



HOMECOMING

21 DAYS OF PRAYER & FASTING



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HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

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

I am one of the least tech savvy people you will meet in my generation. I still prefer to read paper books and write in a notebook! Inevitably, when I am faced with a technical problem, I call for my husband, who is always gracious to assist me. Most of the time, his diagnosis is simple: I need to restart my computer! That's because I have a habit of keeping multiple programs open at the same time just in case I need them (which I often don't).

We all need times to restart and refresh and it's often because we have multiple things happening in our lives and our busyness leads to distraction from hearing clearly from God. We allow our family commitments, work, and relationships, to take time away from refreshing our spirits. That's why a commitment for 21 days is important. It helps us to restart and refresh our spiritual priorities.

Here's how you should approach the next 21 days:





MY FASTING COMMITMENT

I'M CHOOSING TO FAST:

THREE THINGS I AM FASTING FOR:



1

CULTIVATING INTIMACY WITH GOD

Luke 5:16

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed

God desires relationship with us. Have you ever just sat back and thought about how profound that truth is? The God of the universe desires communion with us enough to send Jesus to die to pay for the sins that separated us from Him.

But there are many levels of relationship. A neighbour you see once a week on bin day who you can hardly remember their name, a co-worker you only talk to at work, a brother, a best friend, a spouse. They are all relational interactions, but largely what separates them is the level of intimacy shared with each person. The neighbour may not know what makes you laugh or moves you to tears. But your best friend, with a relationship developed over time, through regular conversation and by sharing parts of your life with each other, may know exactly those details of your life.

God does not want the type of relationship that is acknowledged once a week when you happen to take your bins out at the same time. He desires a depth of intimacy that is developed over time, through regular conversation and sharing all your life with him.

This very form of intimacy was demonstrated and practiced by Jesus himself. Often, we see Jesus withdraw to a solitary place just to be with this father. In Mark 1:35 and Luke 5:16, he does so to pray; in Luke 6:12 he even prays all night before he makes the big decision of who his apostles will be. This intentional pursuit of intimacy allowed Jesus to be completely in agreement with the Father's will, to the point where he only did what he saw His Father do, as we read in John 5:19.

From a place of intimacy, we get a glimpse of God's heart. That glimpse of God's heart shapes our convictions; our desires become His desires. Those convictions then show us what we should do. The purpose for our lives comes from the depth of intimacy we share with our heavenly Father.

Intimacy does not develop by accident; it requires intentional effort through the ups and downs of life. A continual pursuit of an ever-deeper intimacy with God.

CHALLENGE: *Write it Down*

At the beginning of this 21 days of Prayer and Fasting, take the time to intentionally write down practical ways you can foster a pure childlike intimacy with our heavenly Father. Then take it one step further, open your calendars and schedule these moments in over the next 21 days.



2

SAYING YES TO GOD'S WILL

Matthew 16:25

If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it

Perhaps the two greatest lies of the enemy are that our life and our time are ours to possess. From that we are lured into a false sense of security that we are somehow in control of our lives. But this sense of control can quickly be unravelled. All it takes is a crisis or tragedy in our world and suddenly, no ground feels solid.

That is a picture of following our own will for our lives. The results drastically change when we realise that in Christ, my life and my time are no longer mine to possess but God's. It was God who gave me life through Jesus. Matthew 16:25 puts it this way, 'If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.'

Jesus' life was a perfect model for us. His time was not his own. Repeatedly we see Jesus getting interrupted on his way to something. The lady with the issue of blood (Luke 8), or the man being lowered through the roof after his friends break a hole in the roof in the middle of a sermon!(Mark 2:) But these were not interruptions for Jesus. Rather, they were another opportunity to show the love of the Father to broken and hurting people. His life was not his own.

In the garden in Mark 14 we see Jesus pleading with God to take this cup from him. Yet he closes with the statement, 'Not my will but your will be done' (Mark 14:36).

Where is it we can find the will of God? In intimacy with our Father. In that place we get a glimpse of His heart, which burns with love for people. When you see that you cannot help but be swept into His will that isn't hindered by schedule, convenience, or fear but one that is so in love with people that you have to tell them about the hope and joy you have found in him!

The only thing in our control is whether we choose to say yes to the will of God or try to work things out in our own strength.

3

HOW TO HEAR FROM GOD

John 10:27

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

Hearing from God can sometimes feel like a convoluted and difficult task, one laced with doubt or muddled by fear. Having turned upon this page you may feel disqualified to hear from Him because of your past or believe that it is only for the pastors to hear the voice of the Lord. Friend, He wants to speak to you. He wants to gently whisper in your ear and speak life into your being. The best part? Being the gracious and knowing God He is, He knew we would struggle with the concept and so He responded by giving us His word - The Word.

Through the Bible, we learn the characteristics and tone of His voice - that He is trustworthy (2 Samuel 7:28), kind (Ephesians 2:7), abounding in love (Psalm 145:8), holy (Isaiah 6:3), pure (James 3:17) and full of grace (2 Timothy 1:9). We learn the stories of His faithfulness - how He extends his mercy to the lost and broken - and the future He has prophesied over us.

Separating His voice from our own can sometimes feel hazy, but we differentiate the two by immersing ourselves in Him through His Word. If someone were to send you a message impersonating your partner, close friend, mother or sibling, you would know because you would hear the inaccuracy of the tone; you would perceive it is not really your loved one sending the message, because you know their voice. In the same way, we learn the voice of the Shepherd through His word and know to follow Him in the direction He calls because we have spent time with Him (John 10:27).

When we familiarize ourselves with the cadence of his voice, we recognize when it's an imposter, the voice of the enemy, or simply our own human and fallible voice. We know when it is fear talking, ambition speaking, or our own lack of trust, because we can check it against what we know are His words in the bible.

Not only does God reveal Himself to us through his living and breathing word but the helper, the Holy Spirit, illuminates what God is speaking over us as we read, and He reiterates the Father's heart (John 14:26). Words begin to take greater resonance within us when we begin by asking Him to give weight to whatever it is he wants to give weight to. Not only that, but when we have the word of the Lord written into our hearts and we find ourselves in an unfamiliar situation and are praying for God's voice of clarity, His Holy Spirit brings forth the words that Jesus has spoken over us at an earlier date (John 14:26). His Holy Spirit penetrates our hearts and reveals to us exactly what we need in that moment.

If you are wanting to hear His voice more clearly, open up the Bible and become acquainted with who He is. Begin with prayer: that His Holy Spirit would both reveal, uncover, challenge and renew, as you delve into His word. Take the time to listen and ponder His words in your heart. Allow your ears to hear.





4

DON'T LOSE THE AWE OF YOUR SALVATION

Philippians 2:12

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,

Have you ever sat down outside on a still afternoon in the breeze for a just long enough to really think about what really matters? You shut-out distractions, dismount from the whirlwind of business and find yourself thinking on what really matters and what we as Christ followers exist for in the first place...

In Philippians 2:12 Paul presents an interesting directive when he says to "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling"... Have you sat and thought about what that might mean? Even more so, when was the last time you sat, considered and recalled all that Christ has saved you from, and into.

For us as Christ-followers to truly 'work out' our salvation we need to remember that we are where we are because of God's grace and not our own merit. Our salvation is not earned by our actions but only by the actions of Jesus and when he lived a sinless life, died on a cross and rose again, he gained victory over death, sin and shame. One time for all time.

It was once beautifully articulated in the following short statement: "God Loved. God Gave. We Believe. We Receive"; and through this lens we can truly pontificate on the beautiful gift of salvation that we have been offered through Christ.

To 'work out' our salvation starts with remembering that we owe it to Jesus. Second, Paul goes on to complete the directive by saying to "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling," which doesn't mean we should be afraid as we work out our salvation but rather, we should hold to a sense of reverence for the sacredness of what God has done through his son Jesus in our lives.

When you sit to think about your salvation journey may you be encouraged to think on the holiness and sacredness of what God has done for you! There is nothing more precious than that gift God gives us in Jesus.



5

CULTIVATE A SPIRITUAL APPETITE

Psalm 42:1-2

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?

Psalm 143:5-6

I remember the days of long ago;
I meditate on all your works
and consider what your hands have done.
I spread out my hands to you;
I thirst for you like a parched land

The writers of Psalms capture so well the hunger for the presence of God. There is an evident desperation in these words for a touch from heaven.

I am sure you can remember what it was like when you first gave your life to Jesus. You knew that the old had gone and the new had come. Everything was new, every revelation from God so sweet. As time goes on and our faith in Jesus and understanding of the word develops, it is all too easy to fall into a rhythmic routine of religious habits. But over time this, just like a piece of chewing gum, begins to lose its sweetness and become tougher and less flexible.

John writes down his well-known warning in Revelation 2:4-5, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."

The church in Ephesus were doing so much, had grown so strong, yet had fallen so far. We need to stoke the fires of our first love. We need to hunger and thirst for more of God!

There is always more in God.

Consider the strange picture we read in Revelations 4:6-8. This passage describes creatures with six wings covered in eyes, inside and out. Surrounding the throne of God, day in and day out they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty - the one who always was, who is and who is to come'. As strange as this may be, it is a picture of the infinite nature of God. With so many viewpoints, if they can sit around God for eternity and see something of wonder again and again than we can be sure that there is always more to see and wonder in and marvel about God.

God is infinite; there is always more in God. How hungry are you for more of Him today? Be encouraged to reflect again on your first love. Stoke the fire of your faith again to see more of God.

CHALLENGE: REFLECT

Quote: "To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love." - A.W. Tozer

CHALLENGE: *Put it Into Practice*
Scripture Memorisation Verse:

Write down the verse you want to memorise here. Keep coming back to this page during the week so you can commit it to memory

7

WE ARE PEOPLE OF FAITH

Read Hebrews 12:1-2

V. 2... "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Recently in a worship service at church, we began to sing the classic song, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace." When Ps Jesse and the team hit those notes and led us in those words, it was like a turbo-charge to the atmosphere!

Our faith is something very precious and very profound. To expand on the meaning of this passage in Hebrews today, we can see that Jesus designed, created, perfected, completed and gives us our faith. He sustains us, and his presence in our lives brings great comfort and strength when we are faced with something that tests our faith. In other words, faith is a tremendous gift to us, and to steward it well is to exercise and build our faith.

It's interesting that the song we sang mentions, "the things of earth..." I wonder what these 'things' were that the songwriter had in mind? Maybe it was a persistent illness, or a difficult personal conflict? Maybe there was some financial pressure, or some fast-approaching study deadlines? We couldn't possibly know what Helen Lemmel thought of in 1922 when she wrote this hymn, but these examples could certainly apply to any of us today.

Today, the answer you're looking for is Jesus. No matter what you're facing, or the challenge that is before you, the answer is Jesus. Look to him. Turn your eyes - your attention, your focus - upon Jesus. Go to him in prayer, in worship, in gratitude that for the joy before him he endured the cross and was victorious.







8

FAITH IN OUR TRIALS

Hebrews 12:2-3

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. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

If I am a Christian, why do I suffer? This question is quite misleading, because it implies that once you have Christ in you, then all the sufferings of the world will fade away. However, that is not the case. In John 16:33, Jesus states:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"

Trials, hardships, and sufferings remain in this broken world. The Christian journey does not exclude us from these experiences.

First, our trials, hardships and sufferings are opportunities to bring glory to God. Our attitude and reaction during suffering is a strong testimony to others of God's faithfulness and peace. Hebrews 12:2 reminds us that Jesus, "for the joy set before him...endured the cross, scorning its shame..." Joy and strength are found in God, not because of our circumstances, but despite them. This is what it means to walk by faith, even when we face hardship, disappointment, or pain. God's power and love is so boundless that even in hardship we can find joy.

Second, to be like Jesus includes taking up our cross and following Him (Matthew 16:24, 1 Peter 2:21-22). Our faith is not conditional on whether God answers all our prayers. Our faith in God is a decision to trust Him and follow Him, no matter what life may bring. As Job declared: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15)

Third, our remembrance of the cross is not just an acknowledgement of its occurrence. It is far deeper than that. It is our embracing of Jesus' suffering and finding comfort in God in all circumstances (2 Corinthians 1:3-7), knowing that He is always with us to strengthen us and that He paid the ultimate price for us.

Finally, we are reminded in Hebrews 12:2-3 to "fix our eyes on Jesus...so that we do not grow weary and lose heart". When we fix our eyes on Jesus, we remember that heaven is our home and that He has conquered sin and death. Our eternal hope gives us the strength and faith for this life.

"Resurrection means that the worst thing is not the last thing" - Frederick Beuchner



CHALLENGE: *Write It Down*

What is one step of faith that God is challenging you to take?

10

HEAVEN IS MY HOME

Ecclesiastes 3:11

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet, no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Where is home?

Where are you from?

I have always found these questions difficult to answer. After all, I was born in the Blue Mountains near Sydney; have an Italian mother and an Australian father. I then moved to South America and lived there for fourteen years. I have lived in 24 different houses and speak two languages. So where am I from?

Many of you can perhaps relate to my story. Maybe your home was originally in one country, but now you have made a new home in a different nation. Or maybe, like me, you moved around a lot as a child and find the question "where are you from?" difficult to answer.

In Hebrews chapter 11, there is a list of Old Testament 'heroes of the faith.' Verses 13-16 tells us something about the way these men and women of faith viewed their world. They understood they were "foreigners and strangers" (v.13) and by faith, looked for a home - a heavenly home (v.16).

In other words, one of the hallmarks of their faith was an understanding that their true place was not here on earth, but as citizens of heaven. Billy Graham once said:

"As a follower of Christ, I know that my home is in heaven, I'm just passing through this world."

The people of faith in Hebrews understood they were travelers in this world. In other words, they acknowledged that the things of this earth are temporary, and the things of heaven are eternal.

As citizens of heaven, there are rights, privileges, and responsibilities that come with being a part of the kingdom of God. If heaven is our home, then we are ambassadors here on earth, to represent our true home and our true king. We have rights as citizens of heaven. But we also have responsibilities, such as caring for the vulnerable and marginalized. And ultimately, to represent our king to a lost world.

CHALLENGE: *Reflect and Respond*

Like the people of faith in Hebrews, when we understand that heaven is our true home, how does that change us? How does it change our focus, our plans and our attitude towards life?

As citizens of heaven, what are some of our rights and privileges?

What are some of our responsibilities as citizens of heaven?

I am an alien.
 I am not of this world,
 nor do I call it "home".
 My desires are not for earthly things that will fade, corrode, or burn.
 I set my heart and mind on things above.
 My faith and home are in God alone and I eagerly await His return for me.
 I'm a citizen of heaven. - Author: Anonymous

11

ONE BODY, MANY PARTS

1 Corinthians 12:27 (NLT)

All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.

Picture Jesus, walking into a beautiful, large, spacious home that could fit all of us in it (think 'mansion,' and then bigger). As He enters, He's peering around every corner, into every room, checking everyone is there. Not a single son or daughter absent.

Jesus gave His life for the body of Christ. Every member carries deep value to the Father. It's His house after all; His family that He personally chose and loves.

When you belong to the body of Christ, you belong to the family of God. We have become members of the household of God, Jesus Himself is the cornerstone. He holds the whole structure together and grows us, His people, into a holy temple (Ephesians 2:19-21).

A DWELLING PLACE

God is transforming us into the Holy of Holies, His dwelling place (Ephesians 2:2 TPT). He handpicked us, flawed and human, to be His very own body, "...in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence" (Ephesians 1:23 MSG). What a beautiful privilege, to be His dwelling place so that He would fill everything with His presence, not just stay at home in you and never go out the front door! He longs to speak and act through His body - us!

THE BUILDING PROCESS

Many people belong to the household of God. He gave each of us grace according to the gifts Christ specifically gave us, not one member forgotten or left out. (Ephesians 4:7 ESV). We will keep building up the body of Christ if we use our gifts, "until we all experience the fullness of what it means to know the Son of God" (Ephesians 4:13 TPT). That is worth investing our entire lives into!

"EACH OF YOU IS A PART OF IT"

Just like the human body has many parts, each with a unique function, so it is in the body of Christ (Romans 12:4 TPT). When each part is working properly, the body grows, building itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16 ESV). Since this is Christ's body of chosen people, "God has put each part just where he wants it" (1 Corinthians 12:18 NLT).

It is a pure privilege to be His chosen people. Let this be a compelling invitation to "go ahead and be what we were made to be" (Romans 12:6). Let's passionately and actively be the body of Christ, whatever part we play.

"Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around." (Romans 12:4 MSG)

CHALLENGE: *Reflect*

What gifts have you been given that are unique? How can you use your gifts for the benefit of others?

What part will play to you contribute to the body of Christ?

12

CO-WORKERS WITH CHRIST

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-11

V. 5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe...as the Lord has assigned to each his task...

V. 9 For we are co-workers in God's service...

It's interesting that our focus topic today - we are co-workers with Christ - originated in a letter during a divisive time in the Corinthian church. I say interesting, because there is something to be said for how powerful it is when we realise we each have a God-given purpose in His Kingdom.

God brings us together, each gift and unique talent working in harmony with the next person, and collectively it contributes to the great work that God is accomplishing across the earth. It sounds big and grandiose, so perhaps it helps to step back a little and consider this from a birds-eye view, rather than the view of your immediate surroundings.

Think of the fruitful missions work of evangelism, church planting, and community initiatives, that we are part of when we exercise the gift of faith and generosity. Or consider the power of faithful prayer and intercession over many years, that results in breakthrough and healing and salvation. These are just two brief examples. I believe that as you read this today, the same that was said of Paul & Apollos could be said of you, "the Lord has assigned to each his task - for we are co-workers in God's service."

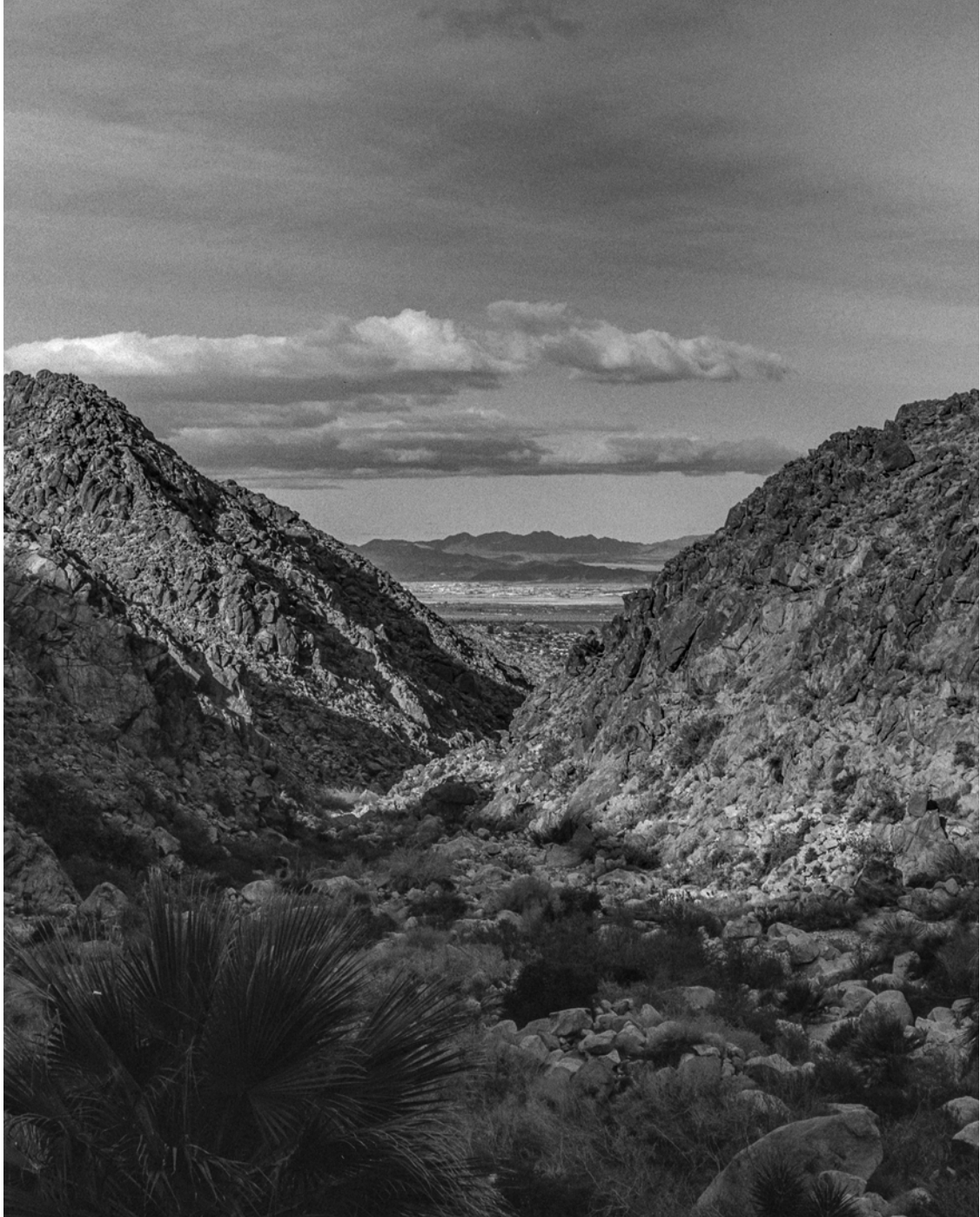
As we work together with Christ to see His purpose fulfilled, it breaks down barriers and brings people together. It's actually very rewarding, and a great amount of fun!

As a final thought today, I would simply encourage you in your God-given purpose, with the words found in Colossians 3:17, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

CHALLENGE: Put It Into Practice

If you'd like to know more about discovering and exploring your own God-given purpose, please reach out as our team are happy to talk with you. We'd also encourage you to ask about our "Join the Team" initiative, which is a great way to begin serving in the life of our church.





13

LIVE GENEROUSLY

Ephesians 5:2 (MSG)

Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.

My mum is the most generous person I know. It's like she lives with an understanding that nothing that she owns is really hers to keep. It's all a gift from the hands of God. This includes her possessions and her time, but it's mostly evident in how she loves.

Most of the time, we deem someone to be generous in the way that they freely give money or any physical things of value away. However, knowing Jesus unlocks a fresh revelation of what it means to live generously!

OUR PROPER RESPONSE

In view of the mercy of God, the depth of His kindness, His rich forgiveness and extravagant love, how could we rightly respond? What could we ever offer in return?

First, can we really embrace being generous in our lives without talking about surrender? Surrendering our lives to God as sacred, living sacrifices is what it really looks like to be generous in the kingdom - to give and surrender yourself, your life, completely.

CHRIST GAVE HIMSELF UP

When we choose to spend our lives loving God, as His children we are called to imitate to Father; "watch what God does, and then you do it" (Ephesians 5:1). There was nothing cautious in the way that Christ lived and loved on the earth. Everything was extravagant.

The cross is the great summation of His unre-served, irrational, unhindered, extravagant love. The most beautiful example of living a surrendered life - a generous life - is to give everything of ourselves as we love God and His people, never to get something in return.

What Does a 'Living Sacrifice' Look Like?

"God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life-your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walk-ing-around life-and place it before God as an offering." (Romans 12:1-2 MSG)

When we live generously, we need the Holy Spirit to help us take every gift He's given us and teach us to place it before God as an offering. Our everyday life - our decisions, time, eating, sleeping, going-to-work, plans, relationships, rest. God brings all of these precious gifts to us, and we are commanded and compelled to give it all up. Everything becomes a holy offering to Him as we begin to place in His hands all that came from and belongs in the hands of God anyway.

How could we not give everything up for Him? When we receive deeper revelation of the forgive-ness and beauty of Jesus, and our desperate need for Him, surrender will become the beautiful, fragrant fruit of our lives. And the more we will love Him extravagantly, unhindered, withholding nothing.

14

REMEMBER THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Proverbs 11:24-25 (MSG)

The world of the generous gets larger and larger;
 The world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller.
 The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed;
 Those who help others are helped.

I love this scripture because it reminds me to look back on how God has blessed generosity on my life. As with many promises in the Bible, they need to be taken by faith that they will eventually come to pass. Sometimes though, we can miss it when those promises are fulfilled in our lives.

For example, in 2 Corinthians, Paul tells the church in Corinth that if they sow abundantly, they'll reap abundantly. This requires me to exercise faith that my sowing will eventually bring back an abundant harvest. But I find that my human nature often attributes the blessing I eventually reap, not to God, but to something else.

I got a pay rise - it's because I work hard. I got a great deal on a new TV - it's because I know how to bargain. My retirement planning is ahead of schedule - just lucky the market is performing well.

Because of the time lapse between sowing and reaping, it's easy to forget we sowed to see this supernatural harvest and attribute the abundant reaping to our own skills or luck. That makes it harder to see in hindsight. But this promise in Proverbs 11, though still future oriented, is easier to see in retrospect.

I look back and see that as I was generous in areas of my life, my world got bigger in those areas. I can see the expansion.

We've grown in the depth, quality, and number of friendships as we've freely given friendship to others. Our lives are enriched and our influence increased as we've invested love and care into others' lives. I've seen promotion and greater responsibility as I've been more generous with my time and diligence toward my workplaces. As I look back, I see God expanded our world because we chose not to withhold in those areas of our life.

It's the same in our church - in both our generosity toward the community or toward our building projects. God has enlarged our influence in our community and with community leaders. I can see the seeds of our impact increasing as we begin to plant these buildings within communities that need to hear of God's love - the beginnings of greater influence starting to flow out of our generosity.

Look back on your life and observe the areas of expansion. Can you see the pattern of generosity in those areas? What area of your life would you like to see expansion in? How can you be generous in that area toward others?



15

LIVING A LIFE OF SURRENDER

Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

The word 'surrender' isn't one that you often hear pop up in conversation unless you work in hostage negotiation or military settings (also known as parenthood some days). For many, the concept conjures up images of conflict, pain, injury, and white flags waved in defeat.

Thankfully, we are shown a different definition which is beautifully expressed in Romans 12. Here we see three key themes laid out with a powerful call to a lifestyle of surrender: living as a holy sacrifice to God; true servanthood; and love in action. These verses are meant to encourage yet also challenge us to know God and to trust in Him, His ways and even His timing - to live lives that are in complete and utter surrender to Him. The purpose? To become more and more like Him.

Talk about a tall order! Indeed, Paul depicts godly surrender as a clear-cut and full-body experience: firstly, of your body; secondly, of your mind, and thirdly, of your will. He makes it sound so simple and yet it can often be anything but.

There's good news ahead though as we re-read Paul's opening words: "God has shown you His mercy" (12:1). Why is this awesome news? Because His mercy stops us from getting what we really deserve. Amen for that! God is full of mercy towards us. Indeed, His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23). They are constant, consistent, unre-served, and oh so undeserved.

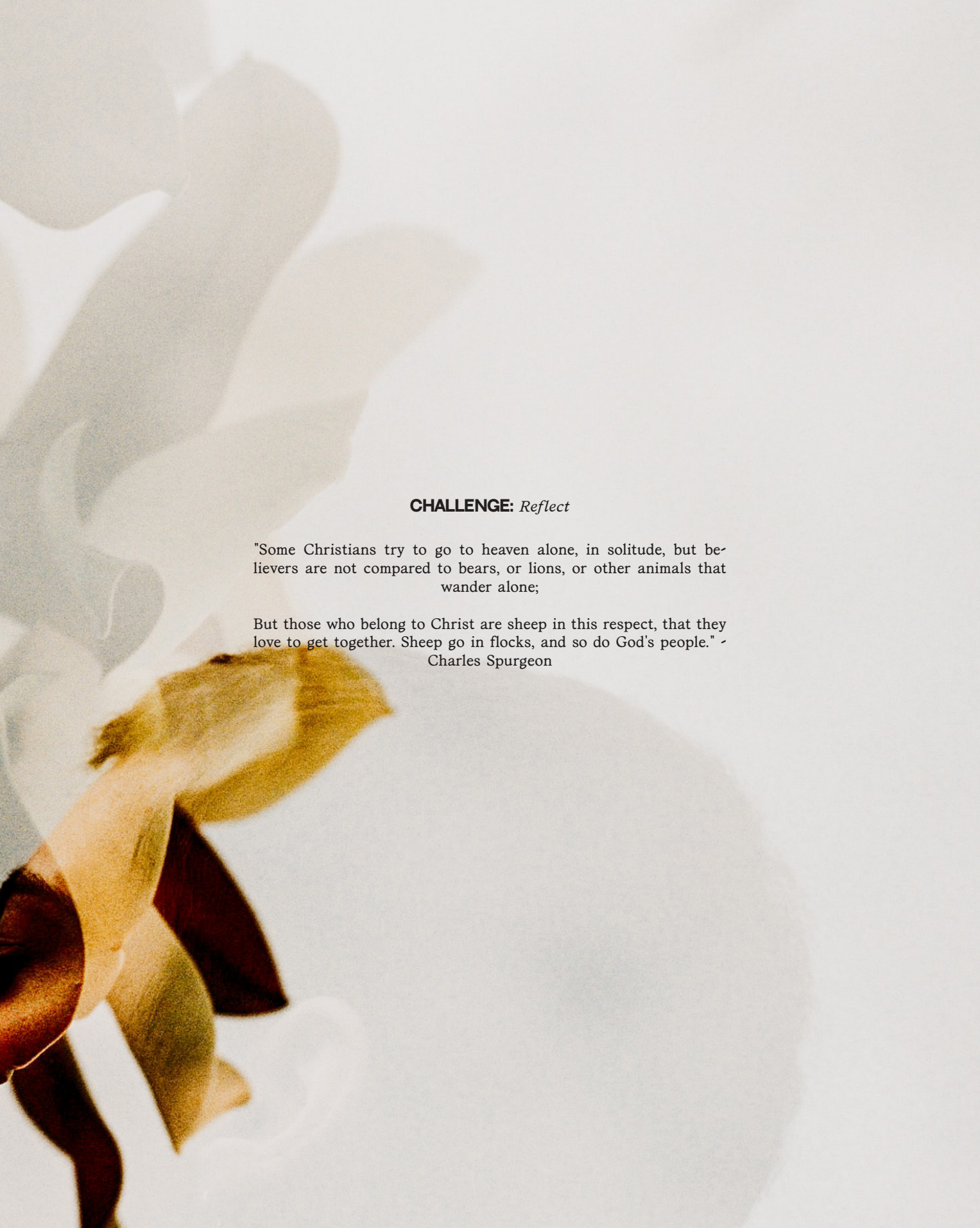
Once we really grasp this, the question of how to live a life fully surrendered to Him changes from "how can we" to "how can we not" live a life of complete surrender?!

Horatio Spafford is a powerful example of one who truly lived a life of surrender.

He was a family man, successful lawyer, and wealthy investor. However, within a few short years that all changed. First, his young son died of scarlet fever. Next, most of his physical assets were lost in the Chicago fires of 1871. Finally, all four of his daughters drowned in a tragic accident while crossing the Atlantic Ocean on holidays with their mother.

As Horatio travelled to be with his wife following the incident, he was alerted by the captain of his ship that they were now sailing near the location where his daughters were lost. One would think he would be overtaken by grief, heartache, loss, anger, or confusion. But no, as Horatio reflected on his beloved children, his heart and mind were filled with the words of comfort and hope embodied in the now-famous hymn "It Is Well With My Soul".

We will face challenges, endure some tragedies, and we may not always be able to declare that 'all is well' in each area of our lives. But, as we pursue a life completely surrendered to God, His will and His perfect timing for our every need, we can, with great confidence, echo Horatio's declaration that in spite of our circumstances, it is well with our soul.



CHALLENGE: *Reflect*

"Some Christians try to go to heaven alone, in solitude, but believers are not compared to bears, or lions, or other animals that wander alone;

But those who belong to Christ are sheep in this respect, that they love to get together. Sheep go in flocks, and so do God's people." - Charles Spurgeon

16

SHEEP GO IN FLOCKS

Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Sheep go in flocks, and so do God's people. This powerful statement summarises something at the very core of the Christian life - community is who we are. As true as it is to say that a daughter was born of her mother, so too is a Christian born of the Church. We are born again into the family of God. We get a glimpse at what that looked like among the early church in Acts 2:42.

As a follower of Jesus these are not things that should fit into our busy schedules. They are things that we should give our busy schedules away for! Equally important is the revelation that the believers devoted themselves to these four areas not in isolation, but in community. A further reading of Acts 2:43-47 makes this abundantly clear. Christians were born to be together!

THE APOSTLES' TEACHING

This is a core part of the Christian life and it is something that belongs in community. When was the last time you had a conversation with a good friend about the what God is revealing to you, or the word you heard preached last week? It is these moments that can help spur each other on.

FELLOWSHIP

This word denotes a sense of unity. In Luke 19 we read about Zacchaeus and how one moment of fellowship with Jesus changed his life forever. With Jesus living within us, fellowship with others can have the same effect. Not only does fellowship change us, but it maintains us and grows us. As we see in Proverbs 27:17: 'As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.'

BREAKING OF BREAD

The early church shared life together. Nothing is as bonding as sharing a meal. Not only does it give us more opportunity for fellowship, but it gives us a chance to be generous and bless our brothers and sisters. It is that joyful generosity that is counter-cultural in our day.

PRAYER

Ultimately, they were immersed in prayer, which enabled them to not only consider others but help them focus on achieving the great commission.

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. - Romans 12:9-12

Christians were designed for community. Community unlocks health and growth in our lives as individuals, in turn unlocking the same in others.





17

WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER

Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-this is your true and proper worship.

Moses is one of the greatest leaders of faith, who saw the very glory of God and received what we refer to today as the Ten Commandments. Yet one day, his father-in-law visits Moses and asks an insightful question:

"Why are you trying to do all this alone?"(Exodus 18:14 NLT)

We remember Moses for his leadership, his faith, and his courage facing Pharaoh as he led the people of Israel out of Egypt. But in Exodus chapter 18, Moses is found doing something that many of us do: trying to accomplish something all alone, when we don't have to. We were not created to be alone. It is God's will that we flourish in community. I love that it is Jethro, Moses' own father-in-law who suggests to Moses that he should appoint others to help with the mammoth task of leading an entire nation. Jethro became the family Moses needed when he fled his home and all he knew earlier in his life. And now through Jethro, Moses discovers again that God provides community for us - we just need to recognise it and respond to it.

Moses needed others who could look at situations with a different point of view. One of the great - but also challenging - aspects of community is that we don't all see the same problem the same way. This can lead to robust discussions at times! But it can also help us look at a problem in a different way. Community can open new ways of looking at the world.

Community also requires us to be vulnerable. It challenges us to admit that we don't have all the answers and that sometimes we need help. This can be a real challenge for some of us, especially in a culture that seems to demand perfection: perfect jobs, perfect marriages, perfect kids and even perfect bodies. To fully enjoy community, we need to learn to be vulnerable and rely on others. To trust that the people God has placed in our lives will support us, love us and encourage us. It isn't always perfect, but it is God's will for us. Verse 24 tells us that Moses listened to Jethro and the result was that his burdens were shared with others.

If you are feeling discouraged, alone or overwhelmed today, ask God to show you who you can turn to for encouragement and support. Give someone a call, organise a visit or a coffee. Community is worth building - we don't have to do it all alone.

18

EXPANDING OUR TABLE

Read: Acts 10:1-35

God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from - if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open" (Acts 10:35-36 MSG)

Our Christmas tradition involves going to church in the morning on Christmas Day and then going to my sister's house for lunch. Lunch usually stretches into dinner as we feast! A few years ago, my sister bought a dining table that expands to accommodate more people. When it is fully expanded, it can accommodate quite a lot of people! I remember when I first saw the table, it seemed so large. But as the years have gone by, our family has grown and more people sit at the table, it is in fact, the perfect size!

One of our challenges as a community of believers is to remember that we need to have an ever-expanding table. I'm not talking about us all going out and buying my sister's table - rather we need to remember our call to go out in the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19)

In Acts chapter 10, Peter encounters this challenge when God shows him that the good news is not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles. This revelation was quite a shock for the early church. Suddenly they found they needed to make room to allow others into their community. And they were not from the same race or culture as the rest of them. God's plan for our world involves inviting more people to the table, so that they too can "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8)

How do we make room for others? Peter responded to the vision by going into Cornelius' house - something that Jews did not do at the time. We too can make room for others by our hospitality and generosity. We can meet someone for a coffee or assist someone we know is in need, in a practical way. We should especially pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us in reaching out to others who do not know Him.

We can expand our table by being willing to embrace those who are different. The world is filled with people whom God loves and is calling to Him. Many of them do not look like us, dress like us or act like us. But it is God's desire to draw all people to Himself (John 12:32). Let us take up the challenge of Peter and ask the Holy Spirit to lead us as we are willing to expand our table.

19

THE BREATH OF GOD

1 Corinthians 3:16

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?

I still remember watching the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000, especially the opening ceremony. For Australians, this was a big moment. In the months leading up to it, the Olympics was a big focus of conversation. But the real focus on the night of the opening ceremony, was who would bring the Olympic torch into the stadium to light the flame, signalling the beginning of the games. I remember watching Cathy Freeman run into the stadium that night, carrying the torch and the moment the great Olympic flame was lit. It was a spectacular moment!

Who carries the Olympic torch, especially in those final moments, is a big decision for the host country. The job doesn't go to just anybody. They need to be deserving of the honour. I think we would all agree that Cathy Freeman was the right choice in 2000.

If we consider it such a great honour and privilege to carry the Olympic torch, how much more should we value the honour of carrying the spirit of God?

1 Corinthians 3:16 tells us that we "are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in [our] midst" (NIV). We cannot overstate the significance of this. Paul was saying to the church: we don't need to go to a temple or a tabernacle to find the spirit of God. Rather, His very breath and presence resides in us - constantly, completely and powerfully.

Paul was speaking to people who knew what it was like to go to a temple or shrine and hope to find God. And he was reminding them that now they are Christians, they no longer needed to search in a temple - we are that temple.

If that thought seems provocative, it's because it is. If we have such stringent requirements for who holds the Olympic torch at the opening ceremony, shouldn't there be some kind of qualification for us to hold the Spirit of God in us? Yet that is the gift of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was sent to us as God's gift to His people to help, encourage, instruct, and guide. Joel 2:28-29 tells us that it was always part of God's plan to pour out His Spirit on all people - not just those that the world considers worthy of the honour. And from the beginning of time, we were created to carry the breath of God (Genesis 2:7)

Knowing that we have the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives, let's be encouraged not to disregard what a great privilege it is. Let's use this gift wisely and freely. We carry the spirit of God in us - let us draw close to Him, seek His counsel daily, ask Him to guide us and direct us. Don't let the gift of the Holy Spirit lie dormant in your spiritual life. Imagine what we would think if Cathy Freeman had turned down the opportunity to carry the Olympic torch and light the flame? We too have such a great privilege and gift in the Holy Spirit. He is waiting patiently to speak to us, even now.

Will you draw closer to the Holy Spirit today? Ask him to speak with you. Ask him to direct you. To watch over your spouse and your kids. Your parents and friends. His Spirit dwells in you. He is waiting.



20

COME HOLY SPIRIT – BUT ARE WE READY?

Read: Acts 4:23-31

"Come Holy Spirit."

It is one of the oldest Christian prayers. It is a prayer that our brothers and sisters have prayed for centuries.

I wonder though if we understand the weight of what we are asking? I'm not sure, (to borrow from the writer Annie Dillard), whether we have "the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke?" We are asking for the God of the universe to come and reveal himself to us in a real and tangible way.

That should give us pause for thought.

What does it mean for the Holy Spirit to "show up"?

I grew up in an environment where the work of the Spirit predominantly centred on encountering God personally - encountering the Spirit on a Sunday at the altar would bring peace, joy, and the love of God into my life. Encountering the Spirit in that personal way is, in large measure, what kept me walking with the Lord throughout the tumultuous teenage years.

Those encounters are crucial; they are just not the whole story. The overwhelming evidence of the scriptures is that when the Spirit does come, it is not about people feeling better, but about God's glory. Or to put it in more pointed terms for today: when the Spirit comes, it is to fulfill God's purposes, not my own.

So, one unmistakable answer to the question of what it means for the Spirit to show up is that God's people think about themselves less, think about others more, and serve them in Jesus' name empowered by a strength outside their own. Being filled with the Spirit will inevitably lead to an entire life oriented towards His mission. And whilst that includes serving one another in Church, it is broader than that; a Sunday to Saturday life lived for the sake of the world.

We see this Spirit showing up and reorienting His people towards the world in several ways. Firstly, when we see the Spirit filling someone in the book of Acts, there is often a description of God's people courageously proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom - that is, Jesus is king, and his rule is now available to all. Acts 4:23-31 is particularly insightful here. Amid persecution and challenge, the believers prayed, not for their own protection or deliverance from the authorities, but that they would be a faithful witness for Christ. The Spirit then "shows up", fills them all, and they speak "God's message with boldness."

Secondly, we see a new type of communal life generated by the Spirit. After the Spirit first fell, we see a commitment to others and a display of generosity that is staggering. The selling of possessions to supply the needs of others and feeding each other was so common that there were no needy people among them (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37). This communal life together was a powerful witness to the truth of the gospel, and many came to know the Lord as a result.

There are many other things that can be said. These are but two examples that illustrate that when the Spirit comes, there is a movement outwards, a reorientation away from ourselves and towards the world.

By all means, let us rejoice that the Spirit draws us to Christ, that we can sense his presence and his love, but that love was never meant to stay with us. Our encounter with the Spirit may be personal, but it was never to be private.

21

SPIRITUAL DIALYSIS

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us

I have dialysis treatment three times a week. I go to hospital to have this treatment since my kidneys failed. The dialysis treatment purifies and gets rid of all the waste in my system. As I sat in the hospital chair watching tubes attached to needles in my arm and watching the blood flow, I thought about the significance of blood.

As followers of Christ, we know that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) As such, we are fallen and broken beings and in need of a savior. Going for my treatment every few days, makes me think about how we need spiritual dialysis. We are all in need of it. We regularly fail. And we regularly need to be cleansed and have the toxins and impurities from our own hearts removed.

The dialysis is only a temporary measure. It is not sufficient for the rest of my life. The dialysis does not care about the patient. All it does is point out what's wrong. And it is a temporary fix. I need to return to the same location and the same process every two days for the rest of my life. It is not the cure.

In the same way, we can return again and again to temporary measures for the spiritual failings in our lives. But it is not enough. We need a cure.

In Christ, we find freedom; because we know that His sacrifice on the cross was absolute and final. All we need is in Christ. We know that Jesus is far more than dialysis. Having Jesus as our saviour is like a kidney transplant for someone like me. Christ's blood purifies us. It cleanses us. And his salvation brings newness into our spirits, where previously there was decay (2 Corinthians 5:17)





"fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer
and perfecter of our faith."

HEBREWS 12:2



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