

THE TREASURES OF DARKNESS

A Daily Devotional for Lent
Christ Church, Kenilworth



THE TREASURES OF DARKNESS
JESUS' JOURNEY OF SUFFERING
A DAILY DEVOTIONAL FOR LENT

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|---------|
| Introduction: The Treasures of Darkness | page 2 |
| One: Caring Companions | page 4 |
| Two: Compassion | page 12 |
| Three: Complete Surrender | page 20 |
| Four: Authentic Prayer | page 28 |
| Five: Humility | page 36 |
| Six: Trust | page 44 |

INTRODUCTION

*I will give you the treasures of darkness
And hidden wealth of secret places,
So that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
The God of Israel, who calls you by your name.
(Isaiah 45:3)*

The theme of our Lenten Daily Devotional booklet this year is The Treasures of Darkness, drawing from this phrase in Isaiah 45:3. The journey to the Cross is a journey into ‘dark places’ of suffering, but it is also a journey into some of the richest treasures of God’s love for us, and the costly and complete redemption he has won for us.

The Messiah is described prophetically in Isaiah 53:3 *as a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief*. Jesus set his face to Jerusalem, knowing that the Cross awaited him there. In that sense he embraced the Cross. He says to us, *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me* (Matthew 16:24). Our call as Christ-followers is also to embrace the Cross. In Philippians 3:10-11 we encounter these remarkable words of Paul the Apostle:

I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

The testimonies in this book share how people in our church family have found treasure in the darkness – have found in tough times the gift of participating in the sufferings of Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Here is Klaus Hahnebeck’s story of finding treasure from God in a recent ‘dark place’ of suffering :

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions.
(2 Corinthians 1:3)*

During the early hours of the 14th December 2019, I was afflicted with a stroke affecting my left arm and leg making me unsteady on my feet and unable to walk unaided.

With the help of our gardener and fortified by his powerful prayer, we went to the hospital where emergency measures were immediately implemented. The MRI scan proved that I had a blood clot in the right side of my brain. During my three days and nights in the ICU, I was

surrounded by God's ministering angels, in the form of the gentle and loving nurses, the expert doctors and well-wishing, praying visitors from CCK and our fellowship group. I was comforted by the prayers of the emergency prayer chain, and our family members and good friends; and I experienced God's peace and comfort in a tangible way as the Lord was busy healing me.

On the fourth day I was discharged from Hospital, with full function of my left hand and arm restored but still needing the walking aid. However, when I reached home I left it at the front door and have not used it since.

Our compassionate Lord has worked so lovingly in my life and has blessed me with a mighty miracle of healing. I give him all the glory. Thank you to all who prayed, and for your loving concern.

This daily Devotional booklet will cover six themes as we follow Jesus from the preparation for Passover through to the Crucifixion. As Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, we begin our journey on Thursday, and continue until Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.

I want to thank each of you who contributed your story. May you be blessed, as I trust we all will be, as we journey through Lent together.

With my love
Rob Taylor

THANK YOU

I'd like to add my loving thanks to all who have entrusted your story to this booklet, and to honour your vulnerability. It has been a deeply moving experience gathering your contributions, and watching God pull it all together. Thank you, too, to Laura Richter and Yvonne Kane for your eye for detail; and many thanks to Taryn Galloway for your help with graphics, design and printing. It is my prayer that we each find great treasure as we encounter the living God in the stories of our Christ Church family.

Bless you
Sue Taylor

[Note: In line with what has become common practice in most Bible translations, we have not used the initial capital for the personal pronouns relating to God.]

CARING COMPANIONS

CARING COMPANIONS: THURSDAY

However much Job's companions may have failed him later on, there is something deeply moving in this account:

When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

(Job 2:11-13)

Friendship is at its most precious when it shows its constancy and care in times of hardship. In times when we are weak, broken or despairing, true friends are indeed a treasure.

I am struck by how intentionally Jesus pressed into friendship as he approached the Cross. In the week before Passover, Jesus spent time in the home of his friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We read that Mary brought a jar of the perfume of Nard and poured it over Jesus' feet. In response to those who were indignant about the waste, Jesus said,

Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her. (Matthew 26:10-13)

We can only imagine what this tender and intuitive act of friendship would have meant to Jesus at that time.

Then, on the night before he faced the Cross, Jesus chose to be together with his closest companions in the intimacy of the upper room. John gives us special access to that time in chapters 13 to 17 of his Gospel. At one point Jesus said to those gathered around the table with him,

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:15)

Certainly the whole context of that Last Supper was one of close friendship. How much must that have meant to Jesus as the looming horror of the Cross lay just ahead? After they left the Upper Room and made their way to Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, Jesus summoned his closest three friends to pray with him.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' (Matthew 26:36-38)

We hear tell of 'fair-weather' friends and true friends, and the difference becomes apparent in the dark seasons of life when, through our suffering, our shame and failure, or our hopelessness, we have nothing to contribute from our side. Companions who remain constant and steadfast are a special treasure that we find in our times of darkness.

Spend time in silent reflection, entering imaginatively into these experiences of Jesus during the week before Passover; and ask God to speak to you about your friendships.

CARING COMPANIONS: FRIDAY

READ

Love each other as I have loved you. (John 15:9-17)

The novelist David Baldacci invented the Camel Club, comprising four old misfits in Washington DC, which is occasionally convened by Oliver Stone, former CIA trained assassin. Paul Gallico's Zoo Gang are five ancient residents of the French Riviera, each with a unique ability to upset the Nazi occupiers, and with an itch to do it all again. Fast forward to CCK in 2010, when Dr Nils Bergman informed me that he needed an accomplice with a nose for business and that I was the chosen one. I 'nose' myself better than that, so gave him 'no' for an answer.

A while later, he gave a breakfast talk to a very small group at the back of the church, in which he explained his mission. It was so unusual, so outrageous, so improbable – but a little voice inside me said, 'Just go and be his friend.' So I did that. And I quickly felt so out of my depth that I pressed three dear CCK friends into service – Janet MacKay, Robert Ferrandi and Graham Greathead – so that we might listen to Nils and Jill, and love them together. We discovered that we each had something small but useful to offer – although nothing remotely to do with reducing the mortality of premature babies by re-establishing ancient God-given practices. We each decided to believe in them, and to trust that they were revealing profound truths, even though the process was substantially beyond us.

Their vision has now been adopted by the World Health Organisation. Mr Bill Gates is intensely interested and involved. Nils and Jill now support an international, rigorously scientific and ethical research and demonstration project, and give lectures all over the world. They are changing minds and saving lives. They have relocated to Sweden to be closer to the action, but every year we have an AGM in Cape Town around a supper table, and this faithful couple share their astonishing news and tell us that it would never have happened without us. And all we are – are friends.

REFLECT

Is it time to ask for a friend; or to be a friend?

PRAY

You have befriended me, Jesus. Who can I befriend for you?

Gerry Adlard

CARING COMPANIONS: SATURDAY

READ

*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.*

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

I had no idea when the phone rang before noon on a sunny Saturday morning in February 2018 that it would be our granddaughter calling to tell us that her 57-year old father, our son, had died suddenly. The bottom fell out of our world. I recall the shock and horror of that moment and the sense of unbelief that encompassed me. This just couldn't be true! But it was. Then the next day one of my dearest friends died, not unexpectedly but nevertheless, another huge gap was created in my life.

Nothing can compare with the darkness of the place I found myself in during the following days. The blackness was overwhelming, but tiny shards of light started breaking through. With hindsight I can see how God, my loving Heavenly Father who is full of compassion, was using people, his people and others, to bring comfort to us. Our neighbours, family and friends from near and far, church family and other residents where we live, circled us with love and care, prayed with us and held us in prayer over that time. In the midst of deep darkness, our Lord Jesus Christ was surrounding us with a shield of comfort and love. The truth of God's statement to Joshua – *I will never leave you nor forsake you* (Joshua 1:5) – became such a reality in my life. As did Psalm 91:4 – *He will cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.* Through people, God was supporting, strengthening and upholding me.

REFLECT

Have there been times when God has worked powerfully in my life through other people, when I had a deep sense of being cared for by God? Bring these times before God, giving thanks that he works powerfully in our lives through other people.

PRAY

Father God, thank you for revealing yourself to me through others. Grow my awareness of when your angels are surrounding me and help me to show mercy to others the same way you do to me. Amen.

Denise Wood

CARING COMPANIONS: SUNDAY

READ

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you should love your neighbour as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

I was brought up as a traditional Anglican and accepted Biblical teachings without question. Eight years ago, everything changed. My beloved grandson was diagnosed with brain cancer and, despite his medical treatment and our prayers, died eight months later. As a family we were devastated.

I felt abandoned by God and lived without my faith for six long years. One day, I was overcome with a persistent 'inner voice' telling me to sell our home which my husband, Ian, and I had recently built for our old age, and to investigate a move to a retirement complex. We did so. I felt that an 'invisible hand' was guiding us in this important decision.

When Ian collapsed six weeks later, with what turned out to be colon cancer, and needed professional care, I realised that God had indeed been holding my hand. Ian died shortly thereafter. It was a time of utter confusion for me. I was greatly comforted by a couple of members of CCK as I struggled with my faith. Dareth and Denise then introduced me to CCK. I started to read copiously, not only Christian teachings, but also about many other faiths in an attempt to digest their creeds and beliefs.

Earlier this year I met up with an old friend with deep faith. We now have regular contact during which we have many discussions over religious and other topics of general interest. This dialogue has strengthened my faith and changed my life – I now know that my trust is totally in God, and that I need to pay close attention to that 'inner voice'. My renewed faith has led me to a deeper understanding of the importance of support, and help needed by people who are lonely or suffering in any way.

REFLECT

Reflect on how God guides and loves us, even when we reject him.

PRAY

Lord God, lead me in the power of your Holy Spirit, to support those who are in need. To your praise and glory, Amen.

Margie Brown

CARING COMPANIONS: MONDAY

READ

Love is large and incredibly patient. Love is gentle and consistently kind to all ... Love is a safe place of shelter, for it never stops believing the best for others. Love never takes failure as defeat, for it never gives up. Love never stops loving ...

(1 Corinthians 13:4-13 Passion Bible)

I am an introvert. I love being alone and much prefer my own company to that of other people. Over the years this has become my default. Friendships have often not been easy for me and I have been let down by people in the past. This of course just reinforced my preference to go it alone. Over the past few years, I have become aware of the strength that meaningful connections can offer. I have also realised that this life is too precious not to be shared with others. I have found my connections with two amazing women – Heather and Lydia. These friends have become my ‘go-to-girls’! We have laughed together, cried together, screamed together ... Our monthly Friday morning gatherings have become a sacred space – a meeting of hearts and minds; a place to be vulnerable and to be seen and valued. Brené Brown puts it so beautifully:

We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honour the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection.

The space with my go-to-girls has become a space where I can be seen, known and deeply loved for who I am. Even in the midst of the chaos and mess that life brings, knowing that I have this space brings me comfort and hope.

REFLECT

Are past hurts stopping you from connecting deeply with others? Bring these to the cross and ask Jesus to show you what the next steps need to be. Ask Jesus to help you notice those who may be in need of a caring companion. Commit to connecting with one person this week.

PRAY

Jesus, in your life and death you offered us an example of perfect love. Show us how we can share this love with others in our world. Help us to take comfort in your love when we feel alone. Amen.

Helen Malgas

CARING COMPANIONS: TUESDAY

READ

Shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life. (Philippians 2:15-16)

In the middle of 2018, I was diagnosed with cancer. It's a lonely feeling. 'Nobody can walk that path with you. That's what always happens in my life,' I thought. 'I will call people and they'll be busy. They have stuff to do. They can't be holding my hand all the time ...' Truck-loads of negative self-talk.

But I did call in the troops. And they came up trumps! Snippets from my gratitude lists read like this:

Can you believe it! I barely know her, but Taryn sends me three micro meals with her pre-teen son. He apologises: 'Mom didn't know if you were vegetarian, so ...'

Two dear friends showing kindness by picking me up from the hospital and then plonking me on the sofa and proceeding to do my washing up! (It was bugging me that it wasn't done!)

And countless, countless love tokens in the form of gifts and messages like this one: 'Auntee Be-e-e ... ummmm ... I am sorry you had to go to the hospital!'

A journal is a wonderful thing – it reminds me of exactly how it was. Memories like these make me remember this: What I choose to remember shapes who I become. I can (and often do!) constantly rehearse the stories of pain and fear and indignity. But then what will I be brainwashing myself into believing?

REFLECT

Small things make a huge difference. I need to give people the chance to love me, and not discourage them by having expectations on how it should be done. I am a reflection of the God I serve, so I must 'build my life as if it were a work of art' (Rabbi Heschell) – and remember to remember. Which of these things speak to you?

PRAY

Lord, you have shown yourself mighty in my life. You have shown that you are with me, that you will provide for me and that you love me. Please will you show me instances in my life where this was so. Help me to remember them and to re-tell them over and over again, for my encouragement and for that of others. Amen.

Belinda Bresler

CARING COMPANIONS: WEDNESDAY

READ

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. (Psalm 23: 4)

One has to go ‘through’ things in order to come out the other side – but it is ‘how’ one gets through that makes the difference.

Phillip Keeler’s book, *A shepherd looks at Psalm 23*, shows that there is nothing that God will not do to take care of us as the Good Shepherd.

In my journey of dealing with alcoholism in the family, breast cancer and most recently the end of my marriage, I have been overwhelmed by God’s constant affirmation of his love for me, and the people that he has put in my path to walk each section of the road with me.

No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he’ll never let you be pushed past your limit; he’ll always be there to help you come through it (1 Corinthians 10:13 – The Message).

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I had a close friend who had walked the same road the year before. She gently talked me through her experience and gave me tips on how she managed the chemo, losing her hair, her diet, her well-being – and I in turn have been able to do the same for others. Likewise, I can be there for a friend who is battling with an alcoholic son – knowing from experience what words are helpful and those which are not. When a marriage comes to a sudden and unanticipated end, there are many emotions of self-doubt and self-worth that can overwhelm one. God’s steadfast presence has been manifested in the love of my family and the people he has faithfully put in my path, whose words and actions affirmed and supported me in the darkest times.

REFLECT

On the joy that comes of waking up each day and declaring: ‘the Lord, he is MY shepherd’.

PRAY

Lord, help me to be attentive to the nudgings of the Holy Spirit when I meet people who are going through a dark valley, and give me the right words to say to them. Amen.

Mary Lister

COMPASSION

THURSDAY: COMPASSION

The second treasure of darkness we are going to look at is the compassion and empathy we find in those dark places. Paul makes reference to this in the opening chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians. Clearly, Paul was writing from a situation of considerable suffering in his own life, as he says,

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

One of the paradoxical treasures of suffering is its ability to soften our hearts towards others who suffer. We return to the Upper Room where Jesus is with his disciples. Although Jesus was under enormous pressure, one of his primary concerns in the interaction he has with his disciples is to bring them comfort and reassurance in their anxiety and perplexity.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. (John 14:1)

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

Jesus' ability to bring comfort to others in the midst of his own anguish is most strikingly evident when he looks down from the Cross and sees the grief of his mother standing among the crowds on the hill of Calvary, and reaches out to her:

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, 'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25-27)

There is treasure awaiting us in dark places, the treasure of receiving compassionate support, but also the treasure of finding deep wells of compassionate grace to share with others. As we find the loving presence of Christ in our suffering, we are softened and shaped into greater conformity with his character and, thereby, we have a special gift to offer others.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. (Philippians 2:1-2)

Spend time in silent reflection, entering imaginatively into the experience of Jesus on Calvary; and ask God to show you how you might give and receive compassion more meaningfully in your life.

COMPASSION: FRIDAY

READ

What good is it if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14 & 17)

About five years ago I listened to Seung Jung talk at an 8.00 am service about his Early Childhood Development (ECD) school at Jim se Bos informal settlement in Philippi. His story touched my heart and God encouraged me to make contact with Seung and offer my services to assist with the school.

This started a journey of action for me in the Philippi area, a place I had never really visited before despite living in Cape Town all my life. The school is a vibrant place providing pre-school education, a feeding scheme and loving care to about forty children each day. There is also after-school educational support for older children. It is a beacon of Christian light in a dark place. My support is in the form of mentoring, governance and finances. I visit the school regularly and have formed a close bond with the team.

This later led to an involvement in the Philippi Horticultural Area (PHA) where I am involved with the Vegkop Polycultural Farm where we are developing a prototype small-scale, sustainable organic farming model, which we hope to roll out elsewhere in the PHA. The PHA is super important to Cape Town because of its contribution to food sustainability, job creation, and the aquifer water resource. I work with Nazeer Sunday who is a Muslim, and I love the multi-faith environment!

I have learned that God opens doors and it is our choice whether we go through them or not. Also, that South Africa provides many amazing opportunities to put our Christian faith into action. These will keep us occupied, useful and more positive about the future!

REFLECT

Is there a door opening near me that God is inviting me to walk through, where I can put my faith in action?

PRAY

Lord God, protect the people and environment of Philippi, and give courage to all those involved in their development and preservation. Open my eyes to see where you are leading me to serve you. Amen.

David Leslie

COMPASSION: SATURDAY

READ

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. (1 Peter 3:8)

When I reflect on my life, there is one day that stands out without a doubt. It was in the October of 2017. I found myself feeling very alone and trying to deal with the last days of my mother's life. Her terminal cancer was unabating; the pain, confusion, and distress was visible. My mother had gone through a process of packing and labelling all her earthly possessions into boxes to make it easier for us that were left behind. My dad and I battled to understand this process, as with failing strength and memory, this had become an enormous mental and physical struggle for Mum. We eventually understood that this was part of my mother's preparing for her own death and was not debateable.

Eventually my mother was admitted to Hospice. End of life thoughts were foremost and so difficult to deal with. I felt overwhelmed, sad, lonely and uncertain. And then, whilst standing quietly in Mum's ward, an elderly, gentle lady (an angel), approached me and showed such care and compassion I was left in awe. I vividly remember her kind eyes and white hair. She brought me a cup of tea and spoke to me with so much love, wisdom and compassion. The warmth and love I experienced that day will never leave me. This 'angel' told me that she volunteers at Hospice on a Wednesday and had done so for 25 years. What an inspiration she was to me at a most difficult time. I thank God often for the experience of unconditional compassion that day and feel encouraged to comfort others similarly.

REFLECT

Can you recall an act/moment of compassionate love that you gave or received? Do you draw near to the Holy Spirit so that you can be led to where you are most needed? Are you an available channel for God's mercy and compassion?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you that you have ignited compassion within each one of us. May we all draw near to you and act on your prompting. We ask you to empower us to make a difference in the lives of others around us. Amen.

Cindy Speechly

COMPASSION: SUNDAY

READ

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. (John 13:34)

Pinpointing the meaning of compassion is challenging. It seems inextricably knitted together with definitions of love, forgiveness and grace. A quick Google search defines it as ‘sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others’.

While reflecting on this theme it became apparent to me that I find it easy to have compassion for my loved ones, people I relate to and those I perceive as innocent. More difficult, however, is committing to the wholehearted compassion that Jesus calls us to while there seem to be so many caveats: How can I have compassion when it feels like a person deserves their suffering or ‘brought it upon themselves’ through their choices or beliefs? How can I have compassion for someone who has hurt me?

I recently read a quote by Rick Warren that has helped provide clearer definition to the practical living-out of a compassion without caveats.

Warren says:

‘Our culture has accepted two huge lies. The first is that if you disagree with someone’s lifestyle, you must fear or hate them. The second is that to love someone means that you agree with everything they believe or do. Both are nonsense. You don’t have to compromise convictions to be compassionate.’

Jesus showcased the magnitude of his compassion when he identified his own persecutors as victims themselves. Even in the agony of his own suffering, he showed radical compassion for his abusers, praying: ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ May our own compassion be so unrestrained.

REFLECT

How do I determine who is deserving of my compassion? How did Jesus show compassion to those he disagreed with and those who hurt him?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you that you show me compassion and love that is not deserved or earned, but freely given. Thank you that I am made in your image, with the capacity to feel compassion for all your people. Please help us to follow Jesus’ example and be people that show genuine compassion without caveats, so that every person who suffers (which is every person) can find solace in the body of your Church. Amen.

Quanta Gauld

COMPASSION: MONDAY

READ

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Most of all, I love to be joyful, finding beauty and freedom in being out in God's awesome creation. But then ... there are the moments, often in the night, when worries intrude and replace the joy. After a while, I remember that Jesus is there with me in the darkness or struggle. He wants me to share the intimacy he offers as he smiles warmly and lovingly waits. I often find myself singing this song as a helpful reminder ...

Everyone needs compassion, a love that's never failing ...

Everyone needs forgiveness, the kindness of a Saviour ...

My deepest memory of Jesus' compassion came to me in a place of failure and shame. A wrong choice left me feeling I had disappointed myself, my loved ones, and God. I was alone and afraid. A sharp ray of sunshine broke through the dark rain clouds on that chilly winter's day and settled directly on my tear-stained face. I looked up and heard Jesus say, "I love you" ... a deeply personal moment encountering the compassionate heart of my loving Father God. My chains fell off, my heart was free.

Not long after, a shock announcement by a close family member needed a compassionate response, not one of judgement. Jesus, you were right there, offering your loving understanding and compassion. I knew it was from you and I needed plenty of it ...

How do we avoid life's troubles and traumas? We can't! They come our way and we need Jesus every single time! Who can ever be prepared for sudden crises, especially when it is only the beginning of an unfolding, hard-to-understand period of our journey?

REFLECT

How do I respond knowing that Jesus fully understands our frailty (Romans 5:1-5)? Am I able, today, to choose joy in the midst of sadness?

PRAY

Thank you, Jesus, that you promise to be with us always. Thank you for your help in dealing with every challenge. You always hear our heart's cry. Thank you for your Holy Spirit, filling our hearts with your love and compassion when we need it most. Amen.

Jill Mathew

COMPASSION: TUESDAY

READ

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:12)

The origin of the word compassion comes from the Latin word 'compati' which means 'to suffer with'. It is a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress combined with a desire to alleviate it. In its purest form, someone else's suffering becomes part of us.

In the hospital where I work, I daily see people in pain and suffering. In the course of a day our unit deals with strokes, heart attacks, overdoses and any other emergency situations.

I often feel completely overwhelmed by the suffering and brokenness of our patients. We are dealing with people at their most vulnerable. Yet, it is so difficult not to become blasé and be burnt out. We are always short of staff due to the huge shortage of nurses in South Africa. However, God has equipped me with a truly wonderful caring team. We all support and help each other during the long, tiring days. We know when one of our colleagues is going through a bad time, and we have people to 'debrief' us if needed.

I know that I am just a small cog in our health care system, nevertheless, I feel privileged to be able to help and get to know my patients. My daily prayer on my way to work is:

Lord, let me be your hands, feet, eyes, ears and mouth today;

Give me strength and compassion to do your work today;

Protect my loved ones and bring me safely home at the end of the day.

REFLECT

How can God use me to show compassion and kindness to everyone I am in contact with today? Let me not underestimate the healing power of a kind word, deed or smile.

PRAY

Lord, help me to feel your tangible presence in my work today. Remind me that I am just a vessel through which you work. Give me energy to do what is pleasing to you. Amen.

Robyn Axelson

COMPASSION: WEDNESDAY

READ

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

(2 Corinthians 1: 3-4)

I sat staring at one of the computer screens in Groote Schuur's Holding Area, willing the time forward, when Sister Losper sat down next to me and began furiously scribbling in her notebook.

Sister Losper is the night-time bed manager; she's responsible for directing the evening's admissions to the beds in the respective wards. Groote Schuur is almost always bursting at the seams – we frequently admit more patients than we realistically have room for.

I always enjoy talking to Sister Losper. She takes no prisoners, brooks no arguments, and has the most warm and generous spirit. Usually, when we see each other she makes fun of my hair, and reminds me that I promised to sing for her before she retires.

When I asked her how things were going, I noticed tears welling up in her eyes. She shared with me that her daughter, who had been sober for thirteen months, had recently relapsed. It hit close to home. My own brother had only just picked up the pieces from his most recent relapse.

We spoke about our hopes and fears for our families. We spoke about our respective joys and disappointments, and the things we learnt about ourselves from our experiences. For a few minutes that night, we forgot about our work, about Groote Schuur logistics, even a little about the patients quietly groaning into the general din of casualty. We spent those few minutes holding each other in that painful space, and I left facing the latter half of my call feeling lighter, and more energized.

REFLECT

What are the hurts that continue to shape you today? How can those narratives support others who are suffering similarly?

PRAY

Father, help me to free myself of the need to understand everything, and the desire to control all circumstances. Give me perspective to place my own suffering in context, and open my heart and mind to the people suffering alongside me. Amen.

Leighlind Daniels

COMPLETE SURRENDER

COMPLETE SURRENDER: THURSDAY

Many of the treasures of darkness are precious because they are so costly. That is certainly true of the third treasure, which is complete surrender. For all of us who commit ourselves to follow in the footsteps of Christ, and, like him, to take up the Cross, self-surrender is a non-negotiable. Paul describes the essence of Jesus' self-surrender in these unforgettable words:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)

That costly laying down of his self-will was already apparent in Gethsemane as Jesus wrestled in anguished prayer, crying out: *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will (Matthew 26:39).*

There is no greater act of complete surrender than giving up one's very life, as generations of Christian martyrs have done, and continue to do in our generation; but physical death is not the only form of dying to self. Paul was able to write to the Corinthians, *I die daily (1 Corinthians 15:31).*

What embracing the Cross means for each of us is letting go of all that feeds our sense of superiority; all pride associated with our accomplishments and abilities; all claims to entitlements and rights; and even surrendering to the Lord all our cherished attachments and relationships. This is what the Cross meant to Jesus and it is the same for us. Yet in that letting go, we open our hearts to deep wells of divine blessing. Throughout the New Testament, participation in the Cross of Christ was seen as a huge privilege, not a burden. Hence Paul writes:

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. (Philippians 3:7-9)

The treasure of self-surrender is one that has to be mined out of the hard seams of adversity and humiliation on repeated occasions in our lives, but each time we do so we find afresh the treasure of the love, the grace, the peace and the righteousness that God alone gives.

Spend time in silent reflection, entering imaginatively into the experience of Jesus as he surrendered first his divinity, then his human life; and ask God to speak to you about surrendering yourself more fully to him.

COMPLETE SURRENDER: FRIDAY

READ

For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you ...
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Sometimes people talk of treating God like a vending machine – asking him for the things we want. What do we do, then, when we not only don't get what we want, but are faced with trial upon trial?

It's been a difficult period in my life over the last five years – many trials have come my way. Initially I fought God. I was angry. I ignored him – for, wasn't he ignoring me?

Slowly he brought me back to him. By removing things, one after another, from my life – my father, steady security, the fulfilment I had found in work and studies, the joy in dancing, the sense of community, the hope of a joyful marriage – I found that all that was left was God. All that I could cling to was God. He alone was unchanging, ever-loving, and there when I needed him.

I've felt like Jacob, wrestling with God for my own way ... I've related to Jonah, running from him. And eventually, I've found myself trying on Jesus' shoes, and saying, 'Your will be done, Lord.'

It's not always easy to find joy in suffering (James 1:2), yet looking back, I can see that God has in fact given me great joy. I have learnt to trust him. And finally, he has restored to me many of the things that I'd lost, which I received with open hands and a heart full of gratitude that would not have been there had I not lost them.

I know that there will be more suffering to come, for that is the nature of this world, but I will trust that God does know the plans he has for me – he has certainly shown himself to be trustworthy thus far.

REFLECT

How does knowing that even Jesus was tested in the wilderness shape my attitude to times of trial in my life? What does it mean for me to know that God has a plan even through our times of trial?

PRAY

Father, thank you for the mercies you send us through our trials. Give us strength to hold fast to you in the knowledge that your plans are still to prosper. Amen.

Clare Hulme

COMPLETE SURRENDER: SATURDAY

READ

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. (Isaiah 43:1-3)

Two years ago, Frans and I started the journey to having children. As each month passed and we did not fall pregnant, there was sadness. We sought medical help and tried eliminating possible causes. As time passed the loss felt greater, and it seemed hopeless.

Infertility is such a shameful and lonely road to walk, but God is with us in that journey, and he brings us through the fire and the deep waters. At first, our prayer was that God would help us to fall pregnant, but later we started to realise that we should rather pray for peace, contentment and joy in our current situation. We needed to surrender and give this burden to God, and stop trying so hard to make something happen that we have no control over.

God brought so many friends and Godly counsellors around us who patiently listened to our anguish again and again, just being with us in that place. God also gave us joy in new things: being parents to furry doggy children and a garden to nurture. We can honestly say that God has given us contentment in our current situation, and so much joy, even though there are still difficult days. I know that I am a beloved daughter of God whether I bear children or not, and that I'm no less of a wife to my amazing husband.

REFLECT

Do you know someone who is trying to have children? Be present to them. Pray that God would give them peace, contentment and joy ... And are you in a situation that you cannot change?

PRAY

Father, you count every tear and you walk with us every painful step. Help us to trust that you have good plans for us - to give us hope and a future, even if it's not the future we imagined. We surrender and rest in your love. Amen.

Nicci Snyders

COMPLETE SURRENDER: SUNDAY

READ

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

When I came to faith in Jesus Christ in 1982, I surrendered my whole life when he called me to follow him. That was the defining moment. But his call includes other large surrenders on occasion, as well as the daily surrenders, for it is not my will but his.

Space permits me to describe only one pivotal time when surrendering to ‘his good, pleasing and perfect will’ was especially testing.

My thirst to know Jesus more intimately led me to apply for a year at Wheaton College in Illinois. All the paperwork was completed and I was accepted to begin the new academic year in September 1986. After tendering my resignation from a teaching position where I was very happy, and giving notice on my flat, I received correspondence telling me that their revised policy for international students required me to pay fees for two full years in advance. That was impossible, and so my year-long dream disintegrated. My pastor suggested I apply to Columbia International University in South Carolina. So the paper trail began again and time was short. (This was the pre-Internet era!) But I had an uncanny peace which truly did ‘pass all understanding’, and God spoke to me unmistakably through Scripture when I read Revelation 3:7-8 : *What he opens, no one can shut; and what he shuts, no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.*

I flew to Columbia on schedule. I loved the experience so much that I asked the Lord to make it possible for me to stay for two years to complete a Master’s degree. He did. I count those years as the happiest and richest of my life.

REFLECT

In what circumstances in my life have I had to change course and reluctantly submit to God’s sovereignty?

PRAY

Lord God, it is tempting to think you are withholding something from me when my plans go awry. Help me to truly believe that you are always good and utterly trustworthy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Sue Gibbings

COMPLETE SURRENDER: MONDAY

READ

So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy. At that time you won't need to ask me for anything. I tell you the truth, you will ask the Father directly, and he will grant your request because you use my name. You haven't done this before. Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy. (John 16:22-24)

2019 was a hard year. The end of 2018 brought the end of my family as I had known it, and 2019 didn't feel any kinder. We experienced great loss and incredible sadness as we adjusted to our new normal. Looking back and reading through my journal, I realise it was a year of simply surviving.

I don't think I made a conscious decision of surrender, but reflecting on the year I can look back and be grateful that I was never without hope. I think I surrendered to Christ mainly because there was nothing else I could do. I couldn't fix any of the hurt, and I couldn't change any of the circumstances, but I could surrender to hope. The hope that only the Father can give, that he would work things out for our good. I still cried more often than not, and went through periods of deep, deep sadness, but 2019 also brought the joy of new friendships, of new life and of knowing and feeling the incredible depth of love and support from friends and family.

These gifts, so clearly from God the Father, made a hard 2019 endurable and I've entered into the new year with renewed hope and excitement for what he has in store for 2020.

REFLECT

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Are there things that you are feeling hopeless about? Are you able to surrender them to God the Father and trust in him?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, my prayer is for a hope that endures and that through sorrow we might find strength in you and the people you have surrounded us with. Amen.

Katherine de Wet

COMPLETE SURRENDER: TUESDAY

READ

The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand. (Psalm 37:23-24)

Ours is a God of amazing love whose desire for us to grow in the knowledge of him and his love knows no bounds. Yes, you will say, I know that – we hear it regularly on a Sunday, BUT it takes an act of will, faith and courage to step out of our comfort zones to seek our awesome God not only in us but in others.

I was pushed out of my comfort zone in a huge way in 2017 when four of us came together in faith and prompting from our trusty minister, Rob Taylor, to offer something special for women. After months of praying, dreaming, discerning, and crafting something specifically for women, the Women's Journey was launched.

What a privilege it is to walk with women who are seeking God in a space designed for peace, to reflect on some spiritual or practical input, and listen to God. Hearing the women sharing their growing knowledge of the love of God has been pure gold.

The nuggets of gold from this year's Women's Journey have been the gems which have lit the way in the dark times of my year, which has involved caring for my ageing mother of 98 who has moved to the Care Centre of her retirement home. Not an easy process for her or me, but God! Through helping women listen and look for God in every situation, I have put into practice just that, and he has come through in a multitude of ways. What a journey, and I dare you to embark on the same.

REFLECT

Actively look for the good in your day and acknowledge that it is God who has been there for you. Write a few lines about the good things at the end of each day in your gratitude journal.

PRAY

Lord, thank you that when we seek you, and step out in faith, though we stumble and bumble, you pick us up, and draw us close because you love us beyond measure. Amen.

Janet Mackay

COMPLETE SURRENDER: WEDNESDAY

READ

Fixing your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary or lose heart. (Hebrews 12:2-3)

‘Complete surrender’ is a term that has always seemed a paradox to me. How is it possible that I could surrender every area of my life to Jesus? The more I’ve grown in my love for Jesus and the desire to live the life he has called me to live, the more I discover that it is impossible to live this life without completely surrendering to him.

I remember that when I first had a sense of calling into full-time ministry, I tried for a very long time to reason with God as to why he shouldn’t choose me, and why there were so many other things I could and should rather be doing. I tried to run from surrendering to him, which led me to spaces of unfulfillment and disappointment. But the more I fixed my eyes on Jesus as the pioneer of a life that I longed to live, the more I found myself surrendering my desires, my hopes and my dreams to him. The Cross invited me into a story that was far bigger than my own, a story that called me to walk a road of painful surrender and hope-filled joy.

‘Complete Surrender’ is becoming less of a paradox, as I come alive to the knowledge of the grace of God that is sufficient for me to surrender my life to him every day. I wish I could say I’ve reached a place where the reality of complete surrender was a natural and easy act. Every day, I depend on the Spirit of God to lead me into looking at Jesus in awe and wonder, so that I will not grow weary and lose heart.

REFLECT

As you fix your eyes on Jesus today, what do you appreciate most about who he is? What is God calling you to surrender today?

PRAY

Father, thank you that we find joy and life in surrendering to you. Would you empower us by your Spirit to surrender to you. In Jesus name. Amen.

Keenan Farquhar

AUTHENTIC PRAYER

AUTHENTIC PRAYER: THURSDAY

As Christians we pray. Prayer is communication with God, the natural outflow of relationship with Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Like any conversation, prayer can range from the relatively mundane and superficial to the deep and tender and honest. We often tend to be careful in our praying so that our words to God are well thought out and appropriate. We often want to present to God our best side and our best motives. If we expose our less worthy selves, we aim to do so in the context of sincere, 'godly' repentance and readiness to amend our ways. But that, of course, is not the whole story!

In the place of anguish, frustration, emotional and physical torment, we are more likely to pray with raw honesty. We expose much more of our true selves and our prayers sound far less polite. Does that mean that such prayers are, somehow, less acceptable, or even offensive, to God? In Scripture we often see the great figures of the faith praying unrestrained prayers, not least in the Psalms which constitute the great 'Prayer Book' of the Bible.

One notable example is Psalm 22, where David begins with the anguished lament, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* In verse after verse, the Psalmist grapples to find God in the place of deepest darkness until eventually he is able to affirm,

*For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.
From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you I will fulfil my vows. (Psalm 22:24-25)*

It was this prayer that Jesus has in his heart as he endures the suffering of the Cross. Probably he had included it, and other psalms like it, in the hours of sweat-soaked prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane where we read,

He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.' An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:41-44)

There is a telling line in Psalm 56 where David says, *Record my misery; list my tears on your scroll – are they not in your record?* (Psalm 56:8)

It is rightly said that tears are liquid prayer flowing from the honesty, the authenticity and the complete dependence that comes from seeking God in the dark seasons of our lives.

Spend time in silent reflection, entering imaginatively into the experience of Jesus as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane; and ask God to show you how to grow your own prayer life.

AUTHENTIC PRAYER: FRIDAY

READ

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

I often end a sermon with the Franciscan Blessing saying: *May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart. May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.*

In 2019 this prayer became very real when I woke up to a phone call from my best friend saying that she had just been 'robbed and raped'. Those three words turned my whole world upside down. Six years of theological training, hours of counselling people and more Bible studies than I can count, didn't prepare me for the moment I walked into her flat minutes later.

I remembered praying on my way there: 'Lord, please let me not give any clichéd, easy answers, please help me love her, please Lord, please Lord.'

I didn't even have the right words to pray. Life is painful and difficult and can sometimes bring tremendous heartache. I believe that too often we are clothed in garments of organized religion and symbolic rituals, so we need to disrobe before God and be free.

This is still a very painful journey for us, but I have learned that it's okay not to have words to pray and to start my prayers with: 'Lord, I am here, but I am angry ...' or 'Lord, I don't understand and I am struggling ...'

John Bunyan writes: 'In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart.'

REFLECT

Write down the emotion(s) you are currently experiencing. Talk to God about it. Think about situations when you might have given easy answers to difficult questions.

PRAY

Pray the Franciscan Blessing.

Elsché Eygelaar

AUTHENTIC PRAYER: SATURDAY

READ

The Centurion addressed Jesus: "Say the word and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I will tell this one 'go' and he goes and that one 'come' and he comes. 'Do this' and he does it."

Jesus was amazed. Turning to the crowd He said, "Never, among all the Jews in Israel have I met a man with faith like this." And when the captain's friends returned to his house, they found the slave completely healed. (Luke 7:2-10)

This passage encouraged me to keep faith in the Lord while I was in prison. I want to share my story about the power of God. I am 27 years old and a refugee from Burundi. I came to South Africa three years ago, leaving behind my family and fiancée; and have not yet been back home.

Early in 2018, I was arrested on an alleged rape charge. I was shocked because I had not done anything wrong. I spent three months in Pollsmoor. It was a terrible place and a horrible experience. I could not communicate easily. One day a prisoner killed another prisoner. The warders searched everyone and beat us very badly.

A friend brought me my Bible and every day I read the New Testament. Throughout my imprisonment, I never lost my sense of peace because I knew God would hear my prayers and help me. Other prisoners asked why I read my book instead of doing drugs and drinking with them. Some of them asked me to explain what the Bible said. I led about five to the Lord.

My lawyer secured my release on bail and the case was dropped. I want to thank Yvonne for helping and supporting me from the beginning to the end. God bless you. Now I have my own motorbike and a job delivering food to people at their homes.

REFLECT

Am I able to hand over my problem to our Lord, and ask him to help me to truly believe that I can trust him?

PRAY

Lord Jesus, the Centurion believed you would heal his servant and his faith was rewarded. I want to trust and believe you will save me with your Grace. Thank you. Amen.

Amos Nshimirimana

AUTHENTIC PRAYER: SUNDAY

READ

Create in me a pure heart, o God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. (Psalm 51)

Lament –I think that’s what I’d call it. But that sounds too ‘Christian’ for how it felt. Tears. Sobbing silently in the shower. Can I bear this? God, must I stay the ride? Why me God? It’s not fair. I didn’t really pray. But, I did cry out. I wasn’t given ‘solutions.’ But I could keep on just a bit longer. Like bread brought by ravens in the wilderness, to feed me for a day – because a week would have been too long – I was quietly given a little more compassion to keep going just a little bit longer.

In my darkest times in my struggling marriage, I didn’t really feel I prayed like a good Christian should. What I found, was a song stuck in my head that I played on repeat:

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth’s lamentations,
I hear the sweet, tho’ far-off hymn
That hails a new creation;
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—

How can I keep from singing? (Robert Lowry, sung by Audrey Assad)

My soul longed to sing again – and I wanted to remain faithful. To God first, and to my promises. As I listened to the song, I would cry because I had lost my own ‘music.’ When I could not pray in my own words, I found a song to speak of my longing, and the words of Psalm 51 to remind myself that I want a pure heart, and God would indeed sustain me.

REFLECT

On this earth, Jesus’ pain was greater than mine. He sees me, and weeps with me.

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for being my Comforter, my Provider. Give me grace for when I fall and fail. Hold me, love me; thank you that you see me and you know my pain. Thank you for walking with me, and carrying me. Amen.

Post Script: By God’s grace, as well as a lot of hard work and many hours in counselling, we have moved from mutual pain and brokenness, to finding healing and restoration in our marriage. But not all painful circumstances are resolved, and I write of struggling to pray in the most difficult times. Our journey is not yet complete.

Anonymous

AUTHENTIC PRAYER: MONDAY

READ

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

A while ago, after a week of violence in Cape Town, Tim led the evening congregation through a series of prayers and songs of lament. I sat quietly, knowing that attempting to mouth the words might start me weeping inconsolably.

We read Psalm 77. We sang, ‘... carried by your constant grace, held within your perfect peace; never once, no we never walked alone.’

Only, I was crying out about another violence, which felt somehow to be magnitudes greater than anything else. My family was in turmoil as we watched my sister and her daughter battle the tough and tightening grip of depression. My parents and some close friends had prayed, day and night, for months; but when I looked at the situation, I felt completely overwhelmed. Everyone was hurting, not just my sister.

I don’t find it easy to pray. Throughout these months, often the best I’ve been able to muster is, ‘God, please help us!’ The anguish didn’t leave me praying prayers of “raw honesty” as much as it left me feeling that I couldn’t pray at all.

Then, in preparation for our Wednesday connect group, I stopped at the lesson in the study guide beginning with these verses from Romans and ending with a simple prayer, paraphrased below. I’ve found tremendous grace and encouragement in these verses; and effectiveness in the practical act of praying this simple, authentic prayer to God our deliverer.

REFLECT

The Spirit within us is actually praying for us in those agonising longings which never find words.

PRAY

Holy Spirit, I feel overwhelmed and hopeless. I am not sure how to pray for _____, but I know that I want God’s will to be done. You are the one who comes alongside us and pleads for us. I ask you to intercede with the Father on behalf of _____ according to the will of God. Help me see things as you do. Amen.

Warren Gatcke

AUTHENTIC PRAYER: TUESDAY

READ

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

Some years ago I was suffering and in a dark place. Nothing seemed to initiate or facilitate the recovery process.

At this time, I was encouraged by a friend to attend a number of prayer sessions. The big lesson I learnt from this experience is that answer to prayer is not always a simple direct, linear, A to B immediate response. It can also involve a process on a more complex, subtle and indirect path that inevitably still leads to answer in prayer.

For me, answer to prayer was about networking with appropriate people who connected me to relevant situations and contexts which in turn brought recovery. What I was learning in this process was that I must be willing to engage in opportunities that come around as well as take steps out of my comfort zone –not to be so passive in approach to prayer. Despite all this, there was a sense of peace and a space of feeling safe and supported by trusting that God is part of the process. I also learnt to let go and have more trust, and not always be so demanding and time-focused – to let God do his work.

Answer to prayer is therefore not always direct and in a hand-out like fashion. It is not always in obvious and expected ways. It can also be about being placed on a longer journey that opens up doors to new opportunities and connections, which in turn opens and liberates you as a person.

REFLECT

God has his own unique way of answering prayer, and we cannot and must not force our own worldly ideas onto how we would like it done.

PRAY

Thank you, Lord, for answering prayer on your terms. Give me the insight and faith to see the opportunities that you provide in answering prayer. Amen.

Richard Vergunst

AUTHENTIC PRAYER : WEDNESDAY

POURING OUT OUR SOULS TO THE LORD

READ

'Not so, my lord,' Hannah replied, 'I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.' (1 Samuel 1:15-16)

Hannah tells us she was pouring her soul out to the Lord. Starting with an eloquent vow, turning into an anguished, wordless prayer for a child. We don't know what she was praying, but we know that she must have looked a mess. And we also know that God heard her.

I don't remember much of the period around my dad's death. I was a teenager, and I had only recently become a Christian. I remember desperately paging through my Bible for some answer to the 'why, God?' in my heart. I remember the pain and anger of finding nothing there that seemed to help – but nonetheless finding my heart somehow stilled.

I have a different Bible now, and the pages around Psalm 91 are crinkled from tears I cried over that psalm, praying for my brother in hospital with an aggressive form of leukaemia. I just read it aloud, over and over. 'Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare'.

I've prayed anguished prayers of 'God, why?' and anguished prayers of 'God, help' and sometimes less coherent prayers. I've prayed scripture, spoken verses of miracles and healings over people I love. Some of them were healed, some we lost. Sometimes I've just sat with pain and tears before God, my prayer simply being in the silent sitting before Him.

God hears our coherent prayers, and our incoherent prayers: our wordless prayers, the silent hurt, the questions we can't even articulate to ourselves.

REFLECT

If there is something painful you are going through at the moment, bring yourself and the pain you are feeling before God. Do this however you need to –silently sitting before God with the pain or anger; or pouring out your questions and hurt with words; or speaking in tongues; or finding scripture that helps you put words to what is in your heart.

PRAY

Lord God, you see me, you see my hurt. Be with me. Amen.

Laura Richter

HUMILITY

HUMILITY: THURSDAY

Suffering poses a stern test when it comes upon us, and all the more so if we somehow feel it is undeserved. There is within most of us an imperious quality that somehow believes life 'owes' us something. The irony is that this attitude is generally attached to our selfishness and wilfulness – the very qualities that are marks of our fallen nature. As we look to the grace and strength of the Lord in dark times, we open ourselves to his changing our familiar 'poor me! what have I done to deserve this?' narrative.

Peter writes to Christians in a context of tough persecution,

... if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.' (1 Peter 2:20-24)

Jesus sets an example of amazing grace and humility in suffering. Who had more reason to voice recrimination and unjust suffering? Yet Jesus prays, *Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34).

A little further on in his first letter, Peter writes,

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:6-7)

Advice like that is hard to accept when we are suffering, as the example of Job eloquently shows. Yet Job makes that hard journey to a humble assessment of himself. At the end of his long wrangle with God, he comes to the point where he says,

I was talking about things I knew nothing about, things far too wonderful for me. I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance. (Job 42:3,5-6)

True humility before God is a treasure that becomes a source of profound service to others. It is a quality of godly character that is forged in tough places but it is 'a pearl of great price' to be received as one of the great gifts of our times in the darkness.

Spend time in silent reflection, entering imaginatively into the experience of Jesus hanging on the Cross, releasing forgiveness upon his executioners; and ask God to speak to you about growing in humility and forgiveness.

HUMILITY: FRIDAY

READ

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength. (Psalm 8:2)

Cris was suffering from psychotic delusion, I from depression. He would come to my room where I lay weeping bitter tears wrought from depression, bringing with him an apple or stale biscuit, to comfort me. When I was lonely he would sit in my room, his words tumbling out of him, Christian and Biblical, believing implicitly, simply and literally.

His earthly camouflage stripped away by his mental illness, he would stand in the vulnerability and the nakedness of his human frailty. Clear for me to see his sin and shortcoming, his truthfulness emerged, an example to us of our hypocrisy and the trappings of our pride and greed; Cris just was.

He gave and comforted with hugs, as a little child hugs his mother and brings her small tokens of love. Perhaps as the woman who brought the ointment to Jesus, which others saw as useless, Cris brought apples and pears – he brought his heart. His gifts were simple, yet to me they brought tears of gratitude, for he knew with what I suffered, he identified with the sufferings of the mind. And his simple expression helped me through the dark nights of my depression.

REFLECT

And Jesus said, Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work on me (Mark 14:6). The gift of one who sees you as a precious person, may seem to others of little practical value. Let us look beyond the worldly to the heart of him who seeks to console us - to open our eyes to the heart of those who bring themselves, perhaps bearing gifts of love and balm to touch the heart. Such gifts are precious. Those who suffer deeply themselves often identify and understand our suffering.

PRAY

Lord God Almighty, you came to us as a little babe, innocent and dependent, yet dear and cherished, later to bring us the greatest gift: of salvation, a way out of our suffering and sin. Friendship, in its innocence and vulnerability may help us in our darkness and suffering by touching us with your helping hand. Thank you. Amen.

Theresa Keay

HUMILITY: SATURDAY

READ

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Around 1990, I was a very happy and satisfied deputy headmaster at a big boys' school. I was asked to coach the first rugby team, an exciting challenge that I accepted eagerly. Then the wheels came off.

I did not relate well to that group of boys, and even less well to their fathers. I had missed pre-season training because, unexpectedly, I needed to travel with the WP Schools Basketball team. For the first two matches of the season, the first and second teams played at different venues, which made fair selection difficult. And our results were poor.

As the term went on, I discovered that some of the fathers were actively trying to get me replaced and drawing in the headmaster, the chairman of the Board of Governors (an old friend), and the Old Boys Committee of which I was a member. I was unaware of all this activity, but felt the results in the lack of trust by the players, and a lack of support as our results continued to be bad. So in June I resigned, feeling isolated, unwanted and mildly depressed. What a let-down it was, as I saw my teaching and coaching as a service to Christ.

A month later came the opportunity to join a new venture, bridging promising pupils from disadvantaged schools into Universities and Technikons. This led to the happiest 15 years of my teaching career.

You will notice that my account blames everyone but myself. There is also the possibility that had I been having a happy and successful coaching experience, I might not have been willing to move. When we are feeling down, it is not always possible to see the causes or the light at the end of the tunnel. But "God works for good"!

REFLECT

Am I seeking God's will through my difficulties; or am I perhaps blaming others for my unhappiness?

PRAY

Oh God, wherever I am now, I know that you have something good waiting for me. Help me to look out for it and accept your good provision.

Peter Broster

HUMILITY: SUNDAY

READ

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' (Jeremiah 29:11)

This promise from God was what I held onto, and tried to believe, as I walked the road of illness with my best friend Shirley. For over three years, she struggled with cancer and I was privileged to walk this journey with her. It was not always easy to understand God's plan in the pain and sadness as Shirley gradually got more and more ill.

I found myself hanging onto this promise in all the darkness, and surrendering the whole situation to God – I had to trust that God knew what was happening here, and one day all would be revealed.

In the last few days of Shirley's life, I felt I was stepping onto holy ground where God was holding her and bringing her home as part of his bigger plan. Shirley remained steadfast in her belief that God was in control and had been part of her journey from the beginning – she could relate many times when it could only have been God at work in her life as she went through this arduous journey.

I still struggle with why this had to happen, why now, why was she not healed? The only promise and reassurance I have is that God was (and is) in control and that this was somehow part of his plan for Shirley and those around her.

REFLECT

Am I able to see Jesus weeping with me as we weep, enabling me to get through the nights of grief – and even in times of confusion and sadness, to recognise that we stand on holy ground, in the presence of God? Am I able to embrace the privilege of journeying with someone in suffering? Am I able to respond humbly and trust God's eternal purposes?

PRAY

Lord, I thank you for your promise that you do know the plans you have for us and that these are good and prosperous plans. I pray that you will help us to hold onto this promise even in the midst of difficult times. Help us to step out and be with others in their journeys. Amen.

Kathy Scott

HUMILITY: MONDAY

READ

Then Job replied to the Lord: 'Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.' (Job 42:1,3,5-6)

The first three years of our marriage were spent in Grahamstown, where I was a student at St Paul's Theological College. Looking back, I can see that those were days of amazing divine provision. God gave us what we needed, but just enough. One of these 'just enough' acts of provision was the gift from my father of a well-worn orange Volkswagen Beetle. Driving that car was an art because it had so many foibles and faults.

At the end of our first year in Grahamstown, we set off back to KZN. In the remotest part of the Transkei, the Beetle decided it would go no further. Dusk was fast approaching, and no help was in sight (in the pre-cell phone era). My mechanical abilities then (and now) could be written on the back of a match box. So there I was, trying to be a grown-up but feeling completely helpless and anxious.

I had a big meltdown of anger against God for getting me into such a desperate scrape. There was not much evidence of faith in my rant, nor of being a grown-up either! Nevertheless God, who is full of grace, provided. Mechanics who were returning from another breakdown further along that deserted road stopped, fixed the problem, and then proceeded to drive steadfastly behind us like protecting angels all the way to Kokstad.

Though written in a different context, Paul's words resonate: ... *do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realising that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?* (Romans 2:4)

Remembering that occasion always humbles me. How blind I was to the goodness of God and how lacking in faith! And the Lord continues to show his kindness and grace to one so undeserving.

REFLECT

Can I see when two sets of footprints in the sand become just one set ...?

PRAY

Lord, grant me the humility to see how your grace carries me in tough seasons. Amen.

Rob Taylor

HUMILITY: TUESDAY

READ

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2)

I am a recovering Christian – I like to think that is my identity, rather than a recovering addict. I grew up almost all my life in shelters and orphanages and I perceived this life as a horrible experience. I grew more and more angry. As an adult, I found myself repeating that same victim role again and again with pain and self-pity.

I discovered that I was imprisoned by my own anger and by the rage that I felt by being abandoned by my mother. Rather than protecting me from the past, my anger had become my jail. The time had come to let go of the past and live in Jesus' presence. In these past few months, I have begun to explore the spiritual path and become increasingly aware of how I blame God and religion for my feelings of abandonment and abuse. The more aware I became, the more I was able to see how responsible I was for holding on to the pain I was still feeling.

God has given me a spirit of discernment, and I have become much more aware of God's love. This has helped me to forgive God, myself, my mother, and others; to accept my past and let it go. God is teaching me how to hold on to him and trust him.

Each day I feel greater freedom from the pain and anger associated with my past. There is a sparkling in my eyes that was never there before. I thank God for this wonderful, good thing he is doing in my life and for the healing in my life.

REFLECT

What does it mean for me to believe each day that the Lord has plans for me, plans to give me hope and a future?(Jeremiah 29:11)

PRAY

Lord God, forgive me for turning away from you, and then blaming you for the pain in my life. Please help me believe that you can rescue us from the prisons we create, and that you have plans for us to prosper. Amen.

Portia Ncoko

HUMILITY: WEDNESDAY

READ

I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden wealth of secret places so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.
(Isaiah 45:3)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2 Corinthians 4:7)

At the beginning of 2019, I had a goal. I prayed, ‘God, keep me relevant.’

Aging is unkind. One’s energy and stamina decrease; people see you differently; even itinerant sellers at traffic lights now no longer call me ‘Mama’ – I’ve become, ‘Gogo’.

I don’t have children so my DNA will not endure, nor are there handy carers to ensure I don’t wander off, physically or mentally. Friends have become my family, and in 2019 a very dear close friend died more suddenly than expected, leaving that dependence more vulnerable.

I don’t have many spiritual children but what I wanted most was to matter – to God and people – hence my prayer. I anticipated growing old gracefully, dispensing my wisdom where needed.

But God required of me to walk some very hard yards, setting aside what I wanted in order to support others who were struggling to stay alive. While it was one of the most difficult periods of my life, I don’t resent it, but it took a toll on me that was unexpected. I lost my joy in the Lord, and leaned heavily on friends to understand and pray. There were daily small encouragements and deep disappointments. My jar of clay came close to breaking and I felt irrelevant.

I was reminded of Paul who was hard pressed ... *but not crushed ... struck down, but not destroyed ... so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body* (2 Corinthians 4:8-10). God also reminded me that his love is eternal and unchangeable – and that wanting to matter was commendable, but what really matters is that he is relevant.

REFLECT

How have my goals been set aside recently – and where is God inviting me to walk with him in unexpected ways?

PRAY

God, all I seek is to know that you are the Lord, and that you alone are my treasure. Amen.

Ev Els

TRUST

TRUST: THURSDAY

When we look at the Cross of Jesus, the last word on suffering is, literally, *'Father into your hands I entrust my spirit'* (Luke 23:46). In his commentary on this verse, William Barclay reminds us that this was the simple prayer every Jewish child was taught to pray as they laid their heads on the pillow and went to sleep. It is a prayer of childlike and implicit trust.

On the surface, suffering would seem to ask unanswerable questions about the goodness and trustworthiness of God. One of the great questions that has challenged theologians down the centuries is 'the problem of pain', speaking of the existence of so much suffering in the world. On a universal and theoretical level, it continues to be a question that defies any easy answer, but, not infrequently, we encounter Christians who, in their own experience of suffering in one form or another, have come to a profound personal answer. Despite their external circumstances, they display an amazing resilience and assurance of the goodness and trustworthiness of God. They have found a treasure in the darkness, a jewel as enduring as a diamond, and that is a confident assurance in the goodness of God that no earthly setbacks can shake.

Paul shows himself to be a man who has taken hold of this treasure of trust as he writes to Timothy in the final stage of his life,

That is why I am suffering here in prison. But I am not ashamed of it, for I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return. (2 Timothy 1:12)

Does suffering diminish our assurance of the Lord's closeness or magnify it? For some, suffering produces the former, but there are as many (perhaps more) testimonies to the latter. Christians discover the truth of the great statement with which Paul ends Romans chapter 8:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Verses 35-39)

Spend time in silent reflection, entering imaginatively into the experience of Jesus as he entrusted himself into the hands of his Father; and ask God to grow within you a deeper assurance of the goodness and faithfulness of God.

TRUST: FRIDAY

READ

I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours. But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.

(Mark 11:24-25)

Recently, when my husband, Grant, discovered at the age of forty-two that he had a father he did not know of (and who knew nothing of him), he had many questions without answers. His mother had died a decade before, about a year after his grandfather, who was also one of the few secret-keepers and a father-figure to Grant growing up. In a way, both his beloved mother and grandfather betrayed him by keeping the truth about his father from him, for no apparent reason (even now).

As Grant undertook the task of finding out who his father was, hoping that he was still alive, he wrestled with feelings of abandonment, hurt, disappointment, resentment and fear, wondering why his mother and grandfather had not trusted him with the truth.

He also wondered why God had let this happen, allowing his mother to suffer to such an extent that she had taken her own life, depriving him not only of the truth about his father, but also of his relationship with her.

Grant relentlessly pursued his goal for almost a year when, having reached a dead-end place of despair, he was comforted with these words: 'Get on with your search ... and maybe someday we will find that it wasn't really wasted time.' After this message from God (through a fellow believer at church), Grant exerted himself once more and it took just three days for everything to fall into place. Grant found his father (aged 65) and their relationship is one of mutual love, understanding and respect.

REFLECT

The most that we can ask of God is *anything*. The most he asks of us, first, is to forgive those against whom we hold a grudge. Even this act of forgiveness is for our own good.

PRAY

Thank you, great God, for your fatherly love and your determination to unite families and believers through Christ. Amen.

Rachel Ferriman

TRUST: SATURDAY

READ

I am convinced that ... nothing ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

When I was growing up, when hard times hit, my father used to say, 'These things come to try us.' He trusted that God was in control, that troubles served to 'try', test or refine us and God is always faithful.

At the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019, a series of difficult things occurred. A cousin who had been in hospital for four months, fighting to adjust to a liver transplant, lost the battle and died. My husband had six-hour surgery to remove cancerous growth. While he was still in hospital, I had unexpected emergency surgery, then repeated infections, so that in the space of two months I had three surgeries and was left feeling physically disabled and weak. In the middle of that time, fire swept right through our Pringle Bay property such that we had to escape in the middle of the night, taking nothing with us. Life seemed threatened on a number of fronts, and I had a keen awareness of vulnerability and weakness in the face of forces beyond my control.

It was scary. There was more fear of cancer than there was of fire or loss of material things, and there was sadness over the death of a loved one, but I never doubted God's presence. Nothing can separate us from his love. I had a sense of complete trust that he was with us in the fire, in the pain, the weakness, the loss. He showed his presence in the many people – friends, family and strangers – who self-sacrificially helped in so many ways – mopping up after the fire, bringing meals, and doing shopping in the time of physical recuperation. I am so grateful for life, for the kindness of friends and strangers, for the wonder of healing and recovery, both physically and in the beauty of new growth after fire.

REFLECT

In the events of our lives, can we ask ourselves: 'Where is God in this?' and 'What is God's invitation to me?'

PRAY

Lord, thank you that nothing can separate us from your unfailing love.
Amen.

Barbara Richardson

TRUST: SUNDAY

READ

My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak.
(2 Corinthians 12:9b)

When Duncan McLea visited me after my stroke, he reiterated the message that he had given me on the previous Sunday following his sermon on 'Listening to God'. His message was that God was with me through whatever was going to happen, adding 'God says he will make it right.' I have often pondered on the last bit of the message - that God will make it right. Of course, I understood it as being immediate healing and all would be well. When that didn't happen and through many dark moments of weakness that followed, I had to consciously take the attitude that I chose to praise him no matter what! I clung to his grace and his presence was very near. I think that many people experience this in times of stress. Now, some 17 years later, I can say that although I still have a number of disabilities relating to the stroke, he has kept his promise.

I do believe God heals people, and I have seen God heal both miraculously and completely in response to prayer. The problem comes for many of us when he doesn't do the spectacular, but heals in a more gentle but sustainable way. Having said that, I did see a strengthening of my paralysed arm in response to prayer more than three years post CVA, when no significant further improvement is expected.

Through it all, I learned that we need to cling to his grace, which we are told is sufficient for every day, and there is always enough. Life is not smooth, but as we learn to cling to him and to his grace, it brings us closer to him and I think that God actually enjoys the ongoing conversation.

REFLECT

God actually enjoys the ongoing conversation with us, as we learn to trust him more and more.

PRAY

Dear Lord, help us to cling to your goodness and grace. Your grace is sufficient. Amen.

Sam Moore

TRUST: MONDAY

READ

Teach me your ways, O Lord, that I may live according to your truth! Grant me purity of heart, so that I may honour you. With all my heart I will praise you, O Lord my God. I will give glory to your name forever, for your love for me is very great. (Psalm 86:11-13)

I always believed that a positive nature, and determination, will bring the results you want. Whilst this may be a good attitude, and generally worked for me through life's ups and downs, there was a time when it didn't ...

Shortly after re-committing my life to God, and, together with my business partner, committing our new business to God, it felt as though the earth around me began to shake. Things were not working as I had planned, and my business partner challenged my self-reliance and hesitancy to really trust God in everything. I admit, I initially took offence and felt life closing in on me. Some days I woke up with a heaviness and the question, 'God, what are you doing? Why?' Whilst I questioned, my business partner trusted, showing me no pity, but pushing me to seek God.

My daily prayer was, 'Lord, I cling to you, because I don't understand what you are up to!' Then God gave me Ephesians 3:20 to meditate on: *all Glory to God, who is able ... to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think*; confirmed with GOD IS ABLE in bright red letters on a drive-by taxi (!), followed by worship songs expressing this exact message – and my eyes opened. It is my duty to choose to worship God and seek relationship with him no matter what, and trust that he knows what he is doing. He is teaching me to pray differently, to seek his truth above my own and to align with his plans that are better than mine. Doors and opportunities are beginning to open up – within the business, and personally. And I am so grateful for this!

REFLECT

What aspects of my life are not working as I had hoped? Am I relying on myself or am I trusting that God is able ...? Who are those accountability partners in my life?

PRAY

Father, help me trust you, and be open to your good ways! Amen.

Elke Hagedorn

TRUST: TUESDAY

READ

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

In April 2004, the year our son was writing his matric, he suffered a serious brain injury when he was assaulted by a student from another school. As we walked through this dark period when we didn't know what the long term effects of this brain damage would be, the Lord strengthened and upheld me through that healing process. There was also the journey of forgiving and finally meeting with the disturbed youngster who had assaulted our son. Through this difficult period, I learnt to appreciate life in a whole new way. I found joy in simple things I'd previously taken for granted. We were so grateful for outpouring of love and support from family, friends, school and our faith community.

The Lord armoured me with heavenly weapons such as praise and worship, the sword of his living and active word, and his shield of faith which enabled me to endure and conquer through this trial. The words the Lord spoke into my heart which carried me through the long nights were: Be still, beloved bride, and know that I AM God.

Although our son had to write his matric over two years to enable his brain to heal, he did finally recover full functionality. Today he is a high-powered computer programmer and has a lovely girlfriend who is also in the IT field. Thank you, Lord!

REFLECT

What trial are you currently facing that is testing your faith? Is there a person in your life you find challenging?

PRAY

Lord, forgive me for where I have failed in this situation. I choose to forgive myself as well. Empower me, Lord Jesus, to forgive [name/s] from my heart for the pain and damage they have caused. I have no control over this so I LET GO and LOOK UP as I entrust the situation to you. I let you, God, take control to work all things together for good. What is on your heart for me in this? Amen.

Janet Mills

TRUST: WEDNESDAY

READ

If you only knew the gift of God ... (John 4:10)

I was sick for nine months in 2010 and could do very little during that time. I really missed being able to run and walk in the beauty of creation, as well as being involved with, and 'useful' to, others. Despite knowing that God shares in our suffering and does not cause it, I was seldom aware of God's presence during that time. It was a time of barrenness and darkness.

Meditating on the story of the woman at the well (John 4), I sensed God's Spirit whispering to me: 'If you only knew the gift of God, you would trust Me and not be so afraid.' I knew I needed to trust that God was at work even when it seemed like nothing was happening. The letting go, waiting and trusting was hard.

Henri Nouwen described the spiritual life as the long and often arduous journey on which we slowly become detached from our false, illusory self – a self that is little more than the collective evaluations and affirmations of our surroundings – and are opened up to receive a new self that is participation in the life of God.

This is something of what happened for me during those nine months of illness. I slowly became detached from the illusions that I needed to be able to do things for others in order for them to love me, and that I needed to run competitively in order to somehow prove myself to others. By God's grace, I came to understand that I am always loved by God just as I am, and that I am always connected to God and others. I was opened up to receive the gift of life which is union with God.

This gift of participation in the life of God feels like connectedness, deep inner aliveness, and 'enoughness'. This is the treasure that I discovered hidden in the field of my life (Matthew 13:44), which emerged out of the time of darkness.

REFLECT

What are some of the illusions you have about yourself? What is the gift God longs to give you?

PRAY

Loving God, please help me to trust that you can bring a gift out of darkness.

Judy Everingham

TRUST: THURSDAY

READ

My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

During a long period of burnout and grief, after a close friend was killed, I found I had no energy for ministry or people. I didn't feel myself, and was scared I'd never get back to 'normal'.

I realised I had, in part, found my identity in being helpful to others and doing something meaningful, so I was humbled to try to receive his love and acceptance as I was. In my weakness and vulnerability, I had to trust and deeply depend on God daily, listening to quiet music and repeating short prayer phrases in my mind. He spoke to me through my spiritual director, through nature and particularly through a book called *When the heart waits* by Sue Monk Kidd. God showed me that a season of waiting, stillness and even darkness is ok. In nature it's often a time of internal transformation, and the many times of waiting in the Bible were often when people had a deeper revelation of God's character. I learnt not to fight it, but to connect with God within it, to be patient and co-operate with him in the deeper, transforming work he was doing.

Since that time, God has given me a new level of peace without striving and busyness, an ability to be gentle with myself and others, and an ability to connect with God in stillness.

Later, the book *Is God to blame?* by Greg Boyd helped me to understand that the terrible things that happen are due to the spiritual battle over our world, and when we wonder why bad things happen, we should question our limited understanding of those complexities, rather than question the goodness of God. God doesn't promise us a life with no troubles, but promises to be with us in our troubles.

REFLECT

Can you see signs of God alongside you? He may not come to you as you expect. Is God inviting you to be kind to and patient with yourself? Can you allow your spirituality to be expressed differently in hard times?

PRAY

God, thank you that you are with me always. I choose to co-operate with the inner, transforming work you are doing in me.

Hilary Murdoch

PRAYERS FOR EASTER

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

(1 Peter 1:3-9)

Jesus, what have you not suffered,
what have not given for me?
I can never comprehend you,
but I can love you
and wonder
at the depth of the darkness
which you entered on the cross,
and the depth of the love
which held you there.

Angela Ashwin

Christ, you are risen from the dead.
we are risen with you.
May our life never deny
this eternal life,
this peace and hope and joy.
Praise and glory to the God of life
who is stronger than all kinds of death. Alleluia!

A New Zealand Prayer Book

If you were not risen
Lord Christ, to whom would we go
to discover the radiance
of the face of God?

If you were not risen,
we would not find in your presence
forgiveness,
wellsprings of a new beginning.

If you were not risen,
where would we draw the energy
for following you
for choosing you again and anew?

Brother Roger of Taizé

May the light of Christ, rising in glory,
scatter the darkness of our hearts and minds;
and may the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
rest upon us, and be with us always.
Amen.

PERSONAL PRAYERS

