

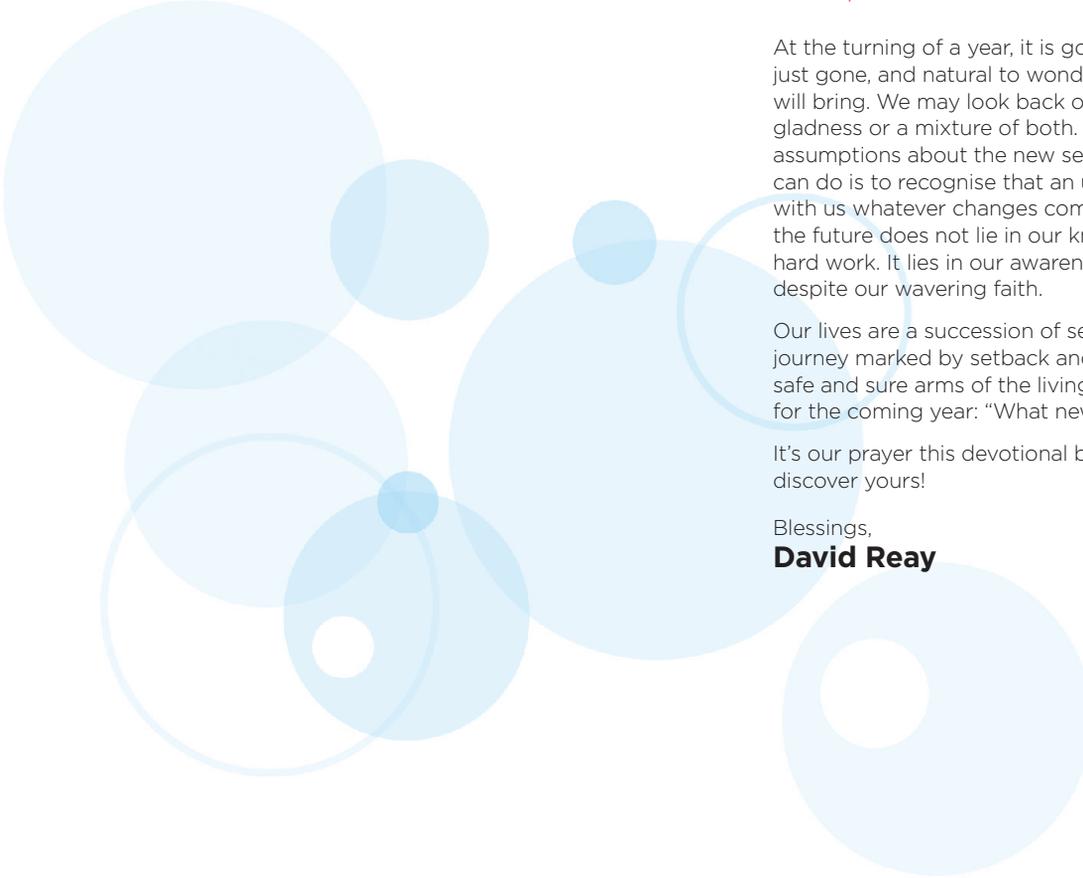


hope
103.2

it's time to
start
the **day**
strong

31 LifeWords
readings to start
each day strong

By David Reay



welcome

to a **new** day!

The Psalmist urges us to sing a new song to the Lord. He is not at all thinking solely of finding new tunes or writing new hymns or getting new musicians involved in our church services. The “new song” he speaks of is a new expression of love and devotion to God. A new experience of the love of God for us. Perhaps a new area of service to God.

At the turning of a year, it is good to reflect on the year just gone, and natural to wonder what the new year will bring. We may look back on a season of sadness or gladness or a mixture of both. And we dare not make assumptions about the new season approaching. All we can do is to recognise that an unchanging God will be with us whatever changes come our way. Our hope for the future does not lie in our knowledge, our skills, our hard work. It lies in our awareness that God is faithful despite our wavering faith.

Our lives are a succession of seasons and songs, a journey marked by setback and progress. So now, in the safe and sure arms of the living God, we ask ourselves for the coming year: “What new song will I sing?”

It's our prayer this devotional booklet helps you discover yours!

Blessings,
David Reay

The gift of today

Read Psalm 118:24

²⁴ This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (ESV)

Very few of us actually bound out of bed each morning shouting out this verse. In our sleep-saturated fog we are more inclined to wonder just what day it is before rejoicing in it. And yet, having this verse at hand on our bedside table might just change how we live that day.

The psalmist is always a realist, never going in for some cheap bit of positive thinking. He is well aware of human trouble. But he is also well aware of God's faithfulness. He isn't suggesting that the day ahead will be a breeze, or that problems will miraculously melt away. He is rather saying that whatever the day holds (and we don't know that in advance) it is a gift from God. It is God's day. Not all that happens in that day will be good, but a good God is walking with us in that day.

It is a day we have never had before and will never have again. It is a day full of opportunities to discover more of the love of God, maybe especially so if it is a day fraught with challenges. Each day is something of a sacred space in which we discern the movements of God and align ourselves to them.

Because of this we can rejoice and be glad. The ground of our glad rejoicing is not in the promise of a trouble-free day but in the promise of a fresh journey towards our daily companion, Jesus. The gift of each day is not the circumstances of the day but the presence of God in that day.

Out of the depths

Read Psalm 130:1-2

¹ From the depths of despair, O LORD, I call for your help. ² Hear my cry, O Lord. Pay attention to my prayer. (NLT)

It is no fun to have the sense of drowning under the weight and the flow of life circumstances. But life is not always fun: sometimes we are in the depths; our life landscape can be disordered chaos. Having faith, being a believer, following Jesus, none of these guarantees us against the possibility of being in the pits.

The message of Christianity, as expressed in the opening of this Psalm, is that when we are in the depths we can call for help. Not that we will never experience that terrible sinking feeling when yet another blow hits us even when we are already down. Rather that, despite our sinking, we need not drown. Help is at hand.

Many of us would like it to be otherwise. Great that God can sustain us in the mess, but how much better it would be if he quarantined us against the mess in the first place. But this is to wish for some alternative fantasy life that has no contact with reality. God comes to us not in our happy-ever-after fantasy world but in the gritty and sometimes distasteful realities of life.

No trouble is too big for him, no problem too complex for him. No depth too deep for him. So our attempts to fatalistically accept our lot in life or our attempts to pull ourselves out of our personal tailspins are futile. Admit we need help. Accept there is basically one source. That is the God who loves us enough to get down and dirty in the pit with us.

Acceptable anger

Read Ephesians 4:26-27

²⁶“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. (NIV)

In this era of road rage, is there a place for church rage? An explosive outburst that lets fly at whatever or whoever frustrates or threatens us? The answer is “probably not”. Hitting out at others for whatever reason is bound to cause some damage no matter how justified we might feel. We don't feel entitled to scream at a song leader who chooses songs we don't like. We don't figure it is proper to yell abuse at a preacher who loves the sound of his own voice. We restrain from throttling study-group members who show off too much of their bible knowledge.

And yet there is a place for anger. When confronted with serious injustice, rightly expressed anger can help remedy the problem. In avoiding wrongful anger we must not drift into apathetic complacency. The issue is what is underlying our anger. So often it is not a deep injustice issue but a personal frustration issue. We don't get what we want; someone gets in our way or on our nerves. So we get angry.

Paul here warns us against chewing over the hurt, dwelling on it. We are to deal with it promptly otherwise it festers and becomes toxic, much to the delight of the evil one. So we don't bury it under the guise of self-restraint or good manners. We find a way to safely express it without wounding others or ourselves. We explore just what it is behind our anger. And so it can become an opportunity for growth rather than an occasion for destruction. We don't clam up, we don't blow up, but we grow up.

The battle for the mind

Read 2 Corinthians 10:4-5

⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (NIV)

So many of our battles are battles of the mind. Each morning, whole armies of thoughts come marching into our minds and demand that our day be shaped by them. No wonder we often feel tired! And each morning our task is to resist them and determine that this day will be shaped not by those competing and bullying thoughts but by the mind and heart of God.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that he was engaged in a battle of the mind. He used supernatural power given by God to refute those who would challenge the faith. The Corinthians themselves were those challengers. Their thinking didn't always reflect God's thinking. Just because we have believed in Jesus doesn't mean we are immune from wrong patterns of thinking.

Paul speaks of demolishing strongholds. These are any oppressive thoughts that take us away from the truth of Jesus. Strongholds include fear which tells us we are at the mercy of circumstances. Or rejection which tells us we are not loved and accepted by our maker. Or self-gratification which tells us the pleasures of sin are greater than the pleasures of God.

Each day we will be bombarded with such thought patterns. Each day we will be tempted to live life according to these patterns. Each day we must tell them to get lost, we have to perceive Jesus as tying them up and rendering them powerless. Each day we tell ourselves that how we think determines how we live. And if we are to live for Jesus we are to let his heart and mind invade and infect us. We think his thoughts in order to live his sort of life.

Flinging in faith

Read 1 Peter 5:6-7

6 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, 7 casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. (NKJV)

Anyone who has ever had an irritating itch or a painful toothache knows how easy it is to keep scratching the itch or flicking your tongue around the sore tooth. We pick at what hurts us, and in doing so become preoccupied with the hurt. When it comes to our anxieties we similarly chew over them, internally or externally debate them. And so we feed our anxieties.

Peter urges another approach. We are to fling our cares on the one who cares for us. The expression he uses is a strong one. This is no polite referral of our troubles to God. This is a decisive hurling of them onto the broad shoulders of the God who alone bears the weight of the world. The image is one of someone carrying a load too heavy for them. They sway and stagger under the load till at last they are able to place it where it belongs. Then and only then they can relax.

Sometimes things come against us that are too big for us. We can't carry the load. Rather than heroically try to do so we instead fling them on God. In doing so, we invite him to empower us to do what needs to be done and leave the rest to him. Casting our cares on God doesn't render us passive. It simply frees us to bear a legitimate burden without carrying the whole load. We give God our anxiety and he in turn gives us wisdom and power to deal with the situation. Casting our cares on him doesn't mean abdicating responsibility; it means we acknowledge that the ultimate solutions come from God and that we have our limits.

Our daily commitment to God may well be that we give all our situations to him and ask him to give us back in return that which we truly need to do and that which he will empower us to do. In this way, our daily challenges are just that, not bearers of unbearable anxiety.

The weeping Jesus

Read John 11:32-37

32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" (ESV)

This passage contains the shortest verse in the Bible, a verse which at the same time is not short of meaning. Jesus' friend Lazarus has died. Jesus has seemingly arrived too late to prevent it. He will go on later to bring Lazarus back to life, a demonstration of his ultimate power over life and death. For now, Jesus weeps.

As the onlookers noted, the tears were natural enough for Lazarus was a much loved friend. Never forget the human dimension of Jesus: we don't have to find some profound theological reason for these tears. They are the tears of one who has lost someone he loves. This tear-filled Jesus is a comfort to those of us who also shed tears in a world of love and loss.

And yet Jesus not only wept but was deeply moved, even outraged at the circumstances. It could be he merely despaired at the lack of faith on the part of those mourning. Didn't they believe in the resurrection? However this seems a bit harsh, especially since Jesus himself wept at the loss. Perhaps it is better to see Jesus lamenting the sad realities of loss and death in our East-of-Eden world. He longs to abolish death and sadness and wipe away every tear but for now he does not. He is troubled and angry about how we have turned aside from life and embraced death by rejecting the ways of God.

But he doesn't just get angry at this state of affairs. Not too long afterwards he dies on the cross to conquer the finality of death and then rises again to show his death was effective in doing so. A reminder that we are outraged and moved to tears by the multiple sadnesses of our world but are also filled with confidence that one day it will all be swallowed up in a new life without tears.

Inseparable love

Read Romans 8:37-39

³⁷ No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NLT)

The tough times we go through have the capacity to drive us away from God or bring us closer to him. This passage reminds us that in principle there is no reason for them to drive a wedge between us and God. Our problems need not define or rule our relationship with God. His faithfulness rather than our fears is the bottom line.

And yet we can become embittered, we can become infantile. Life hasn't turned out the way we wanted. God seems to have let us down. We may be tempted to pick up our bat and ball and retreat into sulky disappointment. Our troubles have become a barrier between God and ourselves.

Better by far to allow those troubles to bind us to God. We can aid this process by taking the time to discern what God is telling us in the midst of the troubles. We can give the troubles to him and ask him for wisdom, for strength, for comfort. We can both plead for an end to them and pray that they be a growing and learning experience. Chances are, they will be an opportunity for us to rely more on him as our only help rather than vainly seek support from our usual crutches.

When troubles come we are caught up in a battlefield. The evil one wants them to cause us to give up on God, whereas God invites us to allow them to lean more on him. One way is defeat and despair. The other way is healing and hope. However great our pain or our trouble, it need not push us away from the only one who can give it meaning.

Small things

Read Zechariah 4:8-10

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁹ "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you.

¹⁰ "Who dares despise the day of small things, since the seven eyes of the LORD that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone in the hand of Zerubbabel?" (NIV)

Much of our lives does not consist in doing great things. At least not great as we commonly understand the word. We perhaps might conclude that our lives don't amount to much. We have never won prizes or hit the headlines. We won't be mentioned when the names of those who have changed history are listed. And yet, each of us can change history. Small acts done in the power and with the Spirit of God can change lives even if we are unaware of it.

In this passage, we are warned against despising small beginnings, seemingly insignificant gestures. God wanted the temple rebuilt in Jerusalem after the exiles returned there. Zerubbabel was to do the job. At this point it didn't amount to much, certainly when compared to the glory of the previous temple. In time it would be grand enough, but for now it didn't seem to count for anything.

God warns his people against dismissing small things. Because small things can turn into big things (like the second temple). And as we know, every great journey begins with a single step. Beware of dismissing the random acts of kindness you do to others and which are done to you. Each word of love and kindness, each gesture of compassion and care, changes the world forever. Not because we are somehow especially great, but because we have allowed ourselves to be the instruments of a great God.

Many small acts and quiet words shape and reshape our life and the lives of others. God is the God of might and majesty, but he is also the God of the minor and the mundane.

Practising what we preach

Read James 2: 14-17

14 What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? 15 Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, 16 and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? 17 So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless. (NLT)

In April 1912, a man sat in a small office onboard a ship in the North Atlantic. He took many radio messages from other ships nearby. Many of these messages warned of icebergs in the vicinity. The telegraph operator took down the messages. He didn't pass them on. And so the unsinkable Titanic came to sink, struck by an iceberg that could have been avoided if the messages had been acted upon. The great ship sank not because of lack of information, but failure to act on the information.

James is telling us that our faith similarly needs to be applied. It is not enough to speak fine words. It is not enough to profess orthodoxy. It is not enough to be knowledgeable. It is not enough to have good intentions. Genuine Christian faith has to show itself in action if it is to do any good. Mere words won't be enough to help the needy. Genuine Christian faith must inevitably show itself in action otherwise it is shown to be a fraud. Faith and good works are not opposites or adversaries. They are necessary companions.

True, doing lots of good works won't make us Christians. Only humble faith in the mercies of Jesus brings us into right relationship with God and so makes us Christians. However, once in that relationship with God, we are empowered to do good works. Our good deeds are a natural outcome of our faith, given that this faith means we receive the Spirit of God who enables us to follow Jesus.

We can truly say we will never get to heaven by doing good works. James reminds us that we will never get to heaven without doing them either.

A reasonable faith

Read 1 Peter 3:15-16

15 Honor Christ and let him be the Lord of your life. Always be ready to give an answer when someone asks you about your hope. 16 Give a kind and respectful answer and keep your conscience clear. This way you will make people ashamed for saying bad things about your good conduct as a follower of Christ. (CEV)

No one will ever argue another person into a relationship with God. Fire all your scholarly opinion at them, launch all your powerful and eloquent reason at them, and they will not necessarily switch allegiance to Jesus. The heart and the will have to be engaged as well as the mind. And since many of us believe this to be so, we can be tempted to then dismiss the idea of trying to reason with people about our faith. In this passage, Peter tells us this is not an option.

In his letter from which this passage is taken, Peter has been urging his readers to live good lives in imitation of Jesus. He assumes people will take note of the Christians' distinctive lives and inquire about what drives them. This, incidentally, is a good pattern to remember when we think about being witnesses for Jesus. Our good works lead to good words. It is not enough to simply live good lives or to speak fine words. Both are needed.

Peter reminds us that each of us needs to be able to state clearly and simply what it is that causes us to be followers of Jesus. This doesn't mean we need to give exhaustive comments on the mystery of the Holy Trinity or explain the delights of predestination. We are however expected to be able to give a reason for our faith, to defend its reasonableness and explain how it shapes us. Some will be more articulate than others, but there is no excuse for an intellectually lazy faith or a dismissal of the need to grasp something of its intellectual basis. Such an attitude reinforces the suspicion of some that the Christian faith is mere irrational superstition.

We do have a faith that makes sense. So let's make sense of it.

Day 11

Wounded soldiers

Read 2 Timothy 4:7

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (NIV)

Christian life is often likened to a battle. Followers of Jesus are likened to soldiers. Some think this is all too militaristic, but we are in fact engaged in an ongoing battle with the evil one. It is a battle of the mind and will, fought with ideas and memories and emotions rather than with physical weapons. At the end of his life, Paul reminds Timothy that he has fought the good fight. Meaning it was worthwhile; it was in a good cause, he was on the right side. And of course that he is now looking forward to the ultimate fruits of victory.

Yet we dare not gloss over the fact that Paul was a wounded soldier. He finished the race, but perhaps with a limp. Fighting the battle is not easy. We get wounded just as Jesus himself got wounded. Our battle is far from some swashbuckling action movie where we smite the enemy and emerge smiling and unscathed. We take some hits. And in our imperfect state, we don't always fight effectively.

But despite being occasionally weak and wounded, we stay in the fight. We don't lick our wounds on the sidelines. We claim the help of our mighty God and stick at it. We might be wounded, but we serve in the army of a great healer who knows all about woundedness and weakness. And most importantly, we know the outcome of the war.

Day 12

The motherhood of God

Read Isaiah 66:12-13

12 This is what the LORD says: "I will give Jerusalem a river of peace and prosperity. The wealth of the nations will flow to her. Her children will be nursed at her breasts, carried in her arms, and held on her lap. I will comfort you there in Jerusalem as a mother comforts her child." (NLT)

We don't hear much about the motherhood of God. After all, the biblical description of God is 'Father'. Even so, calling God 'Father' is not to make him male. It is to simply assign to him attributes of a good father on earth. So it is no surprise that the Bible does have references to the motherly as well as fatherly aspects of God's character.

In this passage, God is promising those who have returned to Jerusalem from exile his motherly care. This doesn't make him female: it simply tells us he has all the qualities we would look for in a good mother on earth. Some people might actually find it easier to think of God in motherly rather than fatherly terms. He might be a fierce and righteous warrior but he is also a warm nurturer.

We look to our mothers to care for us and nurture us. Which isn't to say fathers shouldn't do that as well! Few people have bad words for mothers as a category. They do a lot of the hard yards when it comes to family upbringing. One small child had the right idea when asked a question by his teacher in a primary science class. The subject was magnets. The teacher asked the class what 6-letter word starting with 'M' described something that picked up lots of things. The boy's reply was 'Mother'. He knew the value of motherhood!

Let's go on calling God our heavenly father. But let's never forget that our heavenly father has all the good qualities of earthly mothers.

Do unto others

Read Luke 6:37-38

³⁷ “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven. ³⁸ Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back. (NLT)

How would we be if God treated us the way we treat other people? We are often inclined to focus on someone's faults and be forever picking on their deficiencies. These might be very real and may even need correcting. But in treating someone this way we run the risk of ignoring their better qualities. And we run the even greater risk of becoming harsh. It is one thing to be constructively critical within a relationship of respect and trust and love. It is another thing to adopt a critical spirit where everything and everyone is subjected to our unflattering opinions.

So once again, how would it be if God were to have this attitude towards us? We have our faults so we couldn't really blame God if he got preoccupied with them. After all, he is holy and perfect so he has a right to pass judgement on us. But he doesn't. Or more precisely, he chooses to invite Jesus his Son to bear the weight of that judgement so we could be free of it. He doesn't treat us as we deserve. Which is what grace is all about.

God knows our faults and failings very well. He could spend all his time picking over them, reminding us of them. He could crush us and we could have no complaint. But he chooses instead to have Jesus deal with them. And he chooses to send his Spirit into us to have us become the people he means us to be. He doesn't focus on what is wrong with us but lovingly invites us to bring out what is right in us.

Perhaps this is what love of others is all about. Not ignoring their shortcomings, but focusing instead on the potential they have in God. That, after all, is how we would like to be treated not only by God but by others as well.

Living letters

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-3

¹ Are we beginning to praise ourselves again? Are we like others, who need to bring you letters of recommendation, or who ask you to write such letters on their behalf? Surely not! ² The only letter of recommendation we need is you yourselves. Your lives are a letter written in our hearts; everyone can read it and recognize our good work among you. ³ Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This “letter” is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts. (NLT)

The greatest legacy we can leave is to have enriched the lives of others, to have made a positive difference in those lives. From a Christian point of view, more specifically we long to help others discover their potential as followers of Jesus. This is what Paul is speaking of as he reminds the Corinthians of the validity of his ministry. He doesn't have to have formal references or citations. They themselves are evidence of the value of his work.

How good it is for us if we can similarly reflect on our relationships. Have we so lived and so spoken that others' lives are better for it? It is one thing to have a string of qualifications after our name, an impressive CV, a positive self-concept. It is another thing to be able to point to others and with sober humility realise that we have played a part in improving their life.

Much relating to others can be challenging. We may not see too many spectacular results. Lives change slowly. But if we live in the power of God's Spirit we will see evidence in changed lives, albeit gradual. We can do few better things than invest in bringing the love and truth of Jesus into others' lives. And so when we look back on our lives we will not measure them by bits of paper but by enriched lives. Not dead letters but living letters.

Contagious goodness

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4-7

⁴We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people. ⁵For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance that what we said was true. And you know of our concern for you from the way we lived when we were with you. ⁶So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. ⁷As a result, you have become an example to all the believers in Greece—throughout both Macedonia and Achaia. (NLT)

We never truly know the effects our actions and words will have on others. One word, one gesture, can even change history. Think of Rosa Parks sitting at the front of an Alabama bus. Think of the atom bomb dropping on Hiroshima. For that matter, think of Jesus' death and resurrection. In our passage today, Paul describes the impact that his message had on the Christians in Thessalonica. In turn, they had an impact on Christians in adjoining regions.

John Donne famously wrote that no man is an island to himself but is part of a continent. So the impact I have on one person may well not be confined to that person. Just as the acts and words of Paul affected the Thessalonians who affected the Macedonians and Achaians. We must never underestimate the effects of our random acts of kindness, our seemingly casual words, or the general tenor of our life, especially when we are under pressure. Others notice, others are helped or hindered by it.

It pays, then, to consider our words and our conduct. Who knows what changes will come as a result. It pays also to reassure ourselves that we can make a difference. Perhaps we won't hit the headlines or win public recognition. But remember the ripple effect. Touch one life and you never know what other lives will be touched as well. Think of good deeds and gracious words as a good infection. We hope that what we have is caught by others resulting in a glad and godly epidemic.

Love creating loveliness

Read 1 John 4:10-12

¹⁰This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. ¹²No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. (NLT)

We can't escape being confronted with unlovely people. If we are honest, some days we only have to look in the mirror and experience just this! So what do we do? We can have nothing to do with such people, writing them off as lost causes. We can tackle them head-on by reminding them of their shortcomings and telling them to get their act together. Or we can try loving them.

Fortunately for us, God took the third option. Make no mistake, to a holy and just God, our words and actions are not always lovely. He confronts our unloveliness and yet creatively does something about it. He doesn't despise us or reject us. That would leave us in our misery. He doesn't give us stern lectures about how we must improve, or simply rattle on about how bad we are. He knows that would leave us shamed and beaten, ensuring even more unloveliness.

Instead he expressed his love by sending Jesus to take on himself all that kept us from him. He invited Jesus to bear our unloveliness. We are objects of his love. And, as this passage reminds us, that is the foundation for the love we show to others. His love somehow overflows so that we are changed by it. We, who are stubbornly egocentric, can grow to sacrificially love others.

In other words, God's love creates and sustains human loveliness.

Takes two to tango

Read Romans 12:17-18

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (NIV)

Followers of Jesus occasionally aim too high. Your relationship with someone is damaged by their wrongdoing. You faithfully obey the Scriptures which urge you to offer forgiveness to them. If they spurn your offer or continue their attack, you try that bit harder to put things right. Almost as if you want to force your forgiveness on them.

But not even God can do that. Not even he is able to achieve reconciliation with everyone who wounds him. Not even he is able to make things turn out the way he wants, so what chance do we have?! We make the mistake of confusing forgiveness and reconciliation. And as Paul says in this passage, it may not be possible to be at peace with everyone.

We do our best by living a life which demonstrates God's sort of love. We act rightly towards others. And if we are wronged, we offer forgiveness. But it is only an offer. We can't force acceptance of the offer. Just as God doesn't force salvation on anyone.

We may, sadly, have to live with the sadness of impaired relationships. If we do so, God knows how we feel. He is constantly seeking peace with his human creation and constantly being rebuffed.

Offering forgiveness is up to us. Achieving reconciliation is up to us and them.

Pains and pleasures

Read Proverbs 15:20

²⁰ Wise children bring joy to their father, but foolish children despise their mother. (TNIV)

Being a parent is a life sentence! The children are never 'off your hands'. This can be seen as casting a pall on life: children can cause us heartache. Even if they don't go off the rails entirely, their fallibility alone causes us pain. Then again, those same children can give us so much pleasure. We don't want them to be off our hands.

The writer of Proverbs knows about this. He knows there are wise children and that these children gladden the hearts of the parents. He knows there are foolish children and that these children sadden the hearts of the parents. Perhaps he knows, as we know, that the same child can be both foolish and wise. In one phase they bring joy, in another phase they bring sorrow.

It is a reminder to us that pain and pleasure are both part of love. Our children cause us pain because we love them and they give us pleasure because we love them. In other words, you can't have love without a dose of both pain and pleasure. Love opens us up to being rejected and being embraced. And if we don't like that sort of deal, then we are destined to a lonely sort of pain that has little compensating pleasure.

In this way, being a parent is a great lesson for life. Our imperfect love for our imperfect children opens us up to pains and pleasures. We are reminded all our lives that you can't have one without the other.

Setting an example

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-16

¹⁴ I am not writing these things to shame you, but to warn you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For even if you had ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, you have only one spiritual father. For I became your father in Christ Jesus when I preached the Good News to you. ¹⁶ So I urge you to imitate me. (NLT)

It is a very brave (or foolish) person who publicly invites a group of people to imitate him. And yet, we seem committed to the idea that we all need good role models and need to be good role models. So perhaps we are like those who suggest, “do as I say not as I do”. This won’t do for Paul though. He isn’t at all hesitant about urging his troublesome Corinthian readers to follow his example.

It is interesting to note that the sort of things Paul wants them to imitate seems to be more about his perseverance in weakness and his grace under hardship than about stunning victories and impressive statistics. We sometimes think that we can’t possibly provide a good example because we seem so weak or so troubled. Life has not gone smoothly for us. Life wasn’t smooth for Paul but he wants his readers to imitate him in the way he coped with the rough spots. Not with the way he avoided them.

We are to be role models, but not models of perfection. Rather models of growth, models of how the constant grace of God can work on stubborn and unpromising material. People who reckon they are pretty good and always on top of things are models of arrogance and self-confidence and so no role models at all. Such people tend to discourage others because mere mortals like us can never quite measure up to them.

Of course this ought not to make us complacent. We are to set a good example. We are to be the sort of people others can safely and gladly imitate in a general sense. When we go through tough times remember that others watch us to see if our faith sustains us, to see if we persevere. It is no great problem if we have our bad days and don’t always cope well. That shows we are human. But with the help of God we can press on and even flourish. In doing so, we are examples to imitate. Not plaster saints or pedestal-bound heroes. But ordinary people who cling to an extraordinary God.

Follow the leader

Read Ephesians 5:1-2

¹ Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (NIV)

Back in my schooldays I entered my first public-speaking competition. One of the senior students delivered his speech before me. I noted how he seemed so confident, even to the point of moving around on the stage, walking from side to side in a most relaxed way. So when it came to my turn, I did the same. When we finally found out our scores, neither of us fared too well. The senior student commiserated with me, telling me that the adjudicators marked him down because he moved around too much. And they had marked me down likewise. I had followed the wrong example.

We learn best from observing models of what we want to do and then being helped by them to do what we want to do. But everything depends on the model we follow. If we imitate the example of someone who is doing the wrong thing, then we too will go wrong. So it all depends on who we choose to imitate.

Christians have a pretty easy answer to that. Our model and example is Jesus. And if we argue that Paul here refers to God, we need to recognise that God shows himself to us in the person of Jesus. It may not be too daring to say that Jesus perfectly imitates God in that he perfectly expresses the character of God. And God doesn’t just urge us to imitate him by conforming to a set of abstract principles. He wants us to follow the real-life example of Jesus. And what is more, this example of Jesus is one of sacrificial love.

Human models and examples are wonderful assets. But they can’t measure up to Jesus. And following Jesus is no soothing invitation to a more immediately attractive life. It is a summons to love in the most radical of ways. What saves us from frustration, though, is the fact that Jesus is not only our example, but our enabler.

At the crossroads

Read Jeremiah 6:16-19

16 This is what the LORD says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’ 17 I appointed watchmen over you and said, ‘Listen to the sound of the trumpet!’ But you said, ‘We will not listen.’ 18 Therefore hear, you nations; you who are witnesses, observe what will happen to them. 19 Hear, you earth: I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes, because they have not listened to my words and have rejected my law. (NIV)

Woody Allen once said that humanity was at the crossroads: one way spelt disaster, the other way spelt catastrophe, so we must pray to choose wisely. Thankfully, our choice is not as morbid as that. Though we are at crossroads at various times of our life and our choices do matter.

When faced with life choices, we need first to be sure that God plays no games with us. If we are intent on following him he will not idly stand back and watch us head down the wrong road. True, many times each road is equally acceptable to him: not all crossroads are matters of choosing good or bad. However, when such a choice is before us, God will direct our thinking and our choosing.

Choosing the right way in the case of the people of Israel meant following the ancient paths, the traditional teachings of the law and the prophets. So often we hanker after some new teaching or revelation when what we need to do is remember and reapply the old teaching. In an age where so much change leads to the conceit of believing the new is better, Christians are invited to consider the superiority of the old. Of course the ancient paths need to be sensitively applied to contemporary life. But their essential principles most likely still undergird our choices.

The people of Israel took what they thought to be relevant, enticing paths. They were deaf to the warnings of God. It didn't work out well for them. Choosing the old ways, the possibly now unfashionable truths, may not seem glamorous or exciting. But who wants glamour and excitement when what is on offer from God is rest for our souls?

The art of waiting

Read Psalm 130:5-8

5 I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. 6 I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. 7 Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. 8 He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins. (NIV)

We have probably heard of the old prayer, “Lord, give me patience—right now!” Most of us have a problem with waiting patiently. So much so that computer manufacturers proudly boast that their products can save you milliseconds if only you will cough up the cash for them. On a broader scale, we could argue that some of the credit crisis is caused by people unwilling to wait to be able to afford something but rather use credit. Waiting is not the most exciting game in town.

Yet the psalmists repeatedly speak of waiting. God doesn't seem to be in a hurry and doesn't stick to our timescale. This waiting is sometimes hard because it occurs in an unpleasant context. We are in trouble and long for God to deliver us. We are in darkness and anticipate the light. Our waiting is often not in a comfortable environment.

But this doesn't make waiting an exercise in misery. We wait in hope, which in the Bible is a confident expectation of a future event. We don't wait wondering if God will be good or faithful. We wait in expectancy that good will come. Just as a night watchman waits for the morning: he knows it will come so the waiting is never futile even if it is challenging.

Waiting can be a problem if what we wait for might or might not eventuate. We might wait in vain. Christians waiting on God aren't faced with that possibility. He will be good, he will keep his promises. Our waiting is transformed from frustrating drudgery to eager anticipation. Our waiting becomes an exercise of glad faith rather than a mere test of our limited patience.

Take it to the Lord in prayer

Read *Philippians 4:6-7*

6 Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7 Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. (NLT)

We can make two opposite errors when it comes to petitionary prayer. We can be like spoiled children who scream and stamp their feet till they get what they want. Prayer becomes a means of getting what we want when we want it. We even call our loud tantrums an exercise in strong faith.

Then again, we can become over-polite and guarded. Our prayers are reduced to a fatalistic acceptance of the fact that God will have his way. We feel we are unworthy to ask much for ourselves as if this were selfish. We get muddled over what is a 'need' and what is a 'want' so we reduce our prayers to generalities, afraid of burdening an already busy God with our private desires. We don't want to load him up with our trivial concerns.

Paul here reminds us that we can bring all our requests to God. True, he speaks of needs but as human beings we don't always know what is a need and what is a passing desire. This need not paralyse our prayers. Some of our deepest and most passionate desires are planted there by God. We can bring all our requests to God and trust him to sift through them. And be bold enough to be specific. Only as we pray specific prayers can we readily identify answers to those prayers.

As for burdening God with trivialities: if something is weighing us down it is not trivial. Besides, God doesn't mind being approached about small things. He knows small things can produce big anxieties in his worry-prone people. In any case, he knows what is on our minds and articulating it is no greater problem to him.

So be humble enough to approach God with thankfulness and respect and an awareness of his much greater wisdom. But be bold enough to approach God speaking out what is on our heart, recognising that if it is on our heart it is also on his.

Laughing at life

Read *Genesis 18:10-15*

10 Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. 11 Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" 13 Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son." 15 Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

There is laughter and there is laughter. There is the laughter of sheer delight, the laughter in response to something funny happening in front of your eyes. And there is Sarah's laughter. Sarah wasn't laughing at anything funny. She couldn't see anything funny in someone tantalising her with promises of children at her age. Sarah wasn't laughing at a joke because the words of those mysterious strangers beyond the tent flap were if anything a very sick joke. That promise of children decades ago had turned sour and made her laughter correspondingly sour.

Waiting for a promise to come true is a hard sort of waiting. How long do we wait? Did we hear the promise correctly in the first place? Is it all wishful thinking? How do we live life fully each day all the time realising that there is an aching gap in our life? For God's people, these aren't academic questions. God makes great promises but he doesn't always conform to our expectations when fulfilling them.

If our hearts are not to turn bitter or cynical then we need to heed the words of the divine visitor to Abraham's tent. Nothing is too hard for God. What we deem impossible is anything but to God. We so often shrink God down to our own human-sized expectations. To him, giving babies to barren women, healing to the terminally ill, new hope to the hopeless, is all in a day's work. That ought to at least bring a smile to our face and even some holy laughter.

Prayer as friendship

Read Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁴ So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. ¹⁵ This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. (NLT)

This passage is one of many in the Scriptures which encourage us to draw close to God in prayer. We are not to keep our distance or hover nervously while waiting to be summonsed. We come boldly, though not presumptuously. It is only by virtue of Jesus' death for us that we can have such access. He removed what kept us from God's presence, namely the guilt of our wrongdoings.

In this way we can see prayer as an expression of friendship. Friends share their heartfelt desires with one another. They share the things that delight them and the things that disturb them. They don't play games with one another but are honest about their pains and pleasures. So it is with prayer. We bring what is on our heart to God as a friend and companion, not worrying about burdening him with trivia or confining ourselves to whatever we perceive as 'spiritual'.

Then again, as in any true friendship, we don't simply talk to him to get something from him. Our friends are not means to an end: they have value in themselves. Our dealings with our friends are not business transactions. They are significant personal relationships. Prayer is never to be merely functional, a means whereby we get what we figure is good for us. It does involve the sharing of feeling and the expression of desire, but it is more than that.

If prayer is seen as an outworking of our friendship with God, it ceases to be simply a means to an end. It is itself an end.

Green pastures

Read Psalm 23:1-3

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. ² He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. ³ He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. (NLT)

Familiarity can breed contempt, or more likely with the Bible, complacency. Such familiar verses as these can roll off our tongues and become part of our religious tradition rather than our daily, lived faith. For example, think of what an insult it is that we are likened to sheep. Lovely to have a good shepherd, but for that to work we need to face up to our sheep-like nature. That is, foolish, liable to stray, though valuable all the same.

Do we really believe our God provides all our needs? Or are we frantically trying to meet them ourselves because we don't think he is up to it? And are we confusing our needs and desires and demanding he meet all the latter as well as the former?

In the second verse there is a lovely pastoral picture of rest and contentment. God brings us into situations that are good and life enhancing. Rush and hurry and tension are not his intention for us. True, we are active for him and this Psalm is no invitation to sit back and do nothing. But we are so often inclined to go around looking for what satisfies in stagnant waters and dry paddocks. God knows what we need and invites us to rest in that confidence. Sheep will not lie down and rest if they sense danger. They need to be secure before they relax. Just like us.

When we are weary and worn out, he refreshes us. When we fall he picks us up again. He doesn't leave us defenceless and despondent. And when he restores us, he leads us in the right pathways. Note that he does this not merely for our ease or comfort: we might not have a lot of that along the way. He does it so his own honour and glory are satisfied. This explains why his good pathway might not immediately seem good to us.

So it is good to have someone like this care for us. We can't complain about being likened to sheep: if the cap fits, we wear it. Rather we can be thankful that we, sometimes lost and insecure sheep, have a good shepherd.

Blessed desperation

Read Luke 6:20

²⁰ Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. (NIV)

Jesus seems to make a point of singling out the poor for favour. In this he is following the words of the Old Testament where the prophecy was that the Messiah was to bring good news to the poor. So are we to do cartwheels of delight when our money runs out? Are we to glorify poverty? If we have any sort of wealth, are we out of favour with Jesus? No, no and no seem to be the answers.

The poor here are probably the poor in spirit as Jesus makes clear in Matthew's gospel. Even so, Jesus elsewhere makes it clear that material wealth can be a barrier to receiving his message. Not because having money is wrong in itself but because it can breed a sort of self-sufficiency and can mask our need of the help of God. Being poor, in other words, can more readily bring about blessed desperation where we realise our one and only help comes from God and not our own resources.

Those who have plenty of wealth or resources can shield themselves from God's grace. Whatever is bothering them they figure can be resolved with a new purchase, a holiday, a course of study. Those who have little or no access to these things are left with no other help but divine help. Again it has to be stressed that buying new things, or holidays, or more education are not wrong. Rather if used as a substitute for the meaning only God can give they are a diversion from his grace.

Blessed are those who have run out of their own resources and cannot help themselves, for they will get God's own resources and God's unique sort of help.

Rich man, poor man

Read Proverbs 30:7-9

⁷ "Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die: ⁸ Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. ⁹ Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. (NIV)

Not many of us would make such a request a priority. True, we may want to be honest and thus avoid falsehood and lies. But when it comes to poverty and riches, we tend to secretly hanker after the riches. The writer wants to be neither very poor nor very rich. He can see the dangers in each. Get too rich and we tend to become self-sufficient and push God to the margins of life. Our wealth means we have power and status so who needs God? Then again, get too poor and we may become desperate enough to steal in order to get by. It seems poverty and riches each has its own dangers.

There is a dangerous sort of prosperity teaching which sees God as some passport to financial and material wealth. We have enough faith or give enough to the church, and God comes good with the prosperity. Financial and material success is seen as a sign of God's blessing and poverty a sign of God's displeasure.

Then again, there is a danger in going to the opposite extreme. Poverty is not particularly blessed either. Being materially deprived is no sign of God's favour. In trying to avoid the extremes of twisted prosperity teaching we may be in danger of exalting being poor, or assuming God can't grant material wealth to people.

God will give us enough with which to be generous. He isn't stingy. He might not make us rich, but he will prosper us in the best sense of the word. He lavishes love and care on us so that we are blessed irrespective of our financial resources. This is true prosperity. And if that true prosperity involves money, well and good. If God thinks we can be trusted with it, well and good.

This writer of *Proverbs* reminds us, though, that the main issue is how we honour God. Glorifying wealth or poverty is misguided. Glorify God, and let him prosper us in whatever way he chooses.

Beggars at a banquet?

Read Psalm 23:5-6

⁵ You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honour me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. ⁶ Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever. (NLT)

It is very hard to enjoy a good meal or any pleasure if we are under threat. It is rather reminiscent of the practice of offering a criminal on death row his choice of meal for his last meal on earth. Rather hard to tuck into a home-cooked roast dinner with relish if you know you are going to die within hours.

In our lives we are often under threat. The past casts long shadows. The future is full of unknowns which are beyond our control. In the present, we can see only too clearly what causes us anxiety or fear. But still God bids us tuck in and enjoy what he has for us. These verses of the well-known Psalm remind us that whatever else is happening to us, God is wanting to enjoy us and have us enjoy him.

It takes some self-discipline to enjoy the feast in the midst of fear. We need to cultivate the art of focusing on the present moment rather than looking over our shoulder at the past or peering nervously into the future. God is putting on a banquet for us each day, but we can miss it by our preoccupations. Not all moments or all days are happy or peaceful. But each day and each moment are an occasion for drawing close to God. And when we do this, we find a banquet waiting.

Celebrate each and every delight in life and don't let what has happened or what might happen hinder this celebration. We will always have our enemies but we will also always have the promise of the presence of God. Let's not be beggars at our banquet.

Of gains and losses

Read Matthew 16:24-26

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul? (NIV)

Our lives are not cellophane wrapped to protect us against various unpleasant realities. We don't live in comfortable cocoons. Some days are mountain tops, other days are the pits. So how do we celebrate life given it is such a mixture? Or do we merely celebrate what we like and get mad at what we don't like?

Jesus here gives us some clues. What he teaches here is a paradox, two apparently contradictory truths. We discover life by giving it away to Jesus. We get to be free by total surrender to him. If our basic quest is for the good things in life we will miss out on the good things in life. If we primarily want to take care of ourselves we will not do ourselves any favours.

We are thus set free to celebrate all of life because we recognise that real life is not about satisfying immediate desires. Something deeper is going on. When a child marries, we lose that child in a way but we trust we gain something else. When I give generously I lose some wealth but gain something else. When I marry I lose some independence but gain something else. And even if I die I lose my physical existence but gain something else.

Life is full of such exchanges. If we only mourn the losses we end up miserable. If we take time to discern the gains that are entwined in the losses we can be free to celebrate. Not in the sense of calling a bad thing good. Rather in the sense of celebrating the good that can come out of the bad or may even be hidden in the bad. True celebration arises out of a wholehearted acceptance of life with its gains and its losses, and a recognition that a Father's love ensures that even our losses can be gains.



Day 31

Lots of trouble, lots of joy

Read John 16:33

33 “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.” (NIV)

Many of us would assert that paradox is at the heart of Christianity. Seemingly contradictory or incompatible ideas not only coexist but have to coexist for the sake of authentic faith. False teaching arises when we can't handle such tension and try to resolve it by over-emphasising one truth at the expense of another. In the early church, for example, heresies arose when some individuals didn't hold in tension the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus. Trying to tidy up this tension meant a neat distortion of true Christianity.

Jesus in this passage has been explaining to his disciples the consequences of his imminent departure. He both warns them of trouble ahead and encourages them not to lose heart at this prospect. The world we live in can be a scary place and is way short of what it ought to be. So we expect some difficulties.

However, Jesus is the one who is really in charge of things. Whatever troubles we face we don't face them alone and we don't face them in a defeatist way. We are not overcome by them because Jesus has overcome them and we share in his victory. We have peace, not because circumstances are peaceful but because circumstances are not out of Jesus' power.

Whenever we find ourselves believing following Jesus is an exercise in holy masochism we have become unbalanced. Whenever we find ourselves believing following Jesus is a passport to constant happiness we have become unbalanced. When we sign up to follow him, we have to take the whole package: peace and trouble—sometimes at much the same time. We embrace that mysterious paradox of faith: all is well even when all is far from well.



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