience, experience that may be both positive (what you have enjoyed doing) and negative (what you have not enjoyed).

Thirdly, there is insight that comes from our Christian friends who know us well. Through watching us and experiencing our service over a period of time, it will become clear to others around us where we are gifted to serve.

Fourthly, insight can also come from completing a spiritual gift questionnaire. There are many of these available online and it is a good idea to complete several of them to confirm consistency between different versions and perspectives about what they are telling us about our spiritual gifts.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the combination of both unity and diversity in the serving roles of different members of your church. Where do you see evidence of both loving unity along with rich diversity?
2. Do you know the identity of your main spiritual gifts? Write them down if you do and also how you are using them well. If you don’t, what practical steps can you take to identify them? Write down your next steps.
3. Write out a list of the four spiritual gifts listed in Romans 12 above not listed yesterday. Reflect on their application.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for the provision of spiritual gifts as essential tools for getting the work of ministry done effectively. Thank You that You are eager to reveal the identity of these gifts to each of us. Please clarify for me directly, through others, through my experience and through questionnaires how You have gifted me so that I can be effective in serving You day by day. Amen.

## Week 30 Day 3 Using our Spiritual Gifts with Love

**Bible texts:**

***27****Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.****28****And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.****29****Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?****30****Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?****31****Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way.* 1 Corinthians 12:27-31

*If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.* ***4****Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.****5****It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.****6****Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.****7****It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails…And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.* 1 Corinthians 13:3-8, 13

**Love as the Defining Quality of Service**

We saw in Week 18 how Paul reveals a very important principle about using spiritual gifts by inserting a remarkable passage about self-sacrificial love (*agape* in Greek) in between two passages about spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12 and 14). His sequence demonstrates the importance of always remembering to use spiritual gifts in an attitude of love.

Paul makes abundantly clear that there is no point having the most amazingly developed spiritual gifts, if we don’t make sure that we use those gifts with love. Here are his words on the subject:

*If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

Paul finishes his chapter on love with these simple but profound words:

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

We can exercise astonishing faith as we use spiritual gifts – but we have to make sure that we do so with generous love; this kind of love is the most pressing priority of all.

The combination of the power of spiritual gifts with the compassion of sacrificial love brings amazing transformation to lives. We need to make sure that we maintain this revolutionary combination every time we use our spiritual gifts.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Write out a list of the four spiritual gifts listed above not included in your previous two lists. Reflect on their application.
2. When have you observed or experienced someone using their spiritual gifts with great love? What was the impact of this combination?
3. Have you been aware of times when spiritual gifts have not been exercised in love? What was the impact?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You that You modelled spiritual gifts being used with love. Please help me to follow in Your steps and to make sure that love is always a key priority in the use of my spiritual gifts. Amen.

## Week 30 Day 4 Spiritual Gift Pitfalls to Avoid

**Bible text:**

***14****And so the body is not made up of one part but of many.****15****Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.****16****And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.****17****If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?****18****But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.****19****If they were all one part, where would the body be?****20****As it is, there are many parts, but one body.* ***21****The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’* 1 Corinthians 12:14-21

**Three Common Mistakes: Rejection; Elevation and Projection.**

Paul’s teaching about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 is very useful. As well as encouraging us to be informed about spiritual gifts, he also gives helpful advice about avoiding some key mistakes.

For example, Paul encourages us not to fall into the mistake of rejecting the importance of certain spiritual gifts:

*"And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body."* 1 Corinthians 12:16

It might be tempting to dismiss some spiritual gifts as not being that important but Paul’s wise words teach us that this is wrong: each and every spiritual gift has its place and is vital for the healthy function of the whole body. The gift of helping for example might involve activity that is often hidden and unseen but it is essential if the church is going to be able to get all the many practical jobs undertaken, such as laying out rooms for meetings or emptying bins.

In a similar way, Paul encourages us not to fall into the temptation of feeling that certain spiritual gifts are superior to others:

*The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"* 1 Corinthians 12:21

People with very visible spiritual gifts need to be careful about maintaining humility before God; spiritual gifts are given for the edification of the church and not for boosting our egos.

Another insight is to recognise God’s wisdom in establishing the full range of spiritual gifts:

*God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?* 1 Corinthians 12:18-19

In the light of this insight, we should not run the risk of assuming that our own spiritual gift is going to always be the best way of getting a task done. The diversity of gifts brings a diversity of approaches and all of them are valid and useful.

In summary, here are three key mistakes to avoid: rejecting our gift as inferior; elevating our gift as superior; projecting our gift onto others, rather than letting others use their gifts to contribute to the goal of getting the task done. Being aware of these mistakes and doing our best to avoid them will help our churches exercise spiritual gifts as God intended.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of an example of people rejecting their gift as being inferior to others?
2. Can you think of an example of people elevating their gift as being superior to others?
3. Can you think of an example of people projecting their gift onto others in the wrong assumption that their gift is the only way of getting a job done?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for Your wisdom in distributing these amazing gifts to Your Church. Please help to avoid the pitfalls of rejection, elevation and projection so that I honour all the spiritual gifts as being important and useful for the challenges of kingdom ministry. Amen.

## Week 30 Day 5 Different Levels of Gifting

**Bible texts:**

*It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.* Matthew 25:14-18

*So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service.* Ephesians 4:11-12

*If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God.* 1 Peter 4:11

**Avoiding indifference and jealousy**

The parable above from Matthew’s gospel can be interpreted in many ways but one way of reading this passage is to consider the bags of gold as spiritual gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit. Gold is precious and meant to be stewarded wisely so that it brings in interest. Our spiritual gifts are also precious and meant to be stewarded wisely so that they grow and develop fruitfully for the sake of building up God’s Church.

Yesterday we explored three pitfalls in relation to the stewardship of our spiritual gifts: rejection, elevation and projection. Today’s parable leads us to consider two further pitfalls: indifference and jealousy.

We see an example of the mistake of indifference in the person given one bag of gold. He fails to see the importance of intentionally developing what has been graciously given to us. It is God’s will that we develop what He gives us rather than ignoring it, hiding it, or burying it. The parable teaches us what the apostle Paul encourages us to do: identify, exercise and develop our God-given gifts with as much energy and commitment as we can. This development could include studying examples of people using a particular gift well, reading about this gift’s application, connecting with others who share the same gift for mutual encouragement and praying for wisdom to develop the gift.

There is another lesson about spiritual gifts in this parable: recognition of different levels of gifting in different people. The first person receives five bags, the next two bags, the third one bag. We have seen how important the diversity of spiritual gifts is in getting many different jobs done well. Here we see a different expression of diversity: diversity in the levels of gifting imparted to different people.

The parable is helpful in reminding us that not all of us have the same level of gifting. It is important to remember that the master distributes his resources to each person according to their ability to be able to steward and develop what they are given. There would be no point giving an increased level of gifting to those who are not going to be able to steward that level of gifting well. The level of gifting is appropriate for each person’s capacity to develop what has been entrusted to them.

We can therefore see God’s grace to us in matching our gifting level with our ability to develop our gifts, not imparting a level of gifting inappropriate to our ability to steward that gift.

This recognition of God’s grace to us can keep us safe from the immature response of jealousy. Instead, when we see that other people may have a greater level of gifting in a particular area of serving than we do, we can respond with gratitude that God knows what we are able to cope with. God has given us a level of gifting appropriate to the way we are shaped and wired – no less than we can cope with, and no more than we can cope with.

This means that we can celebrate and encourage those who are more gifted than we are, while we do our very best to develop the level of gifting imparted by God’s grace to us.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Add the two further spiritual gifts from Ephesians 4 and a final new spiritual gift from 1 Peter 4 to make a list of 20 spiritual gifts. Some like to add these three: intercession; hospitality; and creative arts. Reflect on the amazing list of spiritual gifts you have collected this week demonstrating the diversity of how God gifts His people for serving well.
2. Reflect on the need to avoid being jealous of more gifted people and to be thankful to God that we are gifted according to our ability to steward that gift well and wisely.
3. What steps can you take to ensure that you continue to develop your gifts consistently?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for telling this parable that teaches us about the importance of developing what You have given us to the best of our ability. Please keep me from being jealous of those who are more gifted than I am. Help me to realise that You have given me what I can cope with and steward well. Please help me to be intentional about developing the gifts You have generously given me. Amen.

## Week 31 Day 1 Developing a Passion for Serving

**Bible texts:**

*As David was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it. Whenever the Israelites saw the man, they all fled from him in great fear…David asked the men standing near him, ‘What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?’* 1 Samuel 17:23-24,26

*At once Saul began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.****21****All those who heard him were astonished and asked, ‘Isn’t he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?’ Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.* Acts 9:20-22

**Serving God whole-heartedly**

Last week we considered the importance of identifying and developing our spiritual gifts. We turn our attention now to developing a passion for serving God.

God wants our whole-hearted service rather than half-hearted service. God longs for men and women who will follow His call and fight for His purposes with boldness and determination. God wants us to be all out for Him – just as He is all out for us. God does not love us with superficial love; He loves us with deep, sacrificial love -the kind of love that led Jesus to the cross for your sake and mine. God’s love is extravagant, abundant, persistent, courageous.

Through the pages of the Bible we see men and women who expressed this kind of whole-hearted love in response to God’s whole-hearted gift of life and deliverance.

One of these people is David – a man after God’s own heart. (Acts 13:22). From his youth onwards, David was passionate about God and defending God’s honour. We see this in the passage above where he is indignant about Goliath’s insults against God and God’s people. David may be young but he is wonderfully passionate about fighting for God and His sovereign purposes – so passionate in fact, that he will not let the sight of this towering giant of a warrior intimidate his fighting spirit.

Another of these passionate people is Paul. When he was a Jewish rabbi, Paul (then called Saul) was passionate about doing what he thought was God’s will – getting rid of Christians. Paul then had a sudden, dramatic conversion on a journey to Damascus when Jesus appeared to him. From being a radical persecutor of Christians, Paul immediately became a radical evangelist for Christ – explaining and demonstrating that Jesus had appeared as the Saviour of the world. Paul’s passion is clear to see through turning immediately to the work of spreading the good news of Jesus’ saving love. Paul loses no time; he begins this missional work straight away with energy and dynamic commitment. From the word go, he demonstrates the way he fulfils his own encouragement to the Christians in Rome:

*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.* Romans 12:11

God loves this kind of passion in us. God is passionate about us and He loves it when we are passionate about him, shown in the way that we serve God day by day.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the passionate service of David and Paul and how their passion led them to persist through great opposition to fulfil the will of God.
2. As you consider Christian people of influence around the world, whose passionate service for God inspires you most right now?
3. Where is your passion gauge at present: low, medium or high?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your passionate heart for serving throughout Your life. Thank You that You were whole-hearted in Your commitment to serve others, even in difficult circumstances. May I be able to follow Your example of passionate zeal so that I can persevere as You did. Amen.

## Week 31 Day 2 Discovering and Growing our Passion for Serving

**Bible texts:**

*The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.’ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.* Nehemiah 1:1-4

*I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem… By night I went out through the Valley Gate towards the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.* Nehemiah 2:11-12

*Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.’ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work.* Nehemiah 2:17-18

**The emergence of an inspiring passion to make a difference**

Yesterday, we saw the importance of serving God whole-heartedly, with passion and commitment. A key question remains: what is our passion? How do we find our passion among the many causes and needs which we could address?

The story of Nehemiah in the Old Testament is a fascinating one for all sorts of reasons. One of these is the way it provides a biblical example of someone identifying the cause they want to pursue with diligence; we see in this story Nehemiah discovering his passion to make a difference.

The context of the story is the seventy year exile of the Jewish people in the foreign nation of Babylonia (modern day Iraq). Nehemiah is working as the Babylonian king’s cup-bearer and receives information about the sad and sorry state of the Jewish remnant left in Jerusalem along with the destruction of the city’s walls and gates. Jerusalem – the city that represents the heart of the Jewish faith – is in ruins. For a faithful Jewish leader like Nehemiah, this is a disaster of huge proportions. He is cut to the heart by this tragic revelation. The news from Jerusalem is therefore a life-changing moment for Nehemiah: a passion begins to stir in his heart. All he can do to start with is to fast and pray as he calls out to God for help and for revelation about what he can do to change the situation. As he prays, clarity begins to form; a vision of what might be possible with God’s assistance starts to emerge. Nehemiah doesn’t gain a fully formed understanding of what is involved at this point; but he does gain enough to get going as his passion starts growing.

If we are not yet sure of our life’s passion in relation to the advancing kingdom of God, then we can begin to pray that God would show us. Perhaps this revelation will come through a prophetic picture or vision; perhaps it will come through a podcast or an article or book we read; perhaps it will come through a significant conversation – as it did for Nehemiah. There are many routes through which this revelation can come – but a great place to start is praying for this clarity to come.

It’s clear in the first two chapters of Nehemiah’s story that his passion develops further clarity step by step, stage by stage. The outworking of his heart’s desire takes time to develop. It doesn’t come to Nehemiah as a complete strategy. Nehemiah takes some bold first steps – gaining permission to return to Jerusalem; inspecting the walls by night secretly and alone; then, gathering a team together to start doing something practical to begin to turn the situation around.

Most people will testify to the same pattern in their lives. God brings a sense of discontent about a particular situation that needs transformation. If this seed of discontent is planted in the rich soil of our expectant hearts, then the warmth and water of the Holy Spirit can cause it to grow, develop roots, a stem, leaves and in the course of time, fruit as well. Gradually, our passionate desire to make a difference will bear wonderful results: we will see essential transformation begin to happen.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the specific passions of some Christian leaders you know. Do you know how they began?
2. Do you know your own passion? This could well be through our midweek work as well as involvement in the life of our church. Your work is just as much ministry as how you serve at church. If you do know your passion, work on defining this as clearly as possible.
3. If you don’t know your passion for serving yet, start to journal about this key ingredient in fulfilling our life of service. Ask God to help you discover your heart for making a difference.

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that You created me and You know every detail about my past, present and future. In Your gracious love for me, please give me further clarity about how and where You want me to serve. I want my life to make a difference. I want my life to have significance in bringing Your kingdom into being on Earth as it is in Heaven. Please speak to me about my growing heart to serve You effectively every day. Amen.

## Week 31 Day 3 Growing in excitement about existing passions

**Bible texts:**

*Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance. The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.’* Deuteronomy 31:7-8

*You know that because of the wars waged against my father David from all sides, he could not build a temple for the Name of the Lord his God until the Lord put his enemies under his feet. But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster. I intend, therefore, to build a temple for the Name of the Lord my God, as the Lord told my father David, when he said, “Your son whom I will put on the throne in your place will build the temple for my Name*. 1 Kings 5:3-5

*But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.* 2 Timothy 4:5

**Inheriting Passions from Passionate Pioneers**

We saw yesterday how Nehemiah developed a passion to restore the walls and gates of Jerusalem. This was a new and fresh passion and led Nehemiah to be a pioneer in restoration and rebuilding.

While this may be our experience and God may give us a fresh passion for something new, it is probably more likely that the passions that stir in our hearts are already shared by many other people who are aware of this significant cause. Our response will then be a matter of seeing what is being done and how we can partner with these efforts.

Equally, it could well be that it is when someone shares their passion for serving a particular cause that we find a resonance in our hearts that motivates us to get involved too. There is nothing wrong with developing a heart for what other people burn with passion to transform. Passion is infectious in a wonderfully positive way and for many – probably most – people, they become passionate for an area of service because they were touched by the passion of someone else being communicated in a captivating way.

There are many instances of passions being passed on from person to person in scripture. Three examples are cited above. Moses passed on his passion to lead God’s people into the Promised Land to Joshua; King David passed on his passion to build a temple to his son Solomon; Paul passed on his passion to evangelise Turkey and Greece to his young friend Timothy.

The same pattern of inherited passions could well be our experience too. Perhaps we hear someone give a compelling account of the needs of asylum seekers in your city and we want to get involved; maybe we read an online article about the need for closer partnerships between local schools and local churches and we sense a desire to participate; it could be that we hear the story of how a local dance ministry got going and we begin to sense our feet itching to get going too.

There is nothing second rate about inheriting a passion from someone else. The critical point is that we are able to say that we have been set alight by a worthy cause and that we will give our best efforts pursuing that passion and bringing the transformation that God longs to see.

It doesn’t matter how a kindling stick is set on fire; the important point is that it has caught alight and that its heat and light bring blessing to others.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of examples of serving passions being passed on from person to person?
2. If you know your growing passion, whose passion inspired you to get involved?
3. If you don’t yet know your passion, whose passion could inspire you to get involved?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that you made us to burn with passion for kingdom causes.

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the way that You passed on your passion for God’s kingdom to Your first apprentices so that they pursued Your same passion until they breathed their last.

Fire-starting Spirit, Thank You for the way You kindle flames of passion in Your people. Please start a fire in my heart that will burn brightly for the rest of my life.

Father, Son and Spirit: may You bring the fuel of clarity so I know my life’s passion. May You bring the heat of enthusiasm to ignite the fire of my passion. May You breathe the oxygen of courage to expand the fire of my passion. Amen.

## Week 31 Day 4 Pursuing our Calling from God

**Bible texts:**

*For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.* Romans 11:29

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.* Ephesians 4:1

*To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.* 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

**The Power of Pressing into our Calling**

In response to the adventure of serving, so far we have considered the importance of knowing and developing our spiritual gifts and clarifying a passionate pursuit that excites and motivates us. A third strand of knowing how God has shaped us for serving is our specific calling from God.

There are a series of general callings to every follower of Jesus: the call to worship and love God; the call to obedience to God; the call to pray; the call to share our faith; the call to build good character; the call to love others. Along with these general and universal callings, there is also a specific calling in the area of our specific role in serving.

We might feel called to youth or children’s ministry; we might feel called to worship ministry; we might feel called to become a trustee of a charity; we might feel called to be a school governor; we might feel called to run a foodbank; we might feel called to debt counselling. All of these are great callings – and they are all specific for specific people at particular times depending on local needs.

Sometimes, these specific callings may come to us through a prophetic word give to us. Very often our specific calling will resonate with our passion: God gives us an excitement in the area of our passion. So, identifying our area of passion is often a case of identifying how God is calling us. Sometimes we will identify our passion first and this will help us clarify our calling from God. At other times we will identify our calling first and this will lead to the development of our passion in that area of serving.

What are the strengths of finding our calling from God in the area of service?

Firstly, knowing our calling clarifies where we are to serve and how we are to invest time and energy as we serve. We can spend more time praying into and researching that area of need, developing a broader and deeper awareness of the challenges and opportunities.

Secondly, knowing our calling clarifies where we are NOT to serve. This helps us to say no to opportunities that may seem exciting but which will distract us from our primary area of serving and leave us feeling drained. Very often, exhaustion may come to us because we have been trying to serve in an area which is simply not our calling.

Thirdly, knowing our calling helps us to develop vision for what is needed. Because of our passionate commitment to this area, we will have a desire to consider what might be possible with God’s help and resources. A calling from God motivates us to ask for revelation from God about the way forward. This in turn helps us to develop a sense of direction and momentum.

Fourthly, knowing our calling from God helps us to develop persistence. Every area of service is tough and challenging at times. If we serve from a sense of specific calling from God, then we will be ready to keep going through these difficult times.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on how a developed sense of calling has assisted Christian leaders you know.
2. Reflect on how calling encourages direction and perseverance.
3. Do you have a sense of how God is calling you into a specific area of serving?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You that You want us to know our calling. Please help me to clarify Your calling on my life so that I can serve whole-heartedly, sustainably, consistently and persistently day by day. Amen.

## Week 31 Day 5 The Significance of Being Called by God to Serve

**Bible texts:**

*Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’* John 20:21

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.* John 15:5

*For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.* Romans 11:29

**Called by a King**

If a distant acquaintance asks us to do something, our response may be less than whole-hearted; the job might get done – it might not. If our boss asks us to do something, the likelihood is that the job will definitely get done. The greater the authority of the one who calls us to do something, the greater our response of obedience in delivering results.

As we reflect on the fact that the God of this Universe who has made us, redeemed us and who knows everything about us – our past, present and future – has called us to a life of service and more specifically, is calling us to a particular role among his family of servants, then we will be inspired to see the life-transforming significance of this calling. This is so much more significant than the request of a friend or the instruction of a boss. This is a divine call from One who is enthroned over all. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us to live a life of service in response to His specific call (John 20:21).

God’s call brings a clear sense of the importance of responding. His call also brings a sense of the exciting results that can follow (John 15:5). Jesus appoints us to bear fruit and to bear fruit that will last. There is a promise of productivity and there is a promise of lasting results. As we respond to God’s call we can look forward to the fulfilment of this promise; our life will be fruitful and this fruit will not fade and pass.

The gifts God gives us along with the calling He brings to us will not be cancelled or removed (Romans 11:29). If we fail to respond in the right way at the right time this does not mean that God’s call is somehow lost forever. We might take detours now and then – but God is always faithful and He will lead us onwards in the right direction to fulfil His wonderful purposes for our lives and to bring the fruitfulness that He desires for our lives as we serve Him.

Here are three great inspirations for us as we reflect on God’s call: the awesome privilege of being called by the King of kings to serve His purposes in partnership with Him; the abundant fruitfulness that He promises us as we serve Him whole-heartedly; the enduring faithfulness of God in imparting a series of gifts and a specific call that will never be cancelled or taken from us, if we live in a place of submitting to His leading day by day.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the privilege of being called by God to serve in particular ways.
2. Meditate on the amazing and persistent fruitfulness that God wants to bring through our serving.
3. How are you helped by seeing that the gifts and call of God are not going to be cancelled or taken from us if we seek to honour God first in our lives?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that You want to partner with me in service. Help me never to forget the privilege of this calling. Thank You that You want to bear fruit through my service – fruit that will last. Thank You that Your call is a lasting and enduring calling that will not be cancelled. Please forgive me for the times when I minimise the importance of Your call, when I grumble about the lack of results, or when I waste time fearing that I have missed Your invitation irretrievably. Please help me to respond productively to Your call that can and will bring such joy and fulfilment to my life. Amen.

## Week 32 Day 1 Serving God with Our Natural Gifts and Skills

**Bible text:**

*Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘See I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills –**to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze,**to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given ability to all the skilled workers to make everything I have commanded you…* Exodus 31:1-6

**A Diversity of Gifts from God**

In our exploration of knowing how we have been shaped to serve God we have considered our spiritual gifts, our passion and our calling. We turn our attention now to our talents and skills.

Some of our giftedness comes through spiritual gifts; some of our giftedness comes through other kinds of gifts. There is no spiritual gift of repairing broken machines – but some engineering-types have an amazing capacity to be able to serve in this way. There is no spiritual gift of dancing – but some people have a remarkable talent for being able to move their limbs in a beautifully co-ordinated way that expresses their creativity and their worship.

Just as we are to use our supernatural spiritual gifts in serving the Lord, we can also use our natural gifts in serving the Lord, both through our work and through volunteering in the life of our local church.

The passage above from Exodus relates to the way that God has given great skills to a man called Bezalel to be able to craft metal, precious stones and wood – a broad range of materials to work with. The sequence of attributes given to Bezalel expresses a divinely appointed synergy between them:

*I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills…*

Bezalel is divinely equipped to understand what to make and how best to make these crafted objects.

What is true of Bezalel is true of other people mentioned in the text above and is also true for us today. God is our Creator who breathes our lives into being and who gives us wisdom, understanding, knowledge and skills. Each attribute enhances the others and leads to the wonder of what it means to be gifted to do something well. Someone who is not gifted in some activity will find it difficult, challenging, frustrating and will struggle to make progress. On the other hand, someone who is gifted in that area will find it straightforward, inspiring, fruitful and will make rapid progress.

Interestingly, Bezalel is the first bible character to be filled with the Holy Spirit. God is able to empower our natural talents with His Holy Spirit so that they become even more productive. The combination of natural talent with supernatural empowering can lead to amazing results.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Whose natural talents are you aware of in the life of your local church? How are these talents being productively employed?
2. What are your main natural talents? How are you able to use these talents in your work? How are you able to use them through serving at your local church?
3. How do you think God wants you to develop your natural talents in new directions?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You for giving me my natural gifts alongside spiritual gifts. Help me to see how You want me to use and develop my natural talents in my work and my serving. Help me to be faithful and obedient in my response so that I can be as productive as possible. Amen.

## Week 32 Day 2 Offering our Skills to God in Service

**Bible texts:**

*Bless all his skills, Lord, and be pleased with the work of his hands.* Deuteronomy 33:11

*Do you see someone skilled in their work? They will serve before kings; they will not serve before officials of low rank.* Proverbs 22:29

*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* Colossians 3:17

**Skilled work as worship and an area for development**

When we find something tricky to do, there is a high likelihood that we might be led to pray before we tackle the challenge as we may be feeling that we are not very competent to do a good job. On the other hand, when we are very skilled at something, there is the temptation not to pray about what we are doing simply because we find it so straightforward and simple.

The productive work of our hands can be offered to God as an act of worship including the use of our skills. It is good – even with something that we find easy – to offer our work to God as part of our lifestyle of worship to God.

Skilled teachers can pray before they start teaching their favourite class that the lesson that follows might be offered to God as an act of worship; skilled nurses can pray before they start their day that their professional care be a matter of giving a precious gift back to God – the gift of thanksgiving for the talents that have been given to them; skilled office workers can pray as they begin work that all they undertake during the day be presented to God as a sign of their gratitude for the insight, wisdom and competence that they are able to make use of during their busy schedule of meetings and administration.

If forgetting to see work as worship is one temptation, another might be indifference towards developing our skills further. An attitude of worship in our work will encourage us to consider how we may spur one another on towards the continued refinement and extension of our skills, so that we become increasingly competent in our serving, whether at work during the week or in our volunteering in our church.

God earnestly desires to bless the work of our hands. Let’s pray that all we do carries this divine blessing and that God’s blessings mean that we also continue to become even more skilled as we seek to serve God’s purposes in our daily work and serving.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How faithful are you in praying about your work every day? How can you remind yourself to pray about your work each day before you start?
2. How can your daily work skills be further improved and developed? What practical steps are needed to implement this development?
3. How can the skills you use in serving the ministry of your church be developed? What are your next steps?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You for the gifts and skills You have given me to work and serve effectively. Please help me to remember to pray about the use of my gifts and skills each day so that I can be as productive as possible. Please also help me to see where I can develop my skills so that I am ready for the new challenges that are coming my way in the months and years to come. Amen.

## Week 32 Day 3 Learning from Past Experience

**Bible texts:**

*If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.* Philippians 3:4-6

*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia.*2 Corinthians 1:8

**Shaped by our Past**

The apostle Paul was very much aware of his personal history. He knew his Jewish ancestry well and he grew up to become a zealous Jewish rabbi – a career choice only possible for the most devoted of young Jewish men. He knew the Jewish scriptures deeply; he understood the Jewish faith profoundly. This Jewish background was a key ingredient in equipping Paul to be able to explain the theology of the New Covenant to the readers of his many letters collected in the New Testament. None of his past was wasted; he was well-placed to be able to appreciate the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Christian ways of understanding the redemptive purposes of God through Jesus built on the foundation of the Old Testament patterns of sacrificial, substitutionary atonement. His past experience of faith made him ready to understand and explain his present theological position.

Paul was also no stranger to persecution. He had persecuted Christians while he was still a rabbi; and then, ironically, he goes on to experience significant persecution as a Christian missionary. His past experience of trouble and hardship, suffering and torment helped to shape his radical perseverance in the worst of circumstances. Paul was a brave fighter to the very end.

As Paul’s past experience was important in shaping both his attitude and aptitude for serving, our past experience can do the same for us.

For example, our past experience can shape our passions. So many people who have a heart for serving vulnerable people have had an earlier, formative experience of helping a significant vulnerable person in severe need – perhaps a grandparent, parent, sibling or close friend.

Our past experience can help develop our gifts and skills as we serve in our local church. If we have been a school teacher for many years, then we can bring all of that experience to assist our work as a children’s ministry leader. If we have worked in catering, this experience can be wonderfully used in organising and hosting hospitality events at our church.

Our past experience can help us identify our spiritual gifts. As we go through the list of spiritual gifts, we can consider the way that past experience of serving has given us valuable insight into the way that the Holy Spirit has gifted us to serve.

Past experience can also refine our pattern of working as we learn from previous mistakes and ineffectiveness. History is a great teacher. As we recognise practical approaches in the past that have been fruitless, as we recognise clear mistakes that have been made, we are better positioned to be productive in our work and serving in the future.

For all these reasons, past experience is an important ingredient in shaping our life of serving.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How has your past experience assisted the identification of your heart for specific serving in the present?
2. How has your past experience been helpful in identifying your spiritual gifts?
3. What have past mistakes in areas of service helped you understand effective serving in the present?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that You know everything about my life – past, present and future. Please help me to understand my past as fully as possible so that I can be better equipped to serve You effectively in the present and the future. Amen.

## Week 32 Day 4 Gaining Competence through Continued Experience

**Bible texts:**

*I am sending you Huram-Abi, a man of great skill, whose mother was from Dan and whose father was from Tyre. He is trained to work in gold and silver, bronze and iron, stone and wood, and with purple and blue and crimson yarn and fine linen. He is experienced in all kinds of engraving and can execute any design given to him. He will work with your skilled workers and with those of my lord, David your father.* 2 Chronicles 2:13-14

*I said to myself, ‘Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.’* Ecclesiastes 1:16

**Persistent practice brings persistent excellence**

It is amazing to watch highly skilled people do what they do well. Years of practice have brought an astonishing level of competence. Difficult and challenging tasks are made to look easy. Perhaps it is someone plastering a ceiling; maybe it is a lorry driver reversing into a tight space; it could be a nurse inserting a canula. Hundreds - if not thousands – of repetitions have brought an inspiring sense of confidence as these trained professionals pursue excellence in their work.

And whenever one of these people is complimented for their level of skill the response is usually the same: “I’ve been doing it a long time.”

King Solomon (King David’s son) recognised that his persistent pursuit of wisdom and knowledge in a whole range of subjects had led him to feel experienced in these areas (Ecclesiastes 1:6). This recognition led him to recruit experienced craftspeople when he set about building a temple in Jerusalem so that the temple could be constructed and furnished to a high degree of excellence. Huram-Abi was one of those excellent craftspeople – experienced as a metalworker, stone-mason, carpenter, engraver and needle-worker – an amazing range of skills.

Solomon was determined to pursue excellence in the design and building of the temple. His great wisdom led him to realise that excellence honours God and inspires people. It is important that we aim for excellence in all we do. God has always done His best for us; it is the appropriate response of gratitude and worship that we do the best we can for God.

Excellence in our serving comes through persistent practice. Even if we are astonishingly gifted, our first attempts at any new area of skill are not usually very good; they may show signs of potential – especially if we are gifted in that area – but they will rarely be excellent. The more we practise, the greater the degree of excellence – especially if we are able to get reliable and honest feedback from friendly critics. The cycle of experience is very helpful when it comes to maximising the potential of our experience: we do something; we evaluate its quality and impact through self-assessment, peer assessment and expert assessment; we carefully implement next steps in our learning; we do the task again, now more competently.

There is an inherent risk in our life of work and serving: that of getting bored and wanting to change and do something completely different. While God may well call us on to new areas of serving – and we need to be responsive when that call comes – we also need to be creative when it comes to addressing boredom. Rather than give up the skills and experience we have gained, is there the possibility of applying those skills and experience in a new area? If we have developed excellent skills, then there will usually be lots of opportunities for using them in different areas. We can always find new ways of using old skills, new areas of impact, new people to serve. That way our excellence keeps on growing.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the way that excellence through experience honours God and inspires people.
2. Whose excellence inspires you right now? Can you investigate their pathway to excellence?
3. Where have you developed excellence? Where would you like to develop excellence?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that You have only ever done Your best for me. I want to do my best for You. I desire to honour You with excellence in my life. Please help me to grow in competence in my work and serving so that I can pursue excellence as my offering of worship to You. Amen.

## Week 32 Day 5 Shaped to Serve Effectively

**Bible texts:**

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”*Isaiah 6:8

*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.*1 Thessalonians 5:15

*Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.*1 John 3:18

*I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last...* John 15:16

**A five-stranded cord of whole-hearted serving**

Over the last few weeks we have explored five strands relevant to serving that help us to consider how we are shaped to serve effectively: our spiritual gifts; our personal passion; natural talents and skills; God’s call on our life; and our past experience.

When there is alignment between these five aspects of serving, we can be confident that we will be able to make a significant difference through our efforts – whether that is at work or in our volunteering.

Let’s consider a couple of examples.

Suppose someone has the spiritual gift of mercy (compassion) and the spiritual gift of giving (financial generosity). They have a heart for people on the margins, naturally empathising with the challenges of poverty. They have great skills in the kitchen with cooking and baking. As they pray, they sense a call from God to be involved in ministry among people who are struggling to develop a healthy diet. They have a background of many years in catering. In response to reflection on these five strands, they decide it would be good to run weekly cooking workshops for local families. They advertise this opportunity through local primary schools and through their spiritual gift of giving they are able to provide the money necessary to get this workshop going.

Someone else has the spiritual gift of creative communication and the spiritual gift of leadership. They have a passion for educating people about the bible along with artistic creativity. They have great skills in organising people well and lots of experience with planning and delivering events. As they pray, they hear God speak to them about starting a new creative workshop once a month with the aim of bringing artists together who can bring bible stories to life through creative writing, poetry, drama, songs, painting, sculpture and short films.

Both these scenarios provide huge potential for productivity because these people have achieved alignment between their spiritual gifts, passion, skills, calling and experience. This is what God wants for all of us: strategic alignment of every aspect of our lives so that we can be productive and make an impact for the advancement of God’s kingdom.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of examples of people who have aligned their spiritual gifts, passion, skills, calling and experience effectively in their life of fruitful service?
2. Reflect on the level of alignment you have currently achieved in your life of work and serving.
3. What are your next steps to achieve an even better alignment of these five strands?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for the way You have shaped my life. Please help me to achieve the best possible alignment of my gifts, heart, skills, calling and experience so that I can work and serve to my full potential. Please empower every aspect of who I am, so that I know the blessing of Your supernatural resources to amplify what I bring to the table each day. Amen.

Week 33 Day 1 Fighting the Good Fight of Faith

**Bible texts:**

*Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.* 1 Timothy 6:12

*You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.* 2 Timothy 2:1-4

**Pursuing our calling as Soldiers of Christ Jesus**

The apostle Paul liked to use the metaphor of fighting as soldiers in his letters; both these quotations make use of this military picture as a way of illustrating the challenges of the Christian life.

Paul knew very clearly that our life of faith in Jesus involves us in a fierce spiritual battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. Paul also knew that making progress in this spiritual battle requires us to be just as single-minded as soldiers need to be. They cannot be at one and the same time a dedicated soldier and also involved in the distractions of other civilian affairs. Effective soldiers are focused on fulfilling the orders of their commanding officer. Likewise, Paul says, we need to be focused on fulfilling Jesus’ commandments – especially the Great Commission of going and making new apprentices for Jesus.

We need to be careful in our exploration of this metaphor to avoid any sense that we are called to fight against other people. In our previous consideration of spiritual warfare, we have seen that our struggle is not against humans but against the spiritual forces of darkness in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12). So, we are called to be peace-makers in relation to people but fierce warriors in relation to demonic powers.

If we extend the military metaphor from land to sea, we recognise that we are called to serve on a battleship and not a cruise-liner. Each local church can be seen as this kind of naval ship, with a vital military purpose in a very serious battle. There are no passengers on naval battleships; everyone is crew. Likewise, in each local church, everyone belongs to the crew.

These are critical times for our nation. The nationwide Church is low in number compared with previous centuries. There has been a steady deterioration in Christian faith for many decades and the national consequences are plain for all to see: broken families; misplaced identity; low self-esteem; poor mental health; high levels of anxiety and unresolved anger; people desperately searching for meaning and purpose and often numbing their intense levels of emotional pain with one kind of addiction or another. The answer to these complex problems lies in people finding faith in Jesus, trusting in His capacity to bring them a true sense of lasting identity, a consistently loving community, freedom from past shame and brokenness and a life-long purpose that will bring transformation of dark despair into joy-filled hope.

The powers of darkness are set against people finding this hope. That is why we need to fight the good fight with every fibre of our being, with every day we are given and in every place we are living. And that is why we need to partner with Jesus in recruiting, training and developing more soldiers to help lead the offensive against the powers of darkness constantly working to destroy this stunning world of opportunity.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on how the brokenness of this world has impacted your life and the lives of those closest to you.
2. Reflect on the ways that Jesus has brought you forgiving and redeeming love, a faithful spiritual family and a life-long purpose.
3. Reflect on the ways that Jesus is now calling you to become a faithful soldier to join in the good fight of redemption that is being waged around the world.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the redeeming love that You have brought into my life. Thank You for the spiritual family that You have brought me into. Thank You for the hope-filled purpose that You have called me to pursue. Thank You for the inspiring model You showed me through Your life of persistent courage. Please help me to fight the good fight as Your faithful soldier, day by day by day. Amen.

## Week 33 Day 2 The Critical Importance of Developing Leadership

**Bible text:**

*We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is…to lead, do it diligently…* Romans 12:6,8

**Leadership is Influence**

When it comes to fulfilling our potential in serving, people often ask questions like: does everyone have the gift of prophecy or just some? Does everyone have the gift of healing or just some? Does everyone have the gift of leadership or just some?

While some people will be called to exercise a particular ministry of prophecy or healing or leadership, we can see that there is a profound need for EVERYONE to be able to use these gifts regularly, if not daily. And so, the answer to these previous questions is that everyone can use these gifts but some people will have such a powerful impartation of these gifts that they will develop a pattern of serving in a much more extensive and fruitful way than most people experience.

When it comes to leadership, we may not be called to lead a team of hundreds of people – but we are all called to lead, at the very least, ourselves. Read any book on leadership, and there will be considerable focus on the necessity of leading oneself, wisely and persistently. If we cannot lead ourselves well, how can we possibly lead others sustainably and with integrity? Self-leadership is a vital aspect of developing maturity in our lives. We need to be able to lead ourselves from apathy to passion, from temptation to obedience, from selfishness to generosity, from pride to humility, from independence to inter-dependence, from superficial relationships to deep community, from doubt to faith.

The reality is that leadership is simply influencing people – and since we are called to a life of pursuing God’s best then we all need to influence the undeveloped, unfulfilled, unredeemed parts of our lives so that we can fulfil God’s intention for the rest of our lives. Our renewed self needs to influence our currently unrenewed self.

Next, we need to recognise that we are called to influence the not-yet Christian people around us through our life of witness – an area of challenge we considered when we looked at personal evangelism.

When these friends become Christians, we will then need to influence their journey into Christian maturity by inviting them to DNA groups and important church gatherings.

And if and when we become parents, we will be influencing our children.

Because of the reality that everyone will influence themselves, their not-yet Christian friends and if they become parents, their children, then we can see that everyone who is called to follow Jesus is called to a life of influence and therefore called to a life of leadership.

Because of the critical importance of developing leadership, we will consider this vital aspect of Christian life over the next 2 weeks.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Leadership is influence. What opportunities for the influence of leadership will you experience today?
2. Whose leadership influence has most inspired you through your life?
3. What leadership challenges are you currently experiencing?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for Your leadership in my life. Please help me to recognise the critical importance of leading myself well, and leading others around me well. Please help me to rise to these challenges with wisdom, compassion and persistence and help me to learn from Your influence day by day. Amen.

## Week 33 Day 3 God’s Call to Leadership Intentionality

**Bible texts:**

*The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”* 1 Samuel 3:10

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

**Responding courageously to God’s Call to Lead**

We have seen this week that we are called to fight the good fight of God’s kingdom as soldiers of faith in Jesus. We have also seen that we are called to lead diligently – at the very least, ourselves, our not-yet Christian friends, and if we are parents, our children.

For many of us, there will be many other dimensions of leadership challenge in our lives, both through our work and through our serving. Leading well is an essential aspect of our serving if we are to make a difference.

Leadership is vital for providing direction and sustaining momentum in an area of serving; leadership is vital for intentionally pursuing progress and development; leadership is vital for guarding against apathy and indifference; leadership is vital for building and deploying effective teams; leadership is vital for accessing and distributing relevant resources. If we want to see progress in any area of work or serving, then leaders need to lead well.

We have seen how these are critical times for our nation and therefore for God’s Church nationwide. The challenges are great and the need for decisive and mature leadership is vital. The success of our mission and impact depends largely on the calibre of our leadership. When God has a great task to be accomplished, He has always appointed leaders – Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, David, Peter, Paul – the list could go on. The texts above relate to the calling of Samuel and Peter – but all these leaders were called by God at specific times for specific tasks.

There is a desperate need for good Christian leadership and leadership is best developed through the experience of leading, rather than simply reading about the theory. Leaders like to get their hands dirty; they enjoy rolling up their sleeves and having a go; they are not afraid to make mistakes, because they know that it is through our mistakes that we learn the fastest, and it is through our failures that we grow the quickest.

God calls us to seek His kingdom first above all else; He is looking for men and women who will respond to that call with diligence and passion and who are ready to develop their leadership skills to maximise their influence for good. The times are critical. The call is clear. Our response is needed.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How do you feel about the call to lead others as you serve God? Journal about your feelings – whatever they may be.
2. Neither Moses nor Samuel expected the call of God and yet they actively responded. How does this inspire us?
3. What qualities of Christian leadership are most needed right now and why?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for Your call on my life to partner with You in bringing change and transformation to a needy world. Please help me to respond with readiness to follow You and to be faithful in the tasks to which You call me. Please help me to influence others effectively today. Amen.

## Week 33 Day 4 Recruiting Reluctant Leaders

**Bible texts:**

*So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God said, “I will be with you.”* Exodus 3:10-12

*When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.” “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.” The Lord turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” “Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” The Lord answered, “I will be with you…”* Judges 6:12-15

**Reluctant Leaders are in Good Company**

When God called Moses to the task of leading His people out of Egyptian slavery, Moses was understandably reluctant to take on this challenge. His response was one of feeling desperately inadequate and ill-equipped: his words of response are essentially - who am I to take this on? God brings a simple response: “I will be with you.”

A similar conversation happens when God calls Gideon to deliver His people from the hands of their enemies. Gideon also feels woefully inadequate, shown by his response: “how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

God makes the same promise to Gideon that He made to Moses: “I will be with you.” Even when Gideon challenges this perspective by saying that it feels like God had abandoned them, and that he feels weak and ill-equipped for the challenges ahead, God brings the same promise a second time: “I will be with you.”

The promise of the Presence of God with us is God’s answer to the fear of Moses and the despondent self-rejection of Gideon. And it is that same promise from God which will pave our pathway from fear to faith, from cowardice to courage, from reluctance to resilience. God promises to be with us – and if God is with us, there is nothing that can deflect us or defeat us. Of course, there will be significant challenges to intimidate us. Of course, there will be obstacles to make our progress difficult at times, but we can remain bold and determined because we know that God promises to be with us and God always keeps His promises.

The call of Gideon holds other encouragements for us if we feel we are also a reluctant leader.

Firstly, God sees us as we will be one day, after we have fulfilled our God-given potential. God addresses him as a “mighty warrior”. This identity is far from Gideon’s self-perception at that moment – but God knew the end of the story and knows that this is Gideon’s potential. When God calls us, He knows the end of the story from the beginning – and so He is saying that we have the potential to lead well.

Secondly, God said to Gideon – “Go in the strength you have”. There is a principle here of offering what we have by way of resources with the expectant faith that God will bring the increase that is needed in the course of our obedience to God’s instruction for the bigger challenges ahead. As we offer our initial resources to God, His Presence with us will be the assurance that we will have what we need in the future to surmount the greater obstacles that may stand in our way in the future. If you know that you can cross the gentle stream in front of you now, then do so now and don’t worry about the raging torrent downstream that you may have to cross in the future.

Thirdly, God said to Gideon: “Am I not sending you?” If God is the One who is sending us, then we must recognise that we will have access to all the resources that we will need on the adventure to follow for we have access to God’s company along the way. God will never abandon us, nor leave us with a deficit. God is always faithful and generous to those who obey His call.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.” Reflect on the way that God sees us now as we one day will become. Listen to the whisper of His divine affirmation today that is informed by the fulfilment of your calling in Christ.
2. “God equips the appointed; He does not appoint the equipped.” Where and how have you seen this to be true? How does this provide encouragement for reluctant leaders? How does this guard against the obstacle of pride and self-reliance?
3. “Go in the strength you have”: how does the priority of overcoming current challenges help us to avoid worrying about future challenges?

**Prayer**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You for the way that You have often called reluctant leaders who will be ready to trust in Your Faithful Presence and not in their own limited human resources. Thank You for Your promise of Your All-sufficient Presence with me day by day. Thank You that You see me now as I will one day become in Your strength. Help me to face today’s challenges with confident faith and not to worry about tomorrow’s challenges with unnecessary fear. Amen.

## Week 33 Day 5 Leaders who Prepare Leaders

**Bible texts:**

*Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God.*Exodus 24:13

*Moses took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly. Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the Lord instructed through Moses.* Numbers 27:22-23

*Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.* Acts 16:1-3

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth…* 2 Corinthians 1:1

**The Need for New Leaders**

God is in the business of raising up new leaders all the time. Continuity and momentum for the Lord’s work require the recruitment, training, commissioning and developing of new leaders.

We see this in the way that Joshua was trained and commissioned by Moses as the next leader of God’s people. Joshua was Moses’ helper and he was chosen to take on important areas of responsibility in the period of preparation to take over from Moses’ leadership. When the time came to become the overall leader, Joshua had had plenty of time to be trained and he went on to be an exemplary leader.

We see the same pattern with Paul and Timothy in the New Testament. Timothy was chosen by Paul as someone with great ministry potential and who had excellent references. Paul recruits Timothy as a co-worker and trains him in missional work. Such is the maturity of Timothy’s serving that he is mentioned as a co-author of six of Paul’s thirteen letters in the New Testament and described as a faithful co-worker in two of the others. Timothy is the sole recipient of two of Paul’s other letters where we can read the most amazing advice and counsel from an older missional leader to a younger one.

The greatest of all biblical examples of mentoring new leaders is Jesus’ training of His apostles. Jesus spent only three years with these men but their training launched them into a missional adventure that gave rise to the founding and multiplication of His Church across the then-known world. Through these foundational efforts and through their continued recruitment and training of new leaders, the Church of Jesus Christ has been extending and multiplying through 2000 years of Church history.

God always intended that His Church would flourish through the appointment of gifted and devoted leaders who would respond to the call of God to extend the ministry of His Church further and further. And God always intended that the recruitment and development of every generation of new leaders would be entrusted to the existing generation of leaders.

No other plan has ever been used. No other plan is needed – as long we commit ourselves to be trained and to train others in the work and ministry of God’s Kingdom.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the ways that Moses and Paul were effective trainers of new leaders.
2. Reflect on contemporary examples of effective training of new leaders – both at work and in local church ministry.
3. Reflect on the continuity through Church history made possible through the development of new leaders by experienced leaders responding to the call of God to share leadership insights.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your model of training Your first apprentices. Thank You for the way that You have been faithful in enabling the training of every generation of apprentices ever since. Thank You for those who have helped to train me to become a confident apprentice. Help me to be ready to pass on what I have received, and to be an effector trainer of trainers. Amen.

## Week 34 Day 1 Training Trainers

**Bible texts:**

*You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.* 2 Timothy 2:1-2

**Four stages of leadership training**

At the heart of Jesus’ model of training is the principle of sustained reproduction of leaders. Jesus trained His apprentices so that they in turn could train others.

There are four key stages to this kind of training model:

Stage 1: The leader leads; the apprentice watches.

Stage 2: The leader leads; the apprentice helps.

Stage 3: The apprentice leads; the leader helps.

Stage 4: The apprentice leads; a new apprentice watches.

At Stage 4, the apprentice has now become the leader and he or she embarks on the next round of training. Stage 4 is therefore also Stage 1 of the next round of leadership development.

Let’s illustrate this with an example. Suppose a leader wants to train an apprentice in Bible study leadership. At first, the leader will lead this while the apprentice watches the process carefully and intentionally. Next, the leader prepares the apprentice to be able to help with the Bible study – perhaps running an ice-breaker activity at the start or the prayer time that follows the Bible study. The following time, the apprentice leads the Bible study part of the meeting while the leader helps with the ice-breaker and prayer time. Finally, the new leader is able to start the process of developing a new apprentice in the group to lead a Bible study.

For the process to work effectively, the leader has to provide adequate coaching about the new skills involved, for example, what makes a good ice-breaker and ice-breaker pitfalls to avoid; how to devise effective Bible study questions; how to respond to off-the-wall comments; how to draw in quiet people and how to limit air-time for the most talkative.

The leader has to provide feedback after the meeting too – affirmation of what went well and how to improve any aspects of the meeting that could have been handled better. The leadership development process requires both careful coaching beforehand and comprehensive development of skills afterwards.

Paul encouraged Timothy to adopt this same approach in the development of new spiritual teachers:

*…the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.*

Paul taught Timothy to teach well and now Timothy was entrusted with the same task of training other teachers who were qualified to teach yet more teachers. Four generations of teachers are therefore in view in this one Bible verse.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Where and how have you experienced this model of leadership training either working well or being overlooked and leading to poor levels of training?
2. In what ways do you want to seek training through this method as you develop as a leader?
3. In what ways can you offer this type of training to others?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your model of sustainable leadership training. I recognise the pressing need for mature and effective leaders who are being developed through this model and who are continually reproducing themselves to provide further generations of leaders. Please help me to embrace this pattern of training as I grow in my own leadership and as I seek to develop others. Help me to implement a healthy pattern of coaching before leadership takes place and feedback after leadership takes place. Help me to grow leaders and to grow in leadership as we partner with You in developing the mission of Your Church and Kingdom. Amen.

## Week 34 Day 2 The Strengths of the Four Stage Leadership Model

**Bible texts:**

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* Matthew 28:18-20

**A Commission to Train Trainers**

We have reflected on the Great Commission of Jesus before in the course of this devotional journey, particularly in the context of evangelism. As we consider leadership multiplication, it is good to revisit this important bible passage and be reminded that training trainers is right at the heart of Jesus’ commission. Jesus asked His first apprentices to make disciples and to teach them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. This “everything” clearly includes the Great Commission itself – and so the newly trained disciples (second generation) are also tasked with making new disciples (third generation) and so the process continues down through each generation of apprentices. Developing leadership is a critical part of disciple-making since, as we have seen, we are all called to a life of influence - influencing ourselves, our Christian friends, our not-yet Christian friends and our family members. Disciple-making therefore includes leadership development.

What are the strengths of the four-stage model of leadership training we explored yesterday?

Firstly, it is training on the job; it is practical training not purely theoretical. Being shown how to do something by an experienced practitioner and then giving it a go is generally the best way to learn most new skills in life.

Secondly, it is relational training that is born out of doing life together in a family of faith. Jesus lived and travelled with His apprentices and gave them opportunities to grow as leaders out of this experience of a shared way of life. For this model to work well, the leader and apprentice will have connected together relationally, and through travelling together along their journey of faith the opportunities for leading will emerge naturally and easily.

Thirdly, it is intentional training with a clear goal in mind that is obvious to both leader and apprentice: at the end of this process, the apprentice will be ready to lead and to train others to lead.

Fourthly, it is a careful process that includes coaching beforehand, feedback afterwards and help in between. Nobody wants to step into a leadership challenge without adequate preparation, without the promise of help and without reliable and honest feedback about the experience afterwards. Jesus’ model provides all of these.

Fifthly, it is ordered and systematic, progressive and incremental. The apprentice is given a manageable incline of effort and responsibility; there is a steady increase in the level of challenge being faced. Some of the steps are bigger than others – but they are properly sequenced to allow apprentices to gain ground effectively.

Lastly, it is a process familiar to the trainer – because this is the way that they were trained too.

 **For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the positive experience of being shown how to do something practical by an experienced person.
2. If you have yet to start leading in your Christian life, reflect on the prospect of your future experience of developing as an apprenticed leader. Whose coaching would you find the most helpful? How are you actively growing in relationship with these people that you know and trust?
3. If you have started leading in your Christian life, reflect on the relationships which have helped you to develop as an apprenticed leader. Whose coaching have you find the most helpful?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the encouragement of being trained through loving relationships by people who desire the very best for me. Thank You for Your promise in the Great Commission to be with us always as we make this journey of leadership development. Amen.

## Week 34 Day 3 Recruiting New Leaders

**Bible texts:**

*Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.* Exodus 18:21

*One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles…* Luke 6:12-13

**Qualifications for New Leaders**

While we are considering the process of developing leaders, a key question arises about the kind of person who qualifies to be developed as a new leader. How do we select the right people?

Our first port of call will be prayer: asking the Holy Spirit to give us insight to recognise the right people. Jesus prayed before He selected His twelve apprentices; we will definitely want to pray for guidance about this important question too.

Moses’ father-in-law Jethro gave Moses insight about important qualifications for new leaders:

*…select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain…*

We could use these wise words to consider three vital qualifications:

Firstly, new leaders should be people who are ready to obey God; they take their life of faith seriously and they are ready to honour God with their lives. They are living with Jesus at the centre of who they are and how they live.

Secondly, new leaders should be people of truth; in other words, they are honest, trustworthy and reliable. They are ready to speak the truth about themselves and the truth about others. They will not embellish the truth to make themselves look better while making others look worse.

Thirdly, new leaders should be people who hate dishonest gain; in other words, they are people who refuse to cut ethical corners. They will speak and act with integrity, matching their walk with their talk. They will put in the work that is needed, when it is needed, and not try to get away with the minimum input, pretending to be diligent while being content to be indifferent. They undertake honest, hard work when it is required and are not lazy and complacent.

We could summarise these three qualifications with these three phrases: hard-working; obedient to God; truthful. And these three words can therefore provide a useful acronym for leader selection: H.O.T. leaders. And the word HOT can remind us that these apprenticed leaders will not be luke-warm followers of Jesus; they will increasingly burn with passion for Jesus and His kingdom purposes. And that burning passion will ignite flames of faith in the next generation of leaders that they train in turn.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on these three characteristics in your own life: how are you doing in relation to hard work, obedience and truth-telling? Where is there room for improvement?
2. Whose hard work, obedience and truth-telling as a leader most inspires you right now?
3. Whose signs of hard work, obedience and truth-telling as an apprentice now indicate that they could be great people to develop as new leaders in the future?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the wisdom You showed in choosing Your first apprentices. Please help me to grow in my readiness to be hard-working, obedient and truthful. And please give me wisdom and insight to choose apprentices who have these same characteristics as I seek to develop new leaders in the future. Amen.

## Week 34 Day 4 Preparing Apprentices Well

**Bible texts:**

*What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.* 2 Timothy 1:13

*Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.* 2 Timothy 2:23

*As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it…* 2 Timothy 3:14

**Passionate and Persistent Preparation of Trainees**

We have seen how committed the apostle Paul was to the training of Timothy as his apprentice. His two letters written to Timothy are full of sound counsel and advice, preparing Timothy for dealing with the leadership challenges he was facing.

Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy from the darkness of a Roman dungeon. And yet, even from this intimidating prison, Paul is passionate and persistent in his resolve to continue to see Timothy adequately trained. The excerpts quoted above all demonstrate this determination to prepare Timothy well, to advise him about wrong turnings to avoid and to encourage Timothy to keep going.

Our development of apprentices cannot be half-hearted or inconsistent. This development must be whole-hearted and consistently faithful. As we have been blessed by others who have invested time and energy in us, so in turn, we must be ready to pass on the fruits of what we have been taught to the next generation of leaders.

A key part of this whole-hearted training is preparing apprentices well before they step into leadership responsibilities. What will this mean practically?

It will mean good communication about what tasks you would like them to undertake in the near future and when this will be, so that they are clear about what they are doing and how long they have to prepare. Then they have time to intentionally watch your own demonstration of these tasks a few times along with time to prepare well before they have to do it themselves.

It will mean meeting with them beforehand to talk through exactly what is needed in this task, what the goals are, how to maximise the potential for growing disciples through this task and how to avoid common pitfalls.

There is a very common mistake that we can all make when it comes to training others: forgetting what it was like for us when we first addressed some new challenge. After we have done this task hundreds of times, we can very easily think that because it is now easy for us, it is easy for everyone. We need to be able to turn the clock back and remember our own sense of confusion and uncertainty when we first attempted this task, probably making lots of mistakes as we did so.

We also need to confirm that trainees feel ready to undertake this task as part of our preparation. A quick text or call may be all that is needed the day before to make sure that they are feeling confident about what they are about to take on, answering any last minute queries. If trainees feel well-prepared for each new task, they will be eager to keep on growing and developing their full potential.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on good and bad experiences of being prepared for new tasks in your past. What did you learn from these experiences?
2. From your list of potential trainees, make some notes about new tasks that these apprentices could take on, and when and how this could happen. What are your next steps for preparing these apprentices well?
3. What hindrances could there be to delivering adequate preparation? How can you guard against these?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the way You prepared Your disciples well with confident demonstrations and good, clear advice about the challenges of effective ministry. Please help me to be aware of the requirements for adequate preparation of trainees. Help me to be able to remember my own pathway to maturity and the pitfalls along the way so that I can be positioned well to provide good preparation of apprentices. Amen.

## Week 34 Day 5 Training through Helpful Feedback

**Bible text:**

*After this the Lord appointed seventy-twoothers and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go…****5****“When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’****6****If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you.*

***17****The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”* ***18****He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.****19****I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.****20****However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”* ***21****At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.* Luke 10:1,5-6,17-21

**The model of Jesus: commissioning; praying; feeding back.**

This passage from Luke’s gospel shows Jesus preparing His apprentices well: He has carefully chosen a larger group to be trained to help Him in His mission strategy and now He is sending this group ahead of His planned visits to a series of towns in the area. We see Jesus providing very clear instructions in His preparation of these trainees, demonstrating again the importance of adequate preparation (you can read the whole passage for the full set of instructions).

Jesus sends them out in pairs, not alone, so that they could help and encourage each other in undertaking the tasks required of them. This is another great strategy for developing leaders – having people work in pairs. People are much less likely to cave into fear and anxiety if they have a team-mate alongside them.

The mission team return to Jesus in high spirits; they have clearly loved the experience of being involved and are thrilled to recognise that they can be effective in their ministry and leadership. Jesus goes on to provide helpful feedback and advice to the team, demonstrating the importance of providing this for trainees after undertaking a leadership challenge.

Interestingly, Jesus says that while they were on mission, He had a revelation from heaven, clearly indicating that He was praying during this whole time. This is a great model for us too: while trainees are undertaking new challenges, we need to be praying for them.

Our feedback should be positive, affirming what has been done well.

Our feedback should be understanding, recognising the difficulties that were being faced head on, and the complications that made the task especially challenging.

Our feedback should be soon after the task has been completed – within a few days at most.

Our feedback should be honest; trainees need to know how to improve what could have gone better.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on where feedback you have received has not been given well. What have you learned to avoid in giving feedback through this?
2. Reflect on where feedback you have received has been given well. What have you learned about how to give feedback well through this?
3. As you reflect on these positive and negative experiences, where do you anticipate your own pitfalls in giving feedback will lie?

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, Thank You for Your great model in releasing people into leadership, praying for them and offering effective feedback. Please shape my own efforts in this area of multiplying leaders and supporting them well. Amen

## Week 35 Day 1 Stand firm as people of faith

**Bible texts:**

*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.* Romans 12:11

*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*1 Corinthians 15:58

**A Long Walk in the Same Direction**

In our last two weeks of this devotional journal we are going to be considering the importance of perseverance, the essential need to keep going in our life of faith with Jesus at the centre, Jesus as our model, Jesus as our companion.

The life of Christian faith is often described as a long walk in the same direction. It is not a brief sprint of intense effort but a sustained journey over decades, trusting in the One who has made us, the one who has redeemed us, the One who travels with us, the One who cheers us on, the One who knows the End from the Beginning, the One who waits for us at the finishing line, the One who will be our Constant Friend and Lord throughout eternity.

The call to persevere in faith is critical to hear and address because the enemies of persistence are fierce and abundant. Sadly, these enemies have claimed many victims down through the centuries of Christian history.

The New Testament is full of a much-needed refrain for us all to hear and to sing persistently: we must keep going. Through the many hardships, over the numerous obstacles, around the frequent hindrances we must keep going. Two of these refrains of resilience written by the apostle Paul are quoted above, and they are both worth memorising as weapons to wield against the foes of faithfulness. Then, when we are tempted to give in or give up, we can recall these powerful words into our minds and remember that we have been given the opportunity to follow Jesus today because our forerunners kept going and refused to give in or give up, despite just as many – perhaps more – difficulties to face and defeat.

Over the next two weeks we will consider some of the most obvious hindrances to our endurance as followers of Jesus and how we can be encouraged to stand victorious in our battle against these opponents to our life-long persistence as faithful apprentices to Jesus.

To be fore-warned is to be fore-armed.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Whose life-long persistence as a follower of Jesus most inspires you?
2. On the scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your Christian perseverance right now? Be honest with yourself, because the Holy Spirit knows the true answer in any case.
3. Identification of our opponents is a critical strategy in battle if we are to succeed. Make some notes about the specific factors which are undermining your determination to be faithful to Jesus right now.

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You that You know all things including everything about my life right now. Thank You that You know where I am encouraged and where I am discouraged. You know where I am progressing well and where I have stopped going and growing. You know where I have some momentum and where I have stopped or even retreated. Thank You that You want me to persevere and thank You that You are so willing to help me to persevere, day by day by day. Please help me to be receptive to Your divine help each and every day. Amen.

Week 35 Day 2 Dealing with Doubt

**Bible text:**

*Then Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”* John 20:27

**A Four-Legged Chair of Faith**

As we consider the enemies of perseverance, we begin with doubt. In the text above, Jesus didn’t condemn Thomas for his doubts; instead, He helped Thomas to find a practical solution to his doubts and encouraged him to move from doubt to belief.

Doubt is different from unbelief. Doubt is the middle position between belief and unbelief. It is derived from the same word as “double” and therefore carries with it the sense of being in two minds about something. On the one hand, we have confidence in God’s love and power; on the other hand, we are losing this confidence while we deal with disappointments of one kind or another.

Most of us have doubts at some point or other and it is good to be honest about this. No-one is helped by pretending that such thoughts never enter our heads. The honest approach is to recognise the presence of these thoughts from time to time and how we can best deal with them.

Almost all the chairs we sit on have four legs. As we sit on these chairs, we are trusting that the four legs will be strong enough to support our weight. We are exercising faith in these chair legs to keep us sitting confidently without collapsing in a heap on the floor.

Similarly, when it comes to faith in God, it is helpful to think about the identity of four legs which can support the weight of our trust in the reality of God. We can then remember the strength of these four legs on days in which we are wrestling with doubts.

Suppose, for example, that you are tempted to doubt the reality of God. What legs of faith can be helpful in those times? Here are four suggestions.

Firstly, the fine tuning of the universe. Scientists explain that there are a whole series of physical constants relating to key aspects of the universe which have a very narrow range of possibility. Change them either up or down by the smallest of amounts and our universe could not exist. If we entered an engineering control room where we found a series of dials that need to be kept at specific values, it would be cast-iron proof of a system designed by intelligent minds, not the product of random chance. Similarly, the fine tuning of the universe clearly indicates the design of the universe.

Secondly, the martyrdom of the apostles. Almost all of Jesus’ first apostles died for their conviction that they had met the Risen Christ. No-one dies for what they know is a fabricated lie. Martyrs only die for what they are sure of – and the apostles knew they had met the Risen Christ. If Christ was raised from the dead, then He needed to be raised by a force outside of himself – the Power of God.

Thirdly, prophetic revelation for strangers. Only the power of God can reveal secrets about strangers to gifted prophetic ministers. The more you observe this kind of ministry, the more you will be objectively convinced that God is real.

Fourthly, miraculous healing of the sick. Only the power of God can bring instantaneous healing to people in need. The more you witness this kind of ministry, the more you will be objectively convinced that God is who He says He is.

Here then are four legs of faith that can hold up our chair of faith, all of which can be historically and scientifically verified through appropriate research. These are not subjective, disputable theories or opinions. You might like to come up with alternative legs of faith – but these four may be helpful until you find other replacements that suit your needs more closely.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on these four chair legs of faith in God. Are they helpful?
2. Are there other chair legs of faith you might want to use instead?
3. What doubts are you wrestling with right now?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You for Your power in creating the universe with these precise physical constraints, leaving the imprint of Your fingerprints on the fabric of the cosmos. Thank You for the way You inspired the first apprentices of Jesus to be prepared to die for their defence of their conviction that they had met the Risen Jesus. Thank You for the way you reveal hidden insights to prophetic ministers to convince people of Your Power and Love. Thank You for the way You reveal Yourself through miracles of healing. May I find resilient faith through recalling these signs of Your Power and Love whenever I am tempted to doubt Your existence or Your interest in us. Amen.

## Week 35 Day 3 Dealing with Disappointment

**Bible texts:**

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.* Habakkuk 3:17-18

*For in the day of trouble the Lord will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock.* Psalm 27:5

*Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.* Romans 12:12

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name*. Psalm 100:4

**Hanging on relentlessly to God’s enduring faithfulness**

We all face disappointments in life: plans that fail; hopes that don’t come to pass; people that let us down. How we deal with disappointment is really important because if we allow disappointment to erode our faith, then we will be led away from the path of trusting in God’s goodness and faithfulness.

How can we make sure this doesn’t happen?

Firstly, no matter what our present disappointment may be, we can always choose to remember God’s past acts of faithfulness, supremely, the glorious fact of His redeeming grace poured out for us in Jesus Christ. Nothing and no-one can separate us from that astonishing historical fact. No matter how dark the clouds overhead, we know that the sun is still shining brightly beyond these layers of water vapour. A key decision therefore is to choose to reflect on God’s past acts of faithfulness that demonstrate His enduring love for us.

The verses from Habakkuk are an amazing proclamation of this faith perspective: even when life is tough and seemingly fruitless, Habakkuk encourages us to rejoice in the God who is our Gracious Saviour. Nothing can rob us of the reality of Good Friday and Easter Morning: Jesus is our Victorious Saviour, for all eternity.

Secondly, we can be inspired by David’s reminder in Psalm 27:5 that in the day of trouble we can rely upon God’s protection and God’s provision of a solid rock on which to stand. The flood waters may rise around us, but we can trust that God will lift us up out of these troubling waters to a firm and secure rock on which we can stand. This is the perspective of God’s enduring companionship and readiness to deliver us from the forces that try to destroy us in the present. We can make the choice not to rely upon our misleading feelings that God is absent but instead to rely upon the testimony of scripture that God is with us every day, everywhere.

Thirdly, in the light of Romans 12:12 we can choose to exercise patience in the face of disappointment and to decide to exercise hope for the future. We may not have seen our expectations fulfilled today, but we can continue to remember that we are one day closer to the time when our expectations will be fulfilled. With God’s help, we can choose to be known as people who refuse to be robbed of hope for tomorrow, despite the frustrations of today.

Fourthly, we can choose to remain thankful in all circumstances. No matter what serious disappointments we face at present, there are always innumerable blessings from God for which we can give thanks. It takes a good deal of self-control to display gratitude in the face of disappointment but thanksgiving will always lift our hearts out of the floodwaters of disappointment. Words of thanksgiving are like buoyancy aids that will make sure that we remain on top of the rising waters of discouragement and not submerged beneath their intimidation. We can summarise this discipline of thanksgiving in all circumstances with two words that can become our brave anthem of resilience: hallelujah anyway!

**For Further Reflection:**

1. What disappointments are you currently facing? Identify them; name them; write them out; bring them out into the light of God’s faithful love.
2. For the most significant of these disappointments, reflect on how you have experienced God’s faithfulness during your experience of disappointment. Where have you seen His hand at work? How are you stirred to express thanks to God for His faithfulness?
3. Take time to express hope in the face of disappointment. What resilient hopes are emerging from your present experiences of disappointment?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that You know all things. You know exactly where I am feeling disappointed right now. Thank You that You are the firm Rock on which I can stand in the midst of this disappointment. Help me to decide to express gratitude not complaint, hope not despair, faith not resignation. And as I express these attitudes, would You give me the determination to press on from the disappointments of today to the bright invitation of a better tomorrow. Amen.

## Week 35 Day 4 Dealing with over busy-ness

**Bible texts:**

*You shall have no other gods beforeme.* Exodus 20:3

*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work…* Exodus 20:8-10

**Beware the danger of making idols of work**

As we consider the enemies of perseverance in faith, we come to the opposition created through our over busy-ness. Life is very full in these times. In every direction we look, there are more and more opportunities for spending time including with work, recreation and church-related activities. All of these opportunities look attractive and with the ever present “fear of missing out” we often find it hard to say no. The result is a schedule that becomes increasingly impossible to sustain week after week and consequently something has to give.

One prevalent danger is that we give up on the activities that are not connected with paid work – particularly, recreation and worship or ministry at our church. We can be reluctant to cut down our paid work hours because we have fears about losing our jobs or at least not being promoted if we don’t put the extra hours in. While important deadlines may mean that we need to work some additional hours from time to time, this is not a good habit. For many people, paid work and career progression can become their god and their worship of this false god undermines their commitment to other important and life-giving activities.

Other people fall away because they want to make a priority of their hobbies first and this gets in the way of their commitment to their faith activities; maybe their sports game clashes with a worship gathering; maybe their dance class clashes with their midweek small group.

It is noticeable that many people fall away from their faith commitment when they fall away from their church commitment because faith is meant to be practised with others. It is sad when the reason for giving up on church is simply because they are too busy – too busy for their missional community meetings; too busy for attending worship gatherings; too busy to meet with their Christian friends for encouragement.

Conversely, some Christians are so devoted to their church ministry that they no longer have time to relax and rest. They find themselves working seven days a week, rather than maintaining the important discipline of a day-off each week – as God always intended for our lives. They quickly burn out, blame God and/or their church for making them work too hard and so turn away from God and/or church in an attitude of defiant protest, not realising that they themselves were to blame for their situation of being over-worked because they had failed to say “no” at the appropriate times.

Many of us will have seen the illustration with a glass jar into which are placed stones, then pebbles then sand. Everything fits into the jar when placed in this sequence. On the other hand, when the jar is filled first with sand, then pebbles and finally stones the same volume of material does not fit. The lesson is clear: if we place the main priorities of loving and serving God first, then we will have a much better likelihood of having space for the other activities of our lives.

As with our experience of financial tithing, if we honour God with our time, then He will bless us with more capacity within our weekly schedule.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Can you think of people who have fallen away from faith due to over-busy-ness?
2. Reflect on your current weekly schedule. Are you too busy, not busy enough or doing about right?
3. If change is needed, map out a series of next steps to implement this change.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You modelled a life that was full yet sustainable, walking a road of fruitfulness yet with space for rest and refreshment. Please help me to live that same kind of life where I don’t need to choose between church or career, ministry or recreation but I can embrace the best of all these important parts of my life year after year. Amen.

## Week 35 Day 5 Dealing with Tiredness

**Bible texts:**

*In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves.* Psalm 127:2

*Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, Jesus said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”* Mark 6:31

*The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”* Exodus 33:14

**Guarding our Lives from Inappropriate Tiredness**

Everything is more difficult when we are tired; work; thinking; practical chores; relationships; discipline. Tiredness is therefore a great enemy to pursuing a life of perseverance.

While we can expect to be tired at the end of a full day, it is not good if we are starting our days in tiredness beause then the whole day becomes a continual struggle. We easily fall prey to temptation and we will struggle to resist. We will waste time because we are struggling to stay focused. We will often grow impatient with others because tiredness and patience are rarely good friends. The easiest of tasks may seem absurdly challenging. And, as a result of all these complications, frustration is likely to become the dominant experience of the day.

We are not meant to live out of tiredness but out of refreshment. We are not meant to be troubled with fatigue each day, we are meant to feel energised. Tiredness is a serious enemy that needs to be identified and tackled, so that we have every opportunity of living a life of enduring spiritual growth.

In a few cases, tiredness may be the result of a persistent illness – and then we need to be kind to ourselves and do the best we can in difficult circumstances, trusting that God may break into our lives and bring healing.

On the other hand, it could well be that if we are often feeling tired, there are steps that we can take to make a difference. Maybe it’s a case of getting to sleep earlier, recognising that regular late nights soon catch up on us. Maybe it’s a case of working less hours, recognising that over-work is not sustainable over a long period. Maybe it’s a case of making sure we get a rest day each week, recognising that we were never meant to work seven days a week. Maybe it’s a case of taking a desperately needed holiday, recognising that our bodies simply need to stop working and get some refreshment time.

Doing our best to keep our daytime free of tiredness is not selfish; it is loving towards others (we will be better company and better work mates) and it is loving to God (our worship and prayer will be more significant and purposeful).

**For Further Reflection:**

1. How does tiredness impact your life specifically?
2. Are you consistently tired right now? If so, do you know why?
3. What are the essential steps you need to take to reduce your feelings of tiredness or to reinforce your defences against tiredness undermining your energy?

**Prayer:**

Loving Heavenly Father, Thank You that You want me to be fresh not tired each morning, energetic not weary each day. Please help me to guard my life against unnecessary tiredness. Help me to take the steps necessary to alleviate the tiredness I feel right now. Help me to be kind to myself by not forcing myself into unnecessary tiredness. May I enjoy the experience of Your refreshment through rest, sleep and soaking in Your presence day by day. Amen

## Week 36 Day 1 Dealing with team disagreements

**Bible texts:**

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* Ephesians 4:1-3

*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.* Colossians 3:12-14

**The four phases of team life**

We can often observe four phases of the life of a team that works together over a prolonged period.

The first phase is full of excitement because everything is new and fresh; the team has come together around a shared vision and set of goals. The atmosphere is full of anticipation; meetings have lots of energy and commitment as the team sets to work on climbing the mountain together.

The second phase occurs when team members start to realise that they don’t agree about everything; there are genuine differences of opinion about priorities and about ways of getting things done. Added to this, there may be personality clashes that are starting to emerge; people start winding each other up and irritating one another. These clashes can cause serious levels of discomfort, disunity and relational tension.

Ordinary teams often never get through this stage; the disagreements seem too broad; the offences seem too deep; the challenge of resolving the situation seems too great. The team will either muddle along, tolerating each other because of their shared end goals or the team will disband because people are finding the relational tensions too hard to deal with.

This second phase can be another reason why people leave their church community. Team members become deeply hurt and offended and they decide it is better to move away completely. If these hurts are not resolved, then they can become serious hindrances to growing in faith later on.

On the other hand, extra-ordinary teams manage to navigate these choppy waters of disunity to reach a new place of much deeper unity. This work of resolving conflicts and achieving deeper mutual understanding is the task of the third phase of team development. This requires wise and perceptive leadership, creating the time and the space for honest heart-to-heart discussions about conflict areas, modelling what is needed by way of humble confession, equipping team players with the tools and skills they need to be able to offer and receive forgiveness for past mistakes and offences, facilitating the journey into much more perceptive mutual understanding, and in-stilling in the team the brave determination to reach the much-needed next phase of resolute team unity. Only the best teams can make it through Phase 3 but with the help of the Holy Spirit who earnestly desires teams to reach Phase 4, it can be done.

Phase 4 is the richest stage of all because now the team members are working effectively together while also realising that they now have the confidence and clarity, the skills and expectation to overcome any and every conflict that may still emerge within the team. They have successfully negotiated fierce relational rapids upstream; they need have no fear about any downstream rapids ahead. They believe in each other’s motives; they understand each other’s faults and failings; they are rooting for each other’s success and productivity. There is a clear and persistent expectation of achieving their shared goals. There are few experiences more satisfying than belonging to a great team that has reached Phase 4.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on working on teams that have never got through Phase 2.
2. Reflect on either your experience of working through Phase 3 in the past or your expectations of the requirements of team members during Phase 3.
3. Reflect on either your experience of enjoying working in a Phase 4 team or your expectations of the satisfaction of being on an effective Phase 4 team.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You had Your fair share of experiencing Phase 2 and 3 among Your first apprentices as they wrestled with their egos, pride, competitiveness, ignorance and prejudices. And You also managed to bring Your apprentices to a Phase 4 effectiveness that allowed them to act upon the Great Commission and spread Your gospel throughout the Mediterranean world. Please help me not to give up or give in during Phase 2 but to be determined to press on through Phase 3 into the deep and mature effectiveness of Phase 4. Amen.

## Week 36 Day 2 Dealing with hurt and offence

**Bible texts:**

*It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.* Philippians 1:15-18

*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* Colossians 3:13

*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* Ephesians 4: 31-32

*And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.* Mark 11:25

**Radical Commitment to Forgiving Others**

While we journey in the Christian faith, it is quite possible that we will experience hurt at the hands of our Christian brothers and sisters. We may be discouraged by a lack of loyalty; we may be treated disrespectfully; we may be misunderstood in our motivation, words or actions; we may be criticised, even slandered by others we thought were our allies; we may be wrongfully accused of misdemeanours. There is a whole range of negative responses we may have to deal with from people we trusted. The question is: how are we going to respond? Are we going to allow this opposition to derail our life of service - perhaps derail our life of faith - or are we going to be resilient and continue to follow Jesus?

Sadly, these kinds of experience of opposition and hurt all too often lead to significant leaders being taken out of the journey of faith. They become so discouraged and wounded that they leave their church and leave behind a life of active service. They may still have some level of faith but it is weakened, even paralysed, and so these leaders are left behind in a wilderness of conflicting emotions where they cease to be fruitful.

The apostle Paul experienced this kind of opposition from fellow-Christians. This is what he is referring to in the extract from his letter to the church at Philippi in Greece. Paul was writing from prison and fellow Christians who disagreed either with his missional message or missional practices or both were most likely stating that his imprisonment was a sign of God’s judgement on a misguided and heretical leader. Paul had a choice in this situation: indulge in a self-promoting pity party, nursing grudges against these opponents or choose the way of forgiveness, and celebrate the fact that these opponents were united with him in the priority of telling people about Jesus. You can see from the paragraph above that Paul chose the second approach.

This is a great model for us to follow if we ever find ourselves severely opposed by fellow Christians: we, also, can choose the pathway of forgiveness for our opponents and critics, pray for God’s truth to be upheld and decide to continue to follow Jesus and to serve Jesus as best we can for the rest of our lives.

If we choose instead the pathway of leaving active ministry, we will have allowed our ultimate enemy – the devil – to have scored a victory over us by eliminating us from the battlefield of mission. The devil will then rejoice that he has managed to get yet one more follower of Jesus to become passive and inactive, indifferent to the urgent needs of the kingdom battle that rages around us.

Jesus hates it when this foul play happens; Jesus wants every one of His followers to be engaged and active in the kingdom battle from the moment they first place their trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord until their dying breath. Let’s make sure we follow Jesus and Paul as people who faced severe opposition and hurt and yet refused to give in or give up.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect upon the fierce courage of brothers and sisters around the world who face severe persecution for their faith in Jesus. Research their stories on the internet. Recognise the level of hurt they have to experience for their faith. How does this inspire your resilience in the face of the insults you have to bear?
2. Where and how have you been hurt by Christians? Have you released forgiveness to these people?
3. How can you guard against the temptation to leave a life of active service because of past hurts within the church?

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, You faced opposition from apprentices who misunderstood You, apprentices who thought they knew better than You did, even an apprentice who eventually betrayed You to Your enemies. Through all of this, You displayed forgiveness and understanding, refusing to express bitterness or hatred. Please help me to offer forgiveness to Christians who hurt me and determination to persevere in a passionate life of devotion to Your gospel and Your kingdom. Amen.

## Week 36 Day 3 Dealing with Isolation

**Bible texts:**

*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.* Acts 2:42-47

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* Hebrews 10:23-25

**Christian faith is to be lived out in community**

This passage from Acts 2 is a glorious description of the richness of Christian community at its best. We see how the first community of Jesus followers met together every day, cherishing each other’s company on an exciting new journey of faith. As a result of their passionate devotion to the Lord and to each other, they saw great blessing released among them and they saw many people continue to join them.

This is how the Christian life is meant to be lived – together. We delude ourselves if we think that we can flourish as a follower of Jesus alone and isolated. We discern the purposes of God together and we fulfil the purposes of God together.

When we are isolated – through the experience of hurt or busy-ness or unchallenged apathy – then we are very vulnerable to feeling discouraged, simply because there is no-one around to speak words of life and encouragement into us. We will find our faith waning, our passion cooling and our determination sagging. We are relational beings designed for community and when it comes to faith, this aspect of community is essential if we are to be able to persist.

Of course, we all need times to be alone with the Lord – but this should never become a season of isolation. Every believer needs to be in a church community and needs to stay in one church community or another. For good reasons, people move church families from time to time – but make sure that you don’t stay isolated for long while you discern God’s calling to a new church family if you feel the need to leave a previous one.

Children need to grow up in families and Jesus followers need to grow in the context of a spiritual family. Let’s make sure we are never content to be living the Christian life in isolation from other believers.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Have you ever felt isolated as a follower of Jesus? What did this feel like? What were the consequences?
2. Reflect on the richness of community life of the first church in Jerusalem. What do you find attractive about this pattern of community?
3. Where do you see gaps between your current experience of church community and the description of the first church in Jerusalem? What steps can you take to close these gaps?

**Prayer:**

Loving Holy Spirit, Thank You for the way You inspired and shaped the life of the first church in Jerusalem. Thank You for the way You bring people together into a community of love to delight in each person and to develop each person. Please help me to stay committed to my spiritual family and to be determined not to give into the temptation to be isolated, for any reason at any point in my journey of faith. Amen.

## Week 36 Day 4 Dealing with temptation and sin

**Bible texts:**

*Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. “You also were with Jesus of Galilee,” she said. But he denied it before them all. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.” He denied it again, with an oath: “I don’t know the man!” After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, “Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away.” Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know the man!” Immediately a rooster crowed.Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: “Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly.* Matthew 26:69-75

*The third time Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”* John 21:17

*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* 1 Peter 5:8

*See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.* Hebrews 3:12-13

**Perseverance through a life of repeated repentance**

In our explorations of the enemies of perseverance, we need to consider the issue of personal sin. Many significant Christian leaders have fallen in this area, especially in the areas of money, sex and the abuse of power and we all need to be especially vigilant to safeguard our lives from these ever-present temptations which can seriously undermine our life of serving Jesus whole-heartedly and persevering on the road of faith.

Our enemy – the devil – is constantly prowling around looking for people to devour who are off-guard (1 Peter 5:8). It is significant that the person who made this observation is someone who knew this reality all too well, having given in to the temptation to deny that he even knew Jesus during the night of Jesus’ betrayal. This was the same man who on several occasions declared his resolute determination to follow Jesus at whatever the cost. If someone as close to Jesus as this can fail so spectacularly, none of us can afford to be complacent.

One of the greatest moments of grace in the gospels is the re-instatement of Peter after this experience of caving in under temptation. Three times Peter denied he knew Jesus shortly before Jesus’ crucifixion; three times the Resurrected Jesus asked Peter the same question: do you love me? The threefold repetition is deliberately intentional; Jesus is affirming Peter as a faithful friend and a committed apprentice. Jesus is determined that Peter should not give into self-condemnation for his past failings and eliminate himself from Jesus’ core team. Jesus had great plans and purposes for Peter and He needed Peter to persevere through the challenges of facing this personal failure, to receive the forgiveness of Jesus, offer himself forgiveness and commit himself to pressing on in obedience.

Peter’s reinstatement is a vital reminder to all of us that if and when we fail, Jesus is ready to offer His forgiveness when we express true repentance. We need to do our best to remain free of sin and disobedience – but if we do make serious mistakes, then the grace of Jesus is sufficient for all our needs. There will be a strong temptation to feel that we are not up to the job and to give in and give up. We must resist this temptation, turn away from our past failing, turn towards Jesus and keep following the One who is always ready to accompany us on our lifelong journey of faithful service.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on Peter’s experience of failure followed by forgiveness and fresh commission.
2. Have you been tempted to give up and give in after a significant mistake? What did you learn from the experience? What persuaded you to keep going?
3. How can you guard yourself and others from future temptations to give up after mistakes are made? Journal about the key principles to bear in mind about persevering through temptation and failures.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for the way You intentionally re-instated Peter after his failure to stand by Your side during the night of Your betrayal. Thank You for the fruit that grew from that experience of pressing back into perseverance. Thank You that You are the same yesterday, today and forever and that You offer me the same assurance of forgiveness when I make serious mistakes. Help me not to give into the temptation to give in and give up when I let You down and when I let myself and others down, but instead, to commit myself to enduring perseverance as Your faithful apprentice. Amen.

## Week 36 Day 5 Finishing Well as Jesus finished well

**Bible text:**

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* Hebrews 12:1-3

**Persevering in the footsteps of Jesus**

We began this devotional journal focusing on Jesus and today we finish with the focus still on Jesus.

When it comes to perseverance in faith, Jesus is our greatest model. The author of Hebrews understood this well and encourages us in these verses to fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Jesus is the One who goes before us to show us the direction of faith as our route finder and guide. Jesus is also the One who has reached the finishing line of heaven first, enabling us through His death, resurrection and ascension to join this life-long marathon run of faith.

Without the victorious cross of Good Friday and the new resurrection life of Easter morning there could be no forgiveness for our failings, no personal reconciliation with God and therefore no history-long, worldwide family of faith that is God’s Church. This is why Jesus is the perfector of our faith, fulfilling all that was required to win eternal salvation for repentant humankind. Through the continuing grace and ever-present Spirit of Jesus at work in each of us, we have all the strength and resources we need to be able to complete the course of faith as Jesus did, trusting God the Father all the way through to the end of His earthly life.

These amazing verses provide other wise counsel for our run of perseverance.

We are also reminded of the huge obstacles Jesus had to face during His run of faith – opposition from sinful people and the inexpressible agony and humiliation of His crucifixion. We are reminded that Jesus was able to face and overcome these obstacles because He fixed His eyes on the joy set before Him: the joy of winning salvation for humankind and the joy of being restored to heaven for all eternity.

We are reminded about the great cloud of witnesses who have lived a life of persistent faith before us: the heroes of Bible history, the heroes of Church history, the heroes of faith who have impacted our lives, inspiring and encouraging us to keep going. Their example and their testimonies of endurance can inspire our lifelong endurance too.

We are reminded that we need to throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that can so easily entangles us so that we are free to run the race marked out for us: a race of resilient faith in the One sent to be our all-sufficient Saviour and ever-victorious Lord.

Let’s always fix our eyes on Jesus, so that His past model and His present companionship will empower us to finish well, just as He did.

**For Further Reflection:**

1. Reflect on the way Jesus shows us the right path of faith through His example of trusting in God the Father throughout His life.
2. Reflect on the way Jesus’ perfect life of faith and perfect sacrifice on the cross has won eternal salvation for us and supplies all that is lacking in our own life of faith.
3. Reflect on how Jesus demonstrated how to face major obstacles along the way by fixing our eyes on the joy set before us on the other side of these obstacles.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, Thank You for Your model of a life of persistent faith. Thank You for the way You overcame all the obstacles and hindrances that stood before You because of the joy set before You. Please help me to live a life of resilient faith, as I trust in Your Presence with me, every day, everywhere I go. Help me to throw off everything that might hinder and distract me and help me to run with perseverance the race marked out for me for the joy set before me: everlasting life in Your Loving Presence. In Your Name I ask this, Amen.

# **Epilogue**

This journal has been all about a life change – making a U-turn from living life with ourselves at the centre to living a new kind of life with Jesus at the centre.

If you have been able to make it all the way to the end of this journal, if you have been able to read, reflect, write, draw, pray through and apply what you have been learning, then you can celebrate the fact that you have now spent at least 36 weeks living this kind of life – with Jesus at the centre.

My prayer is that you have so appreciated this journal journey that you won’t want to look back. The life of faith in Jesus is not easy – but it is amazingly fulfilling. This kind of life is often full of challenges and hardships – but you can be sure that Jesus is and always will be your faithful companion along the way.

Please keep going – for the sake of your own well-being; for the well-being of your friends and closest relationships; for the sake of living out the glorious good news of knowing Jesus as the Leader of your life.

I hope you have inspiration for your next steps in terms of daily spiritual food for the journey.

Here are a few thoughts about what you could do next.

You could follow one of the many bible reading plans available through the You Version Bible app. There is a wide selection available, covering different topics, for different periods of time. Have a browse and then decide on one to get going with.

You could follow through the Bible in a Year app– daily readings and reflections as you read through the whole of the bible in a year.

You could decide on one book of the Bible to read in more depth and get hold of a commentary to help you delve down deeper into the text. For example, you could read one of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark Luke or John) alongside an interesting and well-written commentary – the Bible Speaks Today commentaries are always accessible, yet all written by bible experts.

Whatever you decide to do, please keep going with your plan. Don’t give up.

And make sure that you are following through with the seven spiritual habits that we explored together from Weeks 9 to 12.

We live at a time of history when faith-filled, committed followers of Jesus are desperately needed. They need to be men and women who will keep pressing on wisely, passionately, bravely, relentlessly. I pray that you are ready to join their number and to press on to the finishing line of your life.

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Romans 6:23 (7.1)

Romans 7:6 (29.2)

Romans 8:5-6 (14.4)

Romans 8:14-16 (3.2)

Romans 8:15 (22.3)

Romans 8:37-39 (24.4)

Romans 10:9 (14.5)

Romans 10:17 (27.1; 28.1)

Romans 11:29 (31.4,5)

Romans 12:2 (14.1)

Romans 12:4-8 (30.2)

Romans 12:6,8 (33.2)

Romans 12:10 (5.5)

Romans 12:11 (35.1)

Romans 12:12 (35.3)

1 Samuel 3:10 (18.1; 33.3)

1 Samuel 17:23-24,26 (31.1)

2 Samuel 24:24 (9.4)

1 Thessalonians 1:5 (28.5)

1 Thessalonians 1:11-12 (31.4)

1 Thessalonians 5:15 (32.5)

1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 (18.2)

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (26.1)

1 Timothy 1:13 (34.4)

1 Timothy 1:9 (1.5)

1 Timothy 1:18-19 (18.5)

1 Timothy 2:1-3 (11.2)

1 Timothy 2:5 (1.2)

1 Timothy 6:12 (33.1)

1 Timothy 6:18 (26.2)

1 Timothy 6:20 (12.3)

2 Timothy 2:1-2 (34.1)

2 Timothy 2:4-6 (9.1)

2 Timothy 2:23 (34.4)

2 Timothy 3:14 (34.4)

2 Timothy 3:16 (10.1)

 2 Timothy 4:5 (31.3)

Titus 2:7-8 (13.1)

Titus 3:5 (1.5)