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FINDING HOPE IN CHALLENGING TIMES

A 40 DAY DEVOTIONAL

DR. MICHA JAZZ

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ABOUT THIS DEVOTIONAL

Finding Hope in Challenging Times is taken from 'Be Still and Know: 365 bible based devotionals to help you grow in your faith', the hard copy book can be bought at premier.org.uk/shop.

The hard copy book is adapted from Dr Micha Jazz's popular weekday slot of the same name broadcast on Premier Christian Radio. Deepen your faith through this year-long daily Bible-based devotional with insights into spiritual growth, a suggested prayer, plus a question to challenge and help you apply scripture into your day.

Be Still & Know is also available in 44 day instalments and published six times a year in Voice of Hope by Premier Christian Communications Ltd. Since Premier began publishing Be Still & Know in 2013, they have received positive testimonies of how they have helped many people to find an oasis of calm, a space to be quiet and meet God.

This book is adapted from Voice of Hope, a bi-monthly magazine published by Premier, which includes 44 Bible based devotions from Dr Micha Jazz.

LISTEN:

Tune in to Dr Micha Jazz every weekday at 12.05pm, repeated at 10.20pm in the evening, and every Sunday from 1pm to 3pm on Premier Christian Radio.

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A NOTE FROM DR. MICHA JAZZ

I have followed Jesus for 40 years. Over that time I have worked with vulnerable young people with Youth for Christ, campaigned for religious liberties around the globe with Evangelical Alliance and served as a pastor and preacher with Revelation Church, Chichester for 21 years.

Having wrestled God over childlessness, my wife Katey and I emerged bruised but not broken only to have Katey diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. I stopped active ministry to care for her until she went to be with the Lord.

During those bitter years, I determined to pursue the sweetness of God and discovered the power of contemplation, a life giving form of prayer that sustained my vision and nurtured my mission. Contemplation simply enables each one of us to join hands with God whilst serving others in our community. Through that time I coached individuals and groups in interpersonal skills and formation while also working as a qualified mediator.

Having lived for many years in community, today my home in southern England serves as a friary where each day begins and ends with prayer. Hospitality is extended to guests to stay for days of prayer, personal and directed retreats, as well as learning weekends on Contemplative Prayer, spirituality and sharing Jesus across our communities. I have completed my training as a Spiritual Director and explored the ancient desert fathers with a PhD in Aramaic and the missional church of the East that carried the gospel as far as China in the eighth century.

My personal inspiration is Saint Francis and like him I have heard God issue a challenge and call me to 'repair his church'. On closer consideration I feel that my own life experiences have been about preparation to come alongside the broken, the bruised, the bewildered and the bitter to encourage them to rediscover their way back towards the heart of God, working with them to recover their first love, a vision for their future and how best to offer themselves in service to the church.

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In 2010 I had the joy of marrying a longtime family friend, Jayne. Together we are committed to serving God, encouraging the church and reimagining prayer and mission. I am available as a spiritual director, and also travel to speak to churches specifically focusing on the 45-plus age group to support them in rekindling their first love and transitioning effectively for the next stage of their Christian journey.

For a while my head and heart were full of excellent intentions to take extended time out each day for Bible reading, for prayer and for quiet. However, despite my initial fervour, my good intentions quickly dissipated and fell into disrepair. On the following pages I tell the story of my own journey in encountering God; the good, the bad and the indifferent. I have described the challenge of a long illness that eventually claimed my wife's life, together with an honest reflection upon my own human frailty. I've endeavoured always to be transparent and real. I am no porcelain saint! Rather a weary, mud splattered pilgrim, at times grumpy, yet always finding myself coming back to a space in which I am desperate to reach out to and take hold of God, as well as to experience the divine embrace.

These meditations can be read as a source of inspiration or to provide a springboard to some serious self-reflection in the presence of God. I generally take a cup of coffee, sit in a comfortable chair in front of the window and simply offer myself to God. I read slowly, less concerned about reaching the end than about hoping to encounter a thought, an image and intuition that draws me back toward God. I am an inveterate day dreamer, so my concentration requires constant rebooting. These simple thoughts, while leading to an eventual space for personal reflection, celebration, confession and amendment of life, also leave space for you to capture your response to the God who can never stop loving you and yearning for your attention.

Take a moment as you settle. Breathe deeply while considering every inward breath is drawing the life of God's Spirit into your being, while every outward breath is releasing the distractions and anxieties of the day. Feel the stress leaving your physical frame; try loosely shaking out





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your arms and hands as a sign of shaking all that stress off. Place your hands upon your knees, palm upwards as a sign of humble submission. Pause and in the silence quietly say aloud the Lord's Prayer, allowing yourself to be brought to the feet of Jesus ready to respond to his fresh invitation to take up your cross and to follow. Then quietly and slowly read a page from 'Be Still...' start with scripture, then move into the meditation, pausing whenever you sense God whisper something into your heart for greater reflection and consideration. Let the question help you apply the scripture and meditation into your own daily walk and situation. The suggested prayer is designed to help you affirm the truth of God's word. Use it as a springboard into further prayer.

I encourage you to join the growing community of Contemplative Activists who desire to discover the depths of God's love and express that love in a confused and confusing world.

- Dr. Micha Jazz

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DAY 1 – HABAKKUK 3:17-18

Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!

Having been a follower of Jesus for over 40 years, I with many others, have seen the Church hard at work praying, loving and serving. Yet in the UK it seems things get worse rather than better. God has told us that the earth is his, and everything in it, and calls upon us to be faithful. Yet before our eyes the social and spiritual fabric of our society appears to be in free fall. You will not be surprised to discover that we are not the first to think this way.

Habakkuk, one of the Old Testament prophets who spoke out some 600 years before Jesus, lived in just such circumstances. The international political scene was unstable, yet God had assured Habakkuk that he was opposed to evil and oppression. It was just that it didn't look or feel like that to Habakkuk.

The prophet expressed his frustration to God in no uncertain terms. However, in the silence following his complaint, God reassures him – even if it appears to be slow in emerging. Habakkuk, reminded of God's majesty and glory, humbles himself before God and the result is renewed hope. He concludes that in spite of the lack of any visible evidence, he will choose to trust in God and his promises. His hope in God is restored.

Like Habakkuk, we are to be those who place our hope in God's faithfulness, and in spite of

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visible evidence to the contrary, we pray and live in the certain knowledge of God's provision today and into the future.

QUESTION: Is your hope in God in need of restoration? Or do you know a friend who is struggling?

PRAYER: Father God, I pray for my friend and for myself. Help us not to despair or to be intimidated, instead may we be encouraged to trust in you. Give me fresh hope and help me to share this with my friend so I can be part of the answer to this prayer.

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DAY 2 – HEBREWS 11:1

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.

Yesterday we looked at Habakkuk's faith – and a recognition that we may need a fresh injection of hope to continue to wait on God. I don't know what you are like about waiting. It can be exciting or it can be heart stopping.

Waiting for Christmas as a child was always exciting – although the very anticipation had a strange effect on everything from appetite to behaviour. It was certain reference points that enabled me to manage to regulate the excitement and prevent it becoming overwhelming. One marker was Dad arriving home from work mid-afternoon on Christmas Eve – home early because of Christmas. He then always proceeded to clean the windows. Why? I don't know. But it meant Christmas was getting closer. The next reference point was eating tea while watching Disney's early version of *A Christmas Carol* on a black and white TV.

Heart stopping is quite a different set of emotions. I'm sure you can recall a moment in your life when you were afraid and felt almost immobilised by fear.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that faith is a lot like that. There is the anticipation of all the wonderful opportunities God has for us to experience. Yet there are also the heart stopping moments when we simply have to cling onto God by faith, and ask for fresh hope. There is nothing else that reassures or encourages us. For faith is the 'assurance about things we cannot see'.



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QUESTION: How is your faith doing today? Are you confident that God will fulfil his promises? Are you able to accept your life as it, knowing that you are safe in God's hands? If not, then take time to reflect on how you might renew that hope in God that he has things under control.

PRAYER: Father God, I renew my faith and commitment in you afresh today. I trust you with my circumstances. Be close to me, fill me afresh with your Holy Spirit, give me fresh hope and help me to grow into a mature and faith-filled disciple.

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DAY 3 – PSALM 33:13-19 NLT

The Lord looks down from heaven and sees the whole human race. From his throne he observes all who live on the earth. He made their hearts, so he understands everything they do. The best-equipped army cannot save a king, nor is great strength enough to save a warrior. Don't count on your warhorse to give you victory – for all its strength, it cannot save you. But the Lord watches over those who fear him, those who rely on his unfailing love. He rescues them from death and keeps them alive in times of famine.

One of the remarkable things about becoming a full-time carer for my wife, Katey, was my experience of stepping from the limelight into the shadows. For 20 years I had been preaching to congregations, engaged with national media and travelled all over the world addressing critical issues of religious liberty. Virtually overnight I disappeared from view. My phone stopped ringing and my diary opened right up. Initially it was both wonderful and essential to have this time. Wonderful because Katey and I had the time we needed to process her grim diagnosis. Essential since there were many practical steps we needed to take and we discovered the value of mutual support throughout.

Those years were years of learning. Not so much about learning to become a carer. Much more about discovering my own character flaws and deficiencies. The internal conflict; deep love and bone-crushing frustration, really took its toll. It was as I eventually gave up on outward appearance and gave myself permission to be a mess that God found me. And as God found me, I felt the church abandon me, or more significantly us.



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So it was that in our deep distress, confusion and sense of loss, God visited us and we experienced the truth of the words of the psalmist above – God’s eyes were on us and he rescued us. They were indeed years of famine but we learned to feed off the living bread.

QUESTION: Wherever you find yourself, whatever and however painful your personal circumstances, will you call out to the God who has his eye upon you?

PRAYER: I pray to you, my provider and deliverer. Be with me and sustain me, deliver me from temptation and give me my daily bread. Keep your gaze on me, Father, and deliver me home safe.

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DAY 4 – PSALM 33:20-22 NLT

We put our hope in the Lord. He is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord, for our hope is in you alone.

In the final verses of Psalm 33 we are invited to put our hope in the Lord and wait for him, but patience is often in short supply. Advances in modern communications mean we expect email replies by return, or we assume our missive has got trapped in a spam filter. Yet, throughout history, God reveals himself to those who discipline themselves in the art of waiting.

We get some clear hints from scripture that God is in no hurry with his timetable. The Israelites were in captivity in Egypt for many years before God intervened through Moses. The very act of the cross was delayed until what was obviously the perfect timing in God's economy.

But it is easy to run ahead, and with my creative brain engaged I can facilitate all sorts of worthy causes and achieve some very godly looking outcomes, yet they won't stand the test of time, for they were in many respects built upon my own imagination rather than the rock of God's construct.

Today I have learnt to take time simply being still and waiting. When I awake at night I don't fret, I simply sit with God in the silence of those deep dark hours. During the day I deliberately create space to do nothing; nothing, that is, but wait upon God. Some would see this as a waste of time; however, it is actually an expression of trusting in God. Then from such waiting comes God's invitation to act, and the impact and reach of such actions are great in their enduring effect.





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I remember one Christmas Day putting into practise how in the silence and the waiting I had learnt to recognise the leading of God. I distinctly heard God invite me to ring up a friend and wish him Happy Christmas, something I had not done before. When we connected he was in a very low state because of some really challenging and difficult circumstances. It was my phone call and my voice, yet it was God who ministered to him that afternoon, giving fresh hope.

QUESTION: What will it require for you to be still and wait upon God?

PRAYER: Today say nothing but try listening and waiting on God instead.

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DAY 5 – ISAIAH 55:3 NLT

Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David.

When training mediators and group facilitators, one of the critical skills is Active Listening. One exercise I use is to get delegates into pairs and ask one to describe a recent holiday home where they stayed, while the other has paper and pencil and is asked to draw what they are told. The drawer cannot ask a single question. After three minutes we interrupt and take a look at the drawings. They usually bear very little resemblance to what was described! On the second time around, the pairs swap and this time the drawer may ask questions. The results are remarkably improved.

Listening is not simply about registering words. It is much more about hearing, understanding and responding appropriately. God is clear and forceful, telling us that we have a responsibility to listen carefully to all that he says. God's word is a living, and a life-giving word for each one of us. The real food is, in fact, God. This is the food that sustains us and enables us to live well day by day. This is why it is so important to take time to 'Be still, and know that [God is] God'.

Now, just as our bodies fail if they are starved of food and fluids, so our spirits wither away if not fed through God's word. This is why God is so emphatic when he demands that we 'Pay attention and...Listen' (NET). It is so that we will truly live and not merely exist. There can be nothing worse than to patiently perform all the duties of a Christian while never enjoying the personal encounter promised through scripture and offered by God to each one of us.





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QUESTION: How are your listening skills? Is your walk with God marked with active listening, or would you regard it more as performance of duties you think are required from a Christian?

PRAYER: Lord God, help me understand that I do not live by bread alone but on the words of God. Help me to feed from your word today.



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DAY 6 – ISAIAH 55:3B-4 NLT

I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David. See how I used him to display my power among the peoples. I made him a leader among the nations.

Our age appears to be infatuated with education and qualifications. Government ministers attempt to introduce model tests at a variety of ages by which they seek to measure a school's academic performance. Of course, to challenge any of this might seem strange coming from one who holds a PhD. However, for me education has always been about fun.

Still, there appears to be much debate about what qualifies an individual to undertake certain tasks. When God describes King David, he says that he is a man after God's own heart (see Acts 13:22; 1 Samuel 13:14). Yet in the process of pursuing God, David proves himself morally frail as he commits adultery, and tries to cover it up before having the woman's husband murdered in the hope that his misdeed will remain undetected. No doubt it would have done had not God chosen to speak directly through a brave prophet, Nathan. If this is a man after God's own heart – what qualifies any one of us to take the name of Christ to our lips?

In an age in which leaders in every sphere of life feel compelled to present themselves as successful, self-reliant and self-confident, it is unusual for any such leader to acknowledge their fracture. But it is because of our fracture, and more importantly our acceptance of such a fracture, that we are trusted by God and entrusted in his service. Our failure qualifies us for employment, God knowing that we are the more aware of our need for grace as we acknowledge that we serve not with our own wisdom, strength or power, but through the



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strength of the Holy Spirit.

QUESTION: What qualifies you in Christ's service? Where do your fractures lie?

PRAYER: Holy Lord, I confess my sins and acknowledge my weaknesses. Thank you that it is by grace that we are accepted and qualified for service. My hope is in you alone and not in my gifts or experience.

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DAY 7 – PSALM 42:8 NLT

But each day the Lord pours his unfailing love upon me, and through each night I sing his songs, praying to God who gives me life.

Alone and in the wilderness, Jesus was no doubt forced to ask himself a lot of questions. Useful questions, since his subsequent ministry required that he knew himself inside out. My experiences through growing up and education seldom posed questions aimed at the core of who I was. From day to day, I think that I rather lazily drifted through life, through exams, university and finally out the other side. My parents were delighted that I appeared to be very successful, yet had little advice or experience to pass on. Well, that's as I recall it. Maybe I was too arrogant or dumb to listen.

So I have never really known what it is I want to do. Nor have I exhibited great skill at maximising the benefits I carried from childhood into adulthood, such as a stable upbringing and educational prowess.

What I discovered was that in the wildernesses I found the place for my personal grounding. I was unable to simply drift through the trauma of Katey and my childlessness or Katey's subsequent Multiple Sclerosis. I was driven to confront the shallowness of my lifestyle choices, to consider the 'double speak' I'd crafted to hide from the scrutiny of the faithful. I think I had even assumed I had deceived God as well. In reality, the only one deceived was me.

While my initial questions were all directed towards God, God turned the questions back on me. The real questions were: 'What is my hope in? Why am I choosing to follow Jesus? When will I





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yield to his counsel and way of wisdom?’ And ‘Where am I headed with my life?’ Instead of blaming God for not being with me, it was in the wilderness that God found me and I indeed found my true self.

QUESTION: Will you yield more of your wilfulness to God’s moulding hands? Where are you headed with your life?

PRAYER: Lord God, my will is weak and I am easily tempted and distracted. Lord, give me courage always to make the best decision.

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DAY 8 – PSALM 42:11

Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again - my Saviour and my God!

At times I have worked as a professional mediator. At some point, in the mediation, the parties either get stuck or one will seek to sabotage the process from within. When I recognise this, what am I to do? I am an impartial, non-judgemental, third party mediator. It is not my job to suggest solutions or counsel the parties. One thing I always come back to is something said during my original training: 'Trust the process!'

Life can often be confusing, and our immediate circumstances can appear overwhelming. During the storms in the winter of 2013/14, the Oratory where I lived began to leak. The gutters were unable to cope with all the rainfall – on one occasion, a month's worth in two days! It was heartbreaking in part as it damaged the principal meeting room which we had only finished decorating the previous autumn.

At times it was as though my issues were the only issues in town. I lost sight of God and lost sight of others and became self-absorbed. Like the psalmist, I had to ask the question, 'Why am I so depressed? Why is this turmoil within me?' It was only as I maintained my offices of prayer and took time actively to place my hope in God and adopt an attitude of thanksgiving for who God is that I was able to gain the necessary perspective.

The wilderness and its survival can become all-consuming. At such times it is good to ask ourselves the question, 'Why am I so depressed?' As we pause and ask ourselves that question





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we can choose to lift our heads and move our gaze from the immediacy of our predicament to the planned purpose and pathway of God. We, along with countless generations, choose to trust the process; the process of redemption that is ministered by our mediator, Jesus Christ. Once more we place our hope in God and entrust our steps, present and future, to his leading and promised care.

QUESTION: What are the issues that make it hard for you to fix your gaze on Jesus?

PRAYER: Father, help me place my hope in you and trust you with my days; placing my past, present and future into your loving care.

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DAY 9 – PSALM 1:1

Blessed are those who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

I found this quote from Sydney J. Harris the other day, 'Happiness is a direction, not a place'. It was a great discovery on the exact day that would have seen my wife Katey celebrating her 55th birthday.

The quote has proved a source of great encouragement to me. It has been hard adjusting to life without Katey's immense personality to engage with. The insights she gave with single one liners would have ensured an interesting evening should we ever have put her and Sydney J. Harris together. Many remember her acerbic tongue, for she took no prisoners and never suffered fools gladly.

She it was who could grasp optimism from the depths of despair with both hands. These gifts were to prove of great benefit to her as she navigated her way through her long relationship with multiple sclerosis. Her optimism in God's ability when all else failed, when, with the human eye, there appeared no way forward yet the consequences of not finding a way forward were unthinkable ensured she was a steady rudder through stormy seas. Not in a superficial, 'everything's going to be OK', way but retaining the ability to see beyond the horizon when everything appears lost in a thick fog. Today when pressure grows, I often find myself thinking of Katey - who didn't give up, brought comfort to others, and kept her eyes fixed on the horizon ahead, the eternal light at the end of the tunnel.



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QUESTION: Do you agree with Mr Harris' statement, 'Happiness is a direction not a place'?

PRAYER: Father God I recognise that happiness is not a product of money plus family plus friendship plus control. I acknowledge that it is a direction, a journey during which you help me overcome challenges, embrace fellow travellers, and through your grace continue to grow.

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DAY 10 – PSALM 46:10

Be still and know that I am God.

Teresa of Avila's autobiography which was written in the sixteenth century for her spiritual director provides a personalised account of her struggle with prayer and the Christian life. Teresa's struggles with prayer are fascinating. She battles with a sense of unworthiness and her personal preference to engage with the immediate pleasures of her day. Yet in the times she actually chose to pray rather than avoid this discipline, she discovered an increasing sense of the sweetness and presence of the Divine.

In the past, often my prayers were marked with a short anthem of praise followed by a rather monotonous series of requests for others and for myself. I would then leave the place of prayer and get on with life. I knew inside that this was a very superficial approach yet maintained it as my prayer routine for quite some years. God never really got an opportunity to speak to me, nor I to listen.

More recently I have been grateful to the work of the Contemplative movement. The process of placing oneself in the presence of God and waiting for Him to meet me in the silence has become my mainstay in daily prayer. It is a source of encouragement and provides strength for the day. I can still grow impatient or feel myself rushing somewhat breathless towards God with a bundle of requests, yet pausing, resting and waiting provides a far better context into which to welcome God.

QUESTION: Are you prepared to sit quietly before God, to set aside your pressing list of prayer



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requests and make the room for God to simply sit alongside you?

PRAYER: (I suggest you symbolically list your hands during this prayer). Heavenly Father, in the stillness I commit that whatever stirs into my mind from my past or present, I will not battle it or entertain it. I simply offer it to you God. And I invite you to minister to me in the silence.

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DAY 11– ROMANS 7:21

When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

I am surprised with the increased interest in monasticism today. Hardly a 'road' that I would imagine might prove popular to our contemporary culture. But today there is a plethora of intriguingly titled books, websites and blogs exploring this ancient way of life. There is an obvious richness here, but I am cautious. It would appear that in a turbulent world, monasticism has been hurriedly grasped by many feeling spirituality starved of spiritual reality in the hope that through the adoption of certain 'methods' practiced by the ancients, the tedium of spiritual formation will be enlivened. Sadly, untrue.

Finding the essence of the monastic comes by way of a journey. The monastic is primarily focussed upon an inner calling and has to face the reality of 'letting go' most of those alternative calls' that compete aggressively for our attention. Thomas Merton himself embraced such a call, 'in revolt against the meaningless confusion of a life in which there was so much activity, so much movement, so much useless talk, so much superficial and needless stimulation'. Against this backdrop Merton was losing touch with who he was.

The monastic way, the way of the contemplative, is not a consumer product but a different way of living.

QUESTION: In your yearning for a more ordered and less stressful way of living, what might you be prepared to change? Nothing happens overnight, however fresh adventures start with a single step. Are you able to choose a single step today that creates fresh space for you and



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God to take time together? If you can, what will it cost to take that step and are you willing and able to do so? If the answers are yes, then take it today - and let your yes be an Amen to Jesus.

PRAYER: Please help me Heavenly Father to pay the price for a life of contemplation.

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DAY 12 – MARK 10:17-27

As Jesus started on his way, someone ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

God invites each one of us to discover who we truly are and, living from within that knowledge, avoid our lives becoming subject to slavishly following external 'models' that appear to offer hope yet are no more than small plastic imitations of real life.

When the rich young ruler approached Jesus and greeted him as, 'Good teacher', he was no doubt following a formula taught him at a recent 'Maximising your Personal Impact' seminar, or something similar.

Having wrestled the enemy successfully in the wilderness, Jesus is comfortable in who he is and freed from all desire for personal wealth, position, or power. He knows it's enough simply to do what Dad tells him!

Jesus was unimpressed with the rich young ruler's religiosity, expressed by the way he kept rules. Jesus told him to "Go, get rid of all that is your current life, the wealth you have generated and this dangerous ego reinforcement strategy, and then Follow Me". Sadly it was too much

for the rich young ruler who left sorrowful - but probably a sort of sorrowful that was full of self-pity – and not about his failure to respond to Jesus' challenge.



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QUESTION: If you could ask God one question, what would it be?

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, please help me to listen for your voice and then obediently follow your commands and direction.



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DAY 13 – LUKE 22:44

Being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat
was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Ever wake up fearful? Or as you get on with your day are you ever suddenly ambushed by fear? No worries; we all experience this.

Fear is defined as, 'a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain' and is not in itself wrong. It simply informs me that there is something unpleasant that lies across my path, something I shall need to encounter. The reality is that while I may be fearful and God may not deliver me from it, God does acknowledge it and wants to accompany within it. I can be fearful yet not alone.

Jesus himself experienced deep fear. Following the final meal with his disciples he drew them to one side into the Garden of Gethsemane and invited them to pray with him. Taking himself off to face his fear - fear ahead on his arrest, torture and violent execution - he experienced what the medics term, 'Hematidrosis', to sweat drops of blood. It can occur when an individual is suffering extreme levels of stress, for example, facing his or her own death.

Now we know that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are yet was without sin, therefore we can conclude to fear is not to sin; it is to be human. As an emotion it is powerful and overwhelms us. It can prove so powerful within our imagination that we freeze and become incapable of doing anything. However, like Jesus, we are to bring the fear to God in prayer, by all means honestly wrestle with it and know that the sign of fruitful prayer is not the departure if



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the fear, rather the ability to move on into the very heart of the challenge, with the sense of God presence and support.

QUESTION: What makes you fearful? Draw aside and face it. You cannot beat it; you cannot avoid it, yet you can take time to pray as honestly as Jesus did.

PRAYER: can take time to pray as honestly as Jesus did. Lord Jesus please take away my fears. If you choose not to, help me to take hold of your hand and live in your promise to walk with me through the reality and consequences of my fear.

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DAY 14 – MATTHEW 27:46

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' - which means, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?'

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, he suffered as a result of his faithfulness to God. Our faithfulness to God is not an antidote to the excruciating pains and disappointments that can enter our lives.

Many of us look to God to deliver us from pain. The gospel story as revealed by Jesus is that God doesn't do this. Rather, God offers to accompany us through our pain. The passion of Jesus does not deny his later glorification; it precedes it and is an essential part in securing it.

The Christian path is always from death to life. Death is never denied nor avoided.

As I accompanied Katey on her journey with MS, I experienced grief long before she died as I observed the one I dearly loved fade by the day. I carried this pain physically within my body, and I felt totally alone. Holding close to God was a discipline since my feelings were lost to me for a season. Somehow, I clung on in this bleakest of journeys and after several years I woke up to find the deep ache had finally removed itself from my physical frame.

Feeling forsaken since every fibre of his being was wracked with pain, and any sense of the presence of the Father was lost to him, Jesus clung on despite the agony of the cross. Like him we can cling on as we await the hope of the welcome that lies beyond the suffering, the fruit of the faithfulness.



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QUESTION: Do you feel abandoned by God? Or are you experiencing grief and mourning?

PRAYER: God help me to hold onto you in the bleakness and pain of apparent separation. I commit to continue walking with you until I receive the welcome that lies beyond the present pain. Please strengthen me today.



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DAY 15 – PSALM 63:1

O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you. My soul
thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched
and weary land where there is no water.

The art of successful navigation is as much about knowing where one is as it is about knowing where one is going. I remember a New Year's Day walk some years ago that was confidently led by a good friend. His confidence initially produced a sense of relaxation among the walking party, but once it became evident that while he knew where we were headed, he had lost track of where we were, his inexhaustible confidence failed to bring much comfort to what was now a very weary group of people stumbling across unfamiliar heathland in the gathering gloom.

It can be the same in our walk with God. We know and love God, we are committed to walking in his ways, yet at times we lose sight of where we are as well as of where God is on this journey. At these times we are reminded of the need for faith, yet how does that help when we are confused, discouraged, with the darkness closing in all around us?

The psalmist encourages us with the simple phrase: '...God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you.' While we may feel lost, we are able to declare with confidence that God is God. The phrase literally means that among all the gods that various peoples and ethnicities look to, our God is the true source of life, hope and salvation. Therefore, we remind ourselves that it is with assurance that in our lostness and confusion we can confidently declare our faith in God and anticipate that our fears won't prove greater than God's goodness.





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QUESTION: Stop and ponder on where you are in your life. Do you feel secure or lost? Are you 'on track' or do you feel unsure and unsettled?

PRAYER: Creator of the universe – thank you that you know and see everything. Please be close to me, fill me with peace, guide and guard my steps today.

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A 40 DAY DEVOTIONAL

DAY 16 – PSALM 63:1-5

I have seen you in your sanctuary and gazed upon your power and glory. Your unfailing love is better than life itself; How I praise you! I will praise you as long as I live, lifting up my hands to you in prayer. You satisfy me more than the richest feast. I will praise you with songs of joy.

Some years ago I was walking towards Assisi in Italy. As I walked, a thirst developed as I struggled up the steep hills surrounding this medieval city. My parched tongue was literally stuck to the roof of my mouth. When I eventually found a water fountain I drank deeply before filling my water bottle and pouring it over my head, drenching myself from head to toe. It felt wonderful – the coolness of the refreshing, life-giving water contrasted with my severe thirst and growing physical anxiety as I searched for refreshment.

Here the psalmist uses the metaphor of thirst to describe his seeking after God. It is not simply his mouth that is parched, but his whole body thirsts for God. Such feelings cannot be manufactured. None of us can conjure up a deep thirst for God. Yet on occasion we discover that we feel empty and desperate for the refreshment and renewal that God alone can bring. In such dry times we are invited simply to cry out to God, in anticipation that God will always be true to his word and meet us at the time and place of his own choosing.

A land that is devoid of water is unable to produce crops and support life. So we are unable to support life without the reality of God's presence. Hence our need to seek after God, even at those times when we feel weakest.





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QUESTION: In what specific ways would your life alter tomorrow if God absented himself?

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, I invite you to place inside me a deep longing, an inner thirst for your love and presence, so that I return to you each day for fresh spiritual nourishment and refreshment.

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DAY 17 – PSALM 63:6-8

I lie awake thinking of you, meditating on you through the night. Because you are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your strong right hand holds me securely.

We have read the psalmist describe our longing for God, our experience of God within the congregation and the depth of God's commitment to each one of us. In light of these truths, he now invites us to worship God.

The heart of worship is simply acknowledging God's worthiness. It is our main response to God throughout our life and declares to the whole of creation that God is the one we choose to serve. It is a voluntary response and a personal choice.

The word 'worship' indicates the use of our body in response to God's love – bowing the knee in reverence, the raising of our hands in surrender – and it is a physical activity. While we might associate with Islam the movement from a standing to a prostrate position, this was in fact the way the early Christians worshipped God, and those in the Syriac Church still will worship in this fashion. So it can help us to engage our bodies in worshipping God, if we are able to.

Our act of worship simply and clearly states our utter dependence upon God. It is not a response to some gift he has given, nor is it a means of gently persuading God to grant our requests. It is an act in response to his being the ultimate reality from whom everything derives both its life and its meaning. And so, regardless of circumstance, we are invited to worship God. Worship is drawing close to God and can be done in silence and alone as easily as within a



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congregational context.

QUESTION: What physical response do you want to make to God and the truth that you have discovered and that you treasure?

PRAYER: I worship you, Almighty God, King of the universe, and lover of my heart – I adore you, my King, my Lord, my saviour, my lover, my shepherd, my friend, my fortress, my redeemer.

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DAY 18 – HEBREWS 12:1

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.

On a recent visit to the dentist, I got talking to a man who had postponed dealing with a severe toothache until he was only able to eat yoghurt and had lost 20 pounds in weight! He could postpone no longer.

When my turn came, as I sat mouth wide open, eyes closed, waiting the verdict, I got to thinking about the spiritual life. Pursuing God is tough. We need a regular check-up so that we can continue to feed appropriately and grow in spiritual understanding. This is the process of formation – becoming more like Christ.

Where the hygienist removes the plaque and other deposits around the teeth that our own brushing efforts cannot reach, so we as followers of Jesus must submit ourselves to God and 'strip off...the sin that so easily trips us up' as the writer to the Hebrews puts it. Once in that space of spiritual cleaning, God will take the opportunity to identify and suggest more intrusive spiritual health care. We must agree with him to allow the work, or suffer spiritual decay.

For me, the times of quiet contemplation, when I can be still and know God, are the times when I listen to what God may be saying and invite the Holy Spirit to reveal areas of potential or actual spiritual decay in my life. It is my primary reason for encouraging you to take some time out each day.





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QUESTION: As you brush your teeth today, ask God; 'What areas in my life are stained or in danger of decay?'

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, please cleanse me, renew me, and then fill me again with your Holy Spirit to live for you today.



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DAY 19 – ISAIAH 26:3

You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!

Do you have trouble sleeping? If so, you are not alone. Thousands of people consult their GP with this problem every month, and a quarter of us face this problem at some time in our lives.

One of the critical tests of how real my relationship with God is has turned on such moments of disturbance. When younger, if something got under my skin I wouldn't let it rest; in fact, I couldn't even if I wanted to. This caused me a lot of internal anger and I know my thoughts directed towards others were laden with sin. Such hatefulness held within is a poison and drags us away from God rather than pushing us closer.

One thing I learned was to make the physical effort of stepping back. I literally stood up and took a deliberate step backward. As I did this, I acknowledged that I was both angry and out of control. I found the benefit of the scripture in Isaiah, and stated it as: 'You will keep me in perfect peace, because my mind is focused upon you.' This created a firebreak in my anger, a thin space for God to meet me. I still had to learn to choose to allow God the space and time, and slowly let go of my ungodly attitude and behaviour while asking for help to live godly in the circumstances. This has been a journey of years, not months.

QUESTION: What are your own natural reactions to pressures outside of your control? Stand up and state them out loud in words that make sense to you. Then take a literal step backward (first checking what is behind you) and with hands raised, ask God to teach you his ways of





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finding rest for your soul in him.

PRAYER: Father God, I claim the promise from scripture, the gift of your perfect peace, which you offer to all who fix their thoughts on you. I step back from my problems and fix my eyes and thoughts on you. Please give me your perspective and your perfect peace. I ask in the powerful name of your Son, my Lord, Jesus Christ.

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DAY 20 – 2 TIMOTHY 3:16

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.

Over a year ago I worked out the cost of simply keeping a car on the road, and it quickly became clear my car had to go. Once the decision was made I assumed that I would primarily travel by train. However, this was often frighteningly expensive and prone to cancellations and delays.

Then I made the wonderful discovery of coach travel. Not as I remembered it as a child. No. Here were reclining seats, Wi-Fi access and a toilet! The prices were incredible and my journey time uninterrupted.

However, I made a further and surprising discovery. Where once I drove myself and had to focus all my attention on handling the car, now I was driven and had time to myself. I recovered the space to regularly read scripture, and reflect upon what I was reading. Many people find scripture-reading difficult, either through lack of time or from falling out of love with the Bible. Yet this is God's living word. It does not simply recall past divine exploits or speak of history. Rather, it provides the critical insights into how God would have me, and you, live out our loves today.

It shapes our characters and prevents us from taking wrong turns.

Most of all, scripture reveals God and enables each of us develop our own relationship with the divine. As Timothy tells us, it is the very breath of God and both teaches and corrects each of



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us. Without a healthy engagement with scripture, our walk of faith may in fact be the journey of a blind person.

QUESTION: How do you find scripture? Are you reading or listening to it regularly? If not, why not?

PRAYER: Talk to God about scripture and your feelings about engaging with God in his word. All scripture is God-breathed – so in these moments invite the breath of God to stir your heart again, and return to your Bible.

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DAY 21 – PSALM 119:105

Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.

Today I want to continue the theme of meeting Jesus in the pages of the Bible. Yesterday I wrote about the benefits I had discovered in travelling by coach. It is more comfortable, cheaper, and creates a useful space for me to spend time with God.

Scripture tells us that God's word lights our path through life. Without it, we peer into the darkness ahead and have only our own wits to decide the decisions we should make and the direction we should take. However, in the pages of scripture, God guides us. Although it may at first seem difficult to understand, it is in fact God himself who guides us within its stories. Slowly, as we press forward, our understanding grows both in appreciating the specific things we are reading and also in discovering God's will and purpose for us. Yet it is not simply a book to go to in order to find out what God wants of us. It is in fact a treasury of God encounters. It is itself the Godspace where we can walk and talk with God.

Psalms 119 is a very long psalm devoted to celebrating God's word, which is broken into sections eight verses in length. Take this psalm and, at some point in your routine today, read one eight-verse section – asking God to speak to you. Repeat this exercise before you go to bed tonight. In this way you open and close the day with a brief scriptural reading and reflection.

Give God time to speak. Don't treat this as a simple exercise of reading eight verses. Expect God to speak to you in a way that you recognise.



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QUESTION: Reread Psalm 119:105 and then ask God to share with you what he sees and feels. No need to keep talking. Simply invite (use the suggested short prayer), and then silently sit and wait, listening and anticipating.

PRAYER: Father, speak to me, your servant is listening.

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DAY 22 – PSALM 119:169,175

O Lord, listen to my cry; give me the discerning mind you promised. Let me live so I can praise you, and may your regulations help me.

I clearly remember the trauma I felt once I realised that my wife, Katey, was not going to get better. Her MS was progressive. It was the practicalities of coming to terms with this reality that proved difficult. I felt as if I had stepped into a life shaft minus the lift and I was dropping like a stone. I literally left my stomach behind and awaited the inevitable thud.

These feelings were so powerful that they once dominated my daily routine. Like the psalmist, I literally let my cry come to God. It was a deep cry of inner anguish; fear, anger, confusion, all combined. It was at this point I was prompted to pick up scripture. My reading was in Psalm 27 – and the words in conclusion, ‘Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord’ broke me. The tears proved a channel to wash away a tide of anxiety, and as this flowed out there was space to wait upon God. I was silent, and in that silence I was refreshed and restored. I had cried out to God, and as his word promised, he gave me understanding according to his word.

Returning to Psalm 119, its concluding verse reminds us that God’s word is what prevents us from going astray. For me, that had certainly been true. My going astray would have been to have lost my way in the depths of despair and self-pity. While perhaps understandable, such behaviours would have left me high and dry. I needed to connect with the living word, God himself, to find my way forward. Of course the pain of the wounds remained, yet I was engaged with God and I knew I was able to stagger on, strengthened by God’s spirit.



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QUESTION: What is your cry to God today, what is on your mind? Tell Him.

PRAYER: Father God, if you choose not to remove me from the challenging circumstances I face today, then please give me understanding and the ability to find you in these circumstances, and to serve you in them.

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DAY 23 – HABAKKUK 3:17-18

Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!

Having been a follower of Jesus for 40 years, I with many others have seen the Church hard at work praying, loving and serving. Yet in the UK it seems things get worse rather than better. God has told us that the earth is his, and everything in it, and calls upon us to be faithful. Yet before our eyes the social and spiritual fabric of our society appears to be in free fall. You will not be surprised to discover that we are not the first to think this way.

Habakkuk, one of the Old Testament prophets who spoke out some 600 years before Jesus, lived in just such circumstances. The international political scene was unstable, yet God had assured Habakkuk that he was opposed to evil and oppression. It was just that it didn't look or feel like that to Habakkuk.

The prophet expressed his frustration to God in no uncertain terms. However, in the silence following his complaint, God reassures him – even if it appears to be slow in emerging. Habakkuk, reminded of God's majesty and glory, humbles himself before God. He concludes that in spite of the lack of any visible evidence, he will choose to trust in God and his promises.

Like Habakkuk, we are to be those who place full confidence in God's faithfulness, and in spite of visible evidence to the contrary, we pray and live in the certain knowledge of God's provision

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today and into the future.

QUESTION: Who do you know who is struggling with student debt, unemployment, or minimum wage jobs?

PRAYER: Father God, I pray for [insert name]. Help them not to despair or to be intimidated, instead may they receive encouragement and practical help. Show me how I can be part of the answer to this prayer.

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DAY 24 – HEBREWS 11:1

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.

Yesterday we looked at Habakkuk's faith – and a recognition that faith required a waiting on God. I don't know what you are like about waiting. It can be exciting or it can be heart stopping.

Waiting for Christmas as a child was always exciting – although the very anticipation had a strange effect on everything from appetite to behaviour. It was certain reference points that enabled me to manage to regulate the excitement and prevent it becoming overwhelming. One marker was Dad arriving home from work mid-afternoon on Christmas Eve – home early because of Christmas. He then always proceeded to clean the windows. Why? I don't know. But it meant Christmas was getting closer. The next reference point was eating tea while watching Disney's early version of A Christmas Carol on a black and white TV.

Heart stopping is quite a different set of emotions. I'm sure you can recall a moment in your life when you were afraid and felt almost immobilised by fear.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that faith is a lot like that. There is the anticipation of all the wonderful opportunities God has for us to experience. Yet there are also the heart stopping moments when we simply have to cling onto God by faith, for there is nothing else that reassures or encourages us. For faith is the 'assurance about things we cannot see'.

QUESTION: How is your faith doing today? Are you confident that God will fulfil his promises?



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Are you able to accept your life as it is, knowing that you are safe in God's hands? If not, then take time to reflect on how you might renew that assurance and conviction in your life that God has things under control.

PRAYER: Father God, I renew my faith and commitment in you afresh today. I trust you with my circumstances. Be close to me, fill me afresh with your Holy Spirit and help me to grow into a mature and faith-filled disciple.

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DAY 25 – HEBREWS 11:8

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going.

The phrase 'Blind Faith' has only one meaning to me. That is of the so-called Super group made up of Winwood, Clapton, Baker and Grech. Their music serenaded my youth and remains much enjoyed today.

However, many people use the phrase to mean taking a step without due regard to the consequences. It is therefore seen as the way of the fool. In the pages of scripture, I would suggest we find many such fools. Take Abraham, for example. He was called by God to set out on a journey to receive an inheritance, a place he did not know the name or location of. Scripture says that Abraham set out not knowing where he was going. Doesn't sound very promising, does it? Yet today we acknowledge Abraham as a father of the faith.

I remember boarding a single-engine, six-seater plane in Zimbabwe some years ago, and sitting next to the pilot. Once we were flying, we were chatting when he suddenly said, 'This is going better than I thought.' On enquiring what he meant, he explained that he was pilot and aircraft engineer. Recently he had needed to make some repairs to the engine, but with no branded parts available in Zimbabwe, he had had to use whatever he could to keep his plane in the air. The rest of the journey I fixed my gaze nervously on the engine and prayed his workmanship would hold out.



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Of course, God has the advantage since he is the designer and creator of the whole of creation. Therefore, trusting our life's journey into his hands should prove easy – yet it isn't, for we feel we need to control our lives. This is not, however, God's way. We need to agree to trust in his faithfulness and accept God knows best.

QUESTION: What aspect of trusting God is hardest for you? Maybe a past disappointment has left you struggling to put your faith in God?

PRAYER: Father God, help me to trust in you today, particularly over the issue I struggle with the most.

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DAY 26 – DEUTERONOMY 34:1-5

Then Moses went up to Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab and climbed Pisgah Peak, which is across from Jericho. And the Lord showed him the whole land...Then the Lord said to Moses, 'This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when I said, "I will give it to your descendants." I have now allowed you to see it with your own eyes, but you will not enter the land.' So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, just as the Lord had said.

One of the most difficult challenges I have faced is knowing when to accept circumstances, even when they are not what I want them to be. My natural inclination is to fix, solve or enable, but it is not always the way that God chooses for me. Certainly learning to accept Katey's MS, its

impact upon her and on us a couple, the loss of dreams and the limitations the disease introduced into our life, were all bitter pills to swallow.

What are we to do when circumstances appear to prevent us from realising our dreams or our own perception of what we deserve? I suggest we consider Moses. Like Abraham, Moses was called by God. He didn't have an easy life. He brawled, killed, ran away, resisted God's call, asked a tyrannical despot to let the Hebrews leave Egypt, was pursued by an army, suffered the people's complaints and their disobedience. He bore the heavy load of leadership for decades, but the nearest he got to enter Canaan was to view it from a distance. His whole life he had





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lived for the Promised Land and he died with it laid out before him, yet viewed from the wilderness.

Moses learned that God made continuous provision for him and the people he led. This is the lesson of faith and faithfulness.

QUESTION: Do you carry disappointments of unrealised dreams? Do you stand in sight of the land but you are not occupying it?

PRAYER: Father God, help me grow in obedience, in both my lifestyle and my understanding, so that like Moses, who journeyed from hot-headed outlaw to obedient statesman, I also may become a friend of you and your purposes for my life.

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DAY 27 – PSALM 118:1

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.

When I was younger and before I was a Christian, I was involved in petty crime. One year I shoplifted all my family's Christmas presents. In fact I enjoyed breaking the rules, and I am sure without God's timely intervention I would have found myself developing into quite a criminal. I was also harsh, sarcastic and rude to everyone I met who I didn't respect. However, I met with a God who was good through and through, and as a result of hanging out with him, I began to discover what being good was about – being a source of encouragement, hope and help to others for no other reason than God loved them.

However, not only is God good, his love which is steady and unwavering lasts forever. Of course, many of us have felt completely let down in relationships. We have been betrayed, or the understanding we had of the relationship is proved to be unfounded. This causes anguish and difficulty in trusting people. But God's love will always be there for us.

I remember that when I was caring for Katey, however bleak life might appear, we always paused to celebrate occasions – birthdays, wedding anniversaries, all the obvious events and a few we threw in for good measure, such as American Thanksgiving and St George's Day. These were times to do good to one another and recall the goodness of God.

I have a great picture of Katey in bed, and us both holding champagne glasses. We were celebrating God's goodness and his forever love.



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QUESTION: Can you stop for a moment, close your eyes and reflect on the never-ending goodness of God? Try. Set aside your own pressing problems and celebrate the fact that God is good and that the love he has for you will last for all time.

PRAYER: I praise you and thank you, Father God, for your goodness and for your faithfulness towards me. I bask in the sunshine of your love and kindness and tender mercy.

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DAY 28 – COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.

My first job was a youth worker. This meant facing some of my own personal terrors, such as participating in rock climbing. Although I didn't have a head for heights, non-participation was not an option, as I sought to win the respect and trust of the youngsters. So I religiously followed the instructor's advice, 'Don't look down on the way up!'

I scrambled up the rope as best I could, climbing what seemed like a sheer rock face, and always looked up. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul advises the Christians to focus their attention on the things that are above; to look up at those attributes and behaviours that are appropriate to being in Christ's presence.

As I climbed up the rock wall I lost my foothold, slipped and started to fall. But the rope I was tied to saved me from falling to the ground. Swinging on the end of the rope I couldn't help but look down. I saw what a mess I would have made if the rope hadn't taken my weight. In the same way, God will stop us falling to our destruction when we do make mistakes. Dangling on a rope, it is easy to look down rather than to look up. Yet looking up reminds us of where we are headed.



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QUESTION: How are you living today? Do you feel like you are making progress, or are you dangling, held up only by the rope around you? Do you feel safe or in peril? In which direction are you looking?

PRAYER: Thank you, Father, that even when I slip you will not let go of me. Help me when I slip to resume my climb. And help me remember to follow Paul's instruction to look up and consider the ways of God regularly.

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DAY 29 – COLOSSIANS 3:5-9

So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world. Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds.

Paul, writing to the Colossians, invites us to look forward to the reality of our true home with Christ in eternity, recognising that our citizenship is in heaven.

There has been much debate about requiring immigrants into the UK to learn English and take a citizenship test which requires learning something of British customs, culture and history. So it is with those of us who aspire to be citizens of heaven. We are to learn the language, the customs and the culture of heaven, and live it out on earth.

Paul reminds us to live each day with our future in view. A car driver needs to regularly look into the rear-view mirror to note what is behind – but more importantly they need to look at the road and traffic ahead. So it is with the Christian journey. We need to keep looking ahead with the occasional glance in the rear-view mirror. When we find ourselves filled with regrets from the past and failing to anticipate the road ahead, then we will lose sight of both God and our destiny with him. We are to live our lives in the light of our destiny to live eternally with God. Anything



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less is to make a mockery of the message of faith that Christ died to release to us.

QUESTION: What sort of Christian driver are you? How much time do you spend gazing into the rear-view mirror as opposed to anticipating the way ahead?

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, please forgive my sins and help me to get rid of all anger, rage, malicious behaviour, slander, dirty language and lies. I choose to live for you.

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DAY 30 – COLOSSIANS 3:10-11

Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

An early faith challenge was my drinking. I was 19 years old and at university, and although not alcohol dependent, my social life revolved around parties and pubs. While I was aware that new-found Christian friends were unhappy with my social drinking, I felt resentful at their uninvited judgement, and so I partied and drank all the harder. Yet the consequence of my behaviour was that as the alcohol took hold, I lost a sense of perspective and would easily make crass comments.

As I reached the end of my first year as a Christian, God began to speak to me about my drinking.

God was more difficult to dismiss than my Christian friends. He was not easily ignored as a busybody; he was my Lord. My Lord was asking me to reduce my drinking, and expressing displeasure at my behaviour. If I ignored him, in what way was he really my Lord? Here is the essence of what Paul is saying to us when he states, 'So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you.' (v5) It may not be deadly in itself, yet in regards to growing up into maturity in Christ and living the God-filled life, it is a poisoned chalice. One of the consequences in dying to self and acknowledging Jesus as Lord is a moderation of behaviour. Paul lists a number of those behaviours that need to be addressed by the faithful Christian, ranging from sexual





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immorality through to the less easily discerned anger and slander. Discipleship is the process of a lifetime, yet it has measurable changes during our walk of faith.

QUESTION: Is Jesus your Lord? If so, in what ways does your lifestyle choices reflect Christ's Lordship?

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, as I reflect on my lifestyle, I invite you to open my eyes to see how you want me to grow to be more like your Son, my Lord, Jesus Christ.

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DAY 31 – COLOSSIANS 3:12-14

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.

For Christmas, my daughter gave me a jacket that she had customised to resemble a Mick Jagger jacket from some years back. I was delighted to add this to my party-going, customised jackets. It's always good to cut a dash when visiting neighbours parties, or simply going out for the evening.

Paul reminds the Colossian Church that they are to look good by putting on the attributes and characteristics fashioned by the creator. These will enable women and men to walk in trust and confidence alongside each other, for they concentrate upon living peaceably and in support of those around us. They are the character attributes that establish and serve active community.

Without an external, supernatural and divine guide, the morality we design for ourselves is far too easily bent to suit our own immediate needs. Our humanity is essentially corrupted; therefore we serve our own interests as a priority. This is in direct contradiction to Paul's injunction elsewhere that we are to place others' interests over and above our own.

When we do something inappropriate and wrong, we feel ashamed and want to keep it hidden.



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We are to be vigilant in challenging wrong when we discover it, while also adopting a lifestyle that reflects the kingdom values entrusted to us by Christ. You can read these values in Colossians 3:12-17

QUESTION: What 'fashion' are you recognised as wearing in the world of congregational life, at work, with family and with friends? Does it reflect the character of Christ and his kingdom?

PRAYER: I invite you, Holy Spirit, to refill me, and to mould and fashion my behaviour and choices to reflect God's values and character. Help me to live for God and not for my old self.

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DAY 32 – COLOSSIANS 3:15-17

And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful. Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

One way we can recognise that our choices are God's choices is by the peace we feel within us. This peace is to act as a 'referee' in our decision-making, and so whether we are deciding upon a pay rise or a relocation, we are to look within and discover whether we have the peace of Christ.

On Christmas Eve 1977, I sat opposite a beautiful young girl whose hand in marriage I had previously requested of her father, something that she was aware of. Christmas Eve was the date I wanted to propose, yet as I sat there my confidence drained away. I had not observed a particularly happy marriage between my parents, and Katey had also had some negative experiences. Instead of the carefully crafted speech I had rehearsed, I found myself saying, 'I'm not sure I can go through with this. I don't know if I can commit to marriage.' The scene was now heavy with tension, and more to avoid saying anything further than for any spiritual reason, I suggested we pray.

The moment we began to pray, I was overwhelmed with such a wave of peace that I was hardly



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able to move. I looked, smiled at Katey and then apologised. I made a heartfelt proposal, not my carefully crafted speech, which she graciously accepted.

QUESTION: Is it your practice to give final authority to God? Do you allow for the peace of God to guide you; a peace that is beyond logic and rationality?

PRAYER: Heavenly Guide, I bring to you the decisions I need to make, and especially those I lack peace about. I commit my way to you. Please guide my paths and fill me with your peace.

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DAY 33 – ROMANS 1:20

For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God

I love to get out into the fresh air and enjoy God's creation whenever I can. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that nature bears witness to God and that even without a human witness, creation itself declares the magnificence of God. I rediscover this each day when I rise early to take my chorkie – a cross between a chihuahua and a Yorkshire terrier – for a walk. We walk for the best part of an hour. Most days this lifts my soul within.

It is interesting to consider the extent to which the natural environment influences us. As a society we are becoming aware of SAD (seasonal affective disorder). This is when the long dark days of winter, with their leaden skies, can exercise a powerful impact upon individuals. The science behind it suggests that we need sunlight to help maintain a healthy sense of well-being.

God, the creator, invested in the whole of the creation, not simply humanity. Creation is there to lift our spirits, to remind us of the rich provision God has made; a provision that is not simply to meet our needs, such as the extensive food resources nature offers up to us, but also fine views, romantic sunsets, vibrant colours and a rich variety of animal and bird life.

Today, as you come to prayer, if possible, take a moment to step outside and feel the air, the rain, the breeze. Open a window and encounter the creator within creation. Take a moment now to breathe deeply and give thanks for the ornate canvas God has painted all around us.



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QUESTION: In what ways does God speak to you through the natural world?

PRAYER: Creator God, thank you for making such a beautiful world. I join your creation to worship and praise you.

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DAY 34 – 1 SAMUEL 2:30

Therefore, the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I promised that your branch of the tribe of Levi would always be my priests.'
But I will honour those who honour me, and I will despise those who think lightly of me.

When I was a child, my dad kept an allotment, and I was always happy being with him in the outdoors. We grew vegetables and fruit, which much of the year provided fresh and home-grown food for the family to eat.

The rhythm between work and prayer was recognised by St Benedict. He established the early Western monasteries in the sixth century on the basis of *ora et labora*, pray and work. For Benedict, working was prayer as the monks worked the fields and harvested food for themselves and the needy that living nearby. Praying wasn't confined to chanting the psalms during the daily offices in the chapel. It was continued as the monks made their way to the kitchens, when they washed themselves and their food, and as they walked to their fields.

At the heart of such prayer is the central truth that God's provision is what sustains us. In one moment we shut ourselves away individually or as a congregation to sing God's praises and to offer up our personal intercessions, the next we wrestle in our workplace seeking to do well, to do good and to celebrate God. But there should be no divide between the so-called spiritual and secular. Just as the Bible describes the creation of the world as a God-inspired act from start to finish, so our daily routine is one in which God walks alongside us throughout.



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QUESTION: How do you see your work, or your unemployment? Are you able to discover God's rhythm of prayer in work? If not, how might you seek this out?

PRAYER: Today, say nothing to God – just meditate on the questions above and listen out for any response from God that he may choose to give you.

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DAY 35 – JOHN 1:1-4

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone.

Many years ago I was with friends punting down the River Cherwell in Oxford. At first it went well. We were mastering the strange method of propulsion. However, we then found ourselves being drawn towards a weir. We tried, with increasing desperation, to propel ourselves back towards midstream, but the power of the weir had caught hold of our boat and was sucking us quickly towards destruction. Within a matter of seconds, a calm evening on the river descended into a crisis. As disaster approached, we leapt into the river and had to swim hard to avoid being pulled under the water and possibly drowned in the weir.

Climbing onto the riverbank our sense of gratitude at our escape quickly gave way to embarrassment as we stood dripping wet, yet fully clothed, for all to see. We then had to make our soggy way back to the boathouse to try to explain our misadventure. Nature is both beautiful and powerful.

John's Gospel opens with the reminder that at the very act of creation, the word, Jesus himself, was present. More than that, everything that was created was created through him; he gave it life – its ability to grow, to flourish, to nurture; all of life, from the production of oxygen, to the air we breathe, to the food upon our tables.





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Once we have this perspective, we begin to see nature through different eyes. As we appreciate God's intimate involvement in the creation of all of nature, of which humanity was his final and greatest handiwork, we can look again in awe and wonder at all that surrounds us. We might also consider again how we treat this wonderful piece of God's craftsmanship

QUESTION: Can you see beyond God's handiwork and sense the love of God in everything he has created?

PRAYER: Creator God, help me today to reconnect with your world. Teach me how to nourish and be a good steward of your creation.

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DAY 36 – ROMANS 8:18-22

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone

Today we continue to meditate on God's creation. Paul, writing in Romans 8, describes the earth waiting for deliverance from its bondage to decay. A while ago, a Banksy wall painting outside the discount shop Poundland depicted a boy hunched over a sewing machine producing bunting of Union flags for the Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

Whatever the politics, we know that there is tremendous imbalance in wealth generation and distribution throughout our world. This is not limited to the exploitation of people, young and old, male and female. It also impacts God's glorious creation, with minerals ruthlessly extracted, and devastated wastelands left behind. As we exhaust one rich mineral deposit, we seek to find new ones to exploit.



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One reason that our elderly population is mistreated, disrespected and often discarded is that society has harvested all the use it can from them. When you pillage the earth of its beauty and resources, it is only a small step to seeing humanity as no more than another piece of creation to exploit, just one more source of income generation. As we lose sight of the image of God in creation so we become blind to the image of God within humanity. Once that happens, we have no need of God at all.

QUESTION: How are you caring for this gift from God that sustains our life on earth? Are you acting responsibly and living a lifestyle that honours God's handiwork?

PRAYER: I acknowledge the damage and abuse that men and women have inflicted on your world. Help me today to care for and look after your creation.

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DAY 37 – ISAIAH 55:12-13

You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands! Where once there were thorns, cypress trees will grow. Where nettles grew, myrtles will sprout up. These events will bring great honour to the Lord's name; they will be an everlasting sign of his power and love.

Today, as we conclude our thoughts around creation, it is to the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah that we turn. Here, following God's invitation to the poor to drink and eat freely at his table that is constantly furnished from his bountiful creation, he announces that the creation will give voice to its praise of God.

When was the last time you witnessed the mountains sing or the fields clap their hands? Isaiah is not alone; for example, in Psalm 98 we read, 'Let the rivers clap their hands...Let the hills sing out their songs of joy before the Lord' (vs7-9).

You might also recall Jesus' own words in Luke's Gospel that if he silenced his disciples from singing his praises, their voices would be replaced by the cries of the stones beneath their feet. When Jesus was crucified, creation did not stay silent. The earth shook, the ground opened up and the curtain in the Temple was torn along its length.

Every organic element of creation carries the DNA of God, and it is designed to celebrate the King of kings as much as we are. When you catch sight of a sunset and you are deeply moved, or climb to the top of a hill and your breath is taken away by the view, you are responding to the





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majesty of God. His heartbeat with you resonates with the sound of the universe which bears God's very fingerprints.

QUESTION: Where can I go this weekend to celebrate and praise God in his creation?

PRAYER: Creation longs for His return/ When Christ shall reign upon the earth/ The bitter wars that rage/ Are birth pains of a coming age/ When he renews the land and sky/ All heav'n will sing and earth reply/ With one resplendent theme/ The glory of our God and King. (From 'Creation Sings' by Steve Green Copyright Thankyou Music)

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DAY 38 – JAMES 2:26

Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead
without good works.

One of the challenges most often presented to me by those seeking spiritual direction is around managing time effectively. This is always really a question about rhythm. So this week I want to look at rhythms that can help you centre on God, no matter what you do.

I believe, based on observation and experience, that in every season of life, busyness will forever drive out time we make available for God. We may acknowledge in our heads that without this time we will be spiritually drained and live life less well, yet knowledge is an insufficient motivator to practice.

Some time ago, my wife, Jayne, experienced problems with her gall bladder, experiencing sharp pains and nauseous attacks, often after eating. She was awaiting a scan and the prospect of surgery. I began to search the Internet for some insights. I am the household cook, and I landed on a specific site that dealt with gall bladder treatment through diet. I read the basics and realised that my penchant for French cuisine, with butters, creams and all things fatty, was not the diet Jayne required. In fact, the site suggested by moving away from processed foods and fats, the problem would disappear and a normal balanced life resume, albeit with certain dietary constraints. So with my new-found knowledge I reorganised my larder and set about creating a whole set of new recipes – refined sugar replaced by fructose, chicken and fish instead of pork and duck, olive oil for all cooking, and so forth. The subsequent scan revealed no problems and the hospital discharged Jayne immediately.





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I was able to find knowledge that addressed the challenge we faced. Yet unless I had unlearned what I knew about my cooking, and left my preferred gourmet style, Jayne would not have experienced the benefits.

QUESTION: Whatever season of life you are in how can you defend regular time with God?

PRAYER: Living Lord, help me this week to learn more about the rhythm of life I am in and how it can change so that I live with you at the centre.

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DAY 39 – MATTHEW 5:14

You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.

This week we are looking at rhythms to increase the space we find for God. These do not need to be elaborate or time-consuming.

Each day I get up first and basically wake up the house. I tidy the kitchen, sort out packed lunches and prepare breakfast – which ranges from muesli and yoghurt to two-egg omelette with toasted fruit loaf. Anything is available but these are the favourites. Once people wake and find their way downstairs, before enjoying a brew or cooking the breakfast, we gather at the kitchen table and one of us strikes a match and lights a candle, thanking God for bringing the household safely through the night and inviting God to be the light we each need in the day ahead.

It's simple and brief, yet the household have gathered together, acknowledged God and reminded themselves and each other that this day is about God first and foremost. The candle will stay alight until we all set off to work. We are able to set out from the house with a great sense of renewed hope and purpose.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged his followers to take responsibility to be that light to a waiting and watching world. Many people today are lost, confused and hurting, longing for someone to provide a light to lead them from their discouragement and despair. This is the privilege we have as followers of the Way.





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QUESTION: Think about the thousands of others who will be starting their day like you with this meditation. Then consider what new tradition you can introduce into the start of your day to help you start it with Christ.

PRAYER: Christ Jesus, Light of the world, pour your light and love into my life today, and make me a channel of your light and love into your world.

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DAY 40 – MARK 6:46

After telling everyone good-bye, he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

I want to continue to help us focus upon the rhythms we develop for sustaining our walk with God today. The best way to do this for me is to include God in on something that is a natural part of my daily life.

Each day I rise early and walk Dylan, our cute Chorkie, a cross between a Chihuahua and a Yorkshire Terrier. I have learned to take a walk with Jesus as well as with the dog. As I come downstairs and prepare to go out, I also prepare my heart and make a simple prayer, 'Jesus, please walk with me today.'

There is something about walking that helps focus the mind. It seems easier to me to chat away with God about all the things that are rushing through my mind and then, with my head noise reduced, to stop and sit with God in silence for a while.

I take a five-minute break half way round my walk to sit and say nothing. I want to wait in God's presence and enjoy his company. The temptation is always to want to immediately fill my brain with the challenges of the day ahead and how I will achieve all I need to, but over time I have managed to quieten such thoughts most of the time. Because I know one of my weaknesses is overwork and I can find my identity in activity, it is a very important discipline for me personally.

You may not have a dog, yet friends of mine use their trip to the gym, a bike ride, some early morning or late afternoon weeding – any task that you can invite Jesus to join you in and learn from his wisdom.





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QUESTION: What simple way can you include God into your daily tasks? It might be a hobby, a chore, while you prepare a meal or vacuum the carpet...

PRAYER: Almighty God, please come and share my life; come close and be with me. Help me to draw aside and be renewed by spending time with you.

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