



Notes for Life Group use and personal reflection

Written by Angela Chapman & Johnny Douglas

September to November 2021

Quotable quotes

'If you can't fly then run. If you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.' Martin Luther King Jr.

'God never said the journey would be easy, but He did say that the arrival would be worthwhile.' Max Lucado.

'You don't need another person, place or thing to make you whole: God already did that. Your job is to know it.' Maya Angelou.

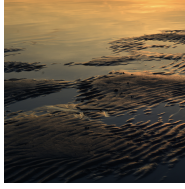
'The greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection.' Henri Nouwen.

'Sometimes when we get overwhelmed we forget how big God is.' AW Tozer

'Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows; it empties today of its strength.' Corrie Ten Boom

'God does not give us everything we want but He does fulfil His promises, leading us along the best and straightest paths to himself.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

'Love alone overcomes fear' Richard Rohr



Recovery is needed.

What an unexpected and unprecedented eighteen months we have been through! We probably never would have predicted or guessed what we have experienced over the last year or so throughout the world, with this pandemic. Whilst everyone has witnessed what has happened, we have all experienced it very differently, each of us having had a unique journey through it. The best way I think it was explained was this, **'We have all been in the same storm but we did not all ride in the same type of boat'**.

We have all been reminded over this period, that unexpected and bad things can and do happen, and that many people suffer lots of things, other than a viral pandemic, much of the time, all over the world. Things constantly change and seek to interrupt and disrupt our lives.

Richard Rohr reminds us that the world has changed, each of us has had our lives and communities disrupted, we have experienced a sense of global solidarity because Covid bypasses race, gender, religion and nation. How then do we respond? What is God saying to us as individuals and as a church family? Many are weary and burdened emotionally, physically, psychologically and spiritually. Time to recover is much needed and yet the world continues to turn, life demands much of us, the 'great pause' is over, Scripture is full of invitations to find our recovery in God – His invitation to come aside, to pause, draw breath, find strength, drink from the well, be filled again with His Spirit. Our series in August, 'Encounters with Jesus' powerfully reminded us that recovery for each of us begins with our own daily encounters with Jesus.

Re-Imagine

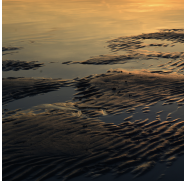
We know a God who never changes - Hebrews 13:8, and is always constant in His love and care for us, who is always welcome to come in and interrupt our everyday lives.

As we emerge from this very strange time of on-and-off restricted liberty, we realise how precious our freedom is, particularly our freedom to worship God at all times. Let's ask and welcome Him in.

The worship song 'Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord' comes to mind when I think about recover and re-imagine. We take time aside with our Father to hear from Him, to receive from Him and then go forward in His strength, and His strength alone into the future. We are different people than 18 months ago, maybe we have found out more about what we need and can do without, how important people and relationships are, what we value about our church family; we've learnt new skills and new ways of communicating, we've learnt how to worship without congregational singing, how not to interrupt each other when praying together via Zoom! I don't believe we are to forget this time but learn from it and take it forward, together. It's like someone who learns to walk again after an accident, step by step, day by day we look forward and not back. Martin Luther King Jnr famously 'dreamed a dream' of a better future, what is our dream under God? This is a divine opportunity to re-imagine what we do and how we do it – we're not throwing the baby out with the bathwater but being open to good change, positive change, change that brings us closer to Him and closer to each other, that is inclusive, not exclusive, that is about Gods heart rather than our own preferences.

Reset

So, let **us** reset and refocus on Jesus and look to Him for our wisdom, for our protection, for our guidance and for directing the way forward for us as we emerge out of 'Lockdown' times and into all that He has prepared and planned for each of us, see Jeremiah 29:1. **I reset my mileage on my car whenever I fill it up with petrol to see how many miles I have done on each tank. Resetting as a church is about our activities, not our values and vision, not our calling to be salt and light, to love one another, to pray for Gods kingdom to come in our parish communities.** What must we do? What must we not do? These next week's leading to Advent will help us discern together, confident that Gods plans for us as individuals and a church will be for our good.



Background...

This Autumn series hopes to be really helpful for us all as we go into this '**recovery and rebuild**' stage after these many turbulent months for everyone. We have sought bible verses and stories which should encourage and uplift us, and help move us on from a place of 'unstable change' to a more 'constant peace', because of Jesus. We have chosen one Old Testament and one New Testament scripture for each week; to embrace, teach and accompany that week's title. **As it says in Matthew 5:17, 'Do not think that I have**

come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' So, a **richness of Old Testament prophecy linked by the New Testament fulfilment, for us to dwell on and be nourished by.**

God loves to bring us his comfort and his grace in all seasons. There's ministry and care and tending He wants to apply to our hearts and spirits as we grow back in life and church together.

He is a God of great care and tender comfort.

May you know this to be true for you this Autumn especially.



Week 1 – September 12th 2021

Forward not Back

OT - Isaiah 43:18-19 NT – Philippians 3:12-14

Introduction and Background

When we look back and reminisce over our lives and events, it's likely that we all have things that we have enjoyed or celebrated. There are also those things that we are glad to see the back of, whether they be sad or oppressive or just truly embarrassing. In Isaiah 43:18-19 we read that the Jewish people were beginning to experience peace and security under the rein of their new Persian ruler Cyrus after years of oppression. We see how God planned to use Cyrus to bring deliverance to His people. **'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!' Isaiah 43:18.** God forgives and restores His people because He is a God of redemption. God does new things; after all, He is the ultimate Creator, and He is making a path and a way forward in the wilderness.

The way of God is to start afresh – we are all-to-often held captive by our past. In Philippians 3:13-14 the apostle Paul uses the analogy of a race, the goal and the finish line in his journey of faith. He wants to forget all that has gone in the past and looks forward to the delight and victory of seeing Jesus Christ face-to-face. He heads for the ultimate prize.

In both OT and NT pieces we learn that God alone is the Saviour of His people. He will not let His people perish. His promises are true. God's promise is for something new, something fresh... we are encouraged to live in the 'today', look ahead and move forwards.

Questions and Reflections

1 Read Isaiah 43:18-19 and Philippians 3:12-14 in two different bible versions. What immediately strikes you from these passages?

2 Which key word comes up in both? What was God doing here?

3 What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'forward not back?'

The world can be cruel when people don't allow us to change, reputations can haunt us. One of the problems of the internet is that things don't always disappear, an unflattering photograph, a bad restaurant review can be on there for a long time. Even if the owner of the review has made changes, the review may not change immediately. What can we do to move on?

4 How do you do with new things and changing this?

5 Instead of living in the past demanding that God revive the 'glory days' can we look to and embrace changes and new ways, whilst keeping only the things that stand over time? How do you answer the question, 'What is God saying to us today?'. See also 2 Corinthians 5:17.

6 God loves doing new things - Isaiah 43:18. What does this mean here in the passage? What new thing has God done in your life during the last 18 months?

7 God does new things every day – fresh manna, fresh forgiveness, fresh hope, fresh blessings – second, third, fourth chances are part of God's gift to us. Can you think of a time in your life when you have experienced God's graciousness and a fresh start?

8 The apostle Paul looked ahead for the ultimate prize Phil 3:13-14. What was the prize he was seeking? And how easy is it for us to keep focused on this prize? Do you ever get side-tracked?

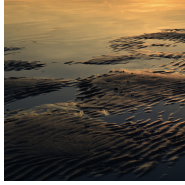
9 Because our hope is in Christ we can let go of guilt and look forward to what God will help us become. What one thing can you do to grow in the knowledge of God and become more like Him?

- **Points to Ponder**

- 'In order to go where we've never been, we have to do something we've never done'
- God loves doing new things. God loves showing us new places. God loves using new methods. Ask God to reveal His ways and what He is doing.

- **Open our eyes Lord and help us to see what You are already doing among us and in my life.**

Amen



Week 2 – September 19th 2021

Whole not Wounded

OT – Isaiah 53:1-6 NT – Mark 5:30-34

Introduction and Background

We can suffer illnesses, ailments and hurts in life, both physiologically and mentally; we can easily allow ourselves to feel less than whole, less than perfect and quite honestly sometimes pretty rubbish. We can also have days where things can seem much better, we are encouraged and we may feel we can conquer the world. 'Wholeness' comes albeit, for a short time, those feelings are often short-lived as we go on to believe we may never feel completely out of life's 'messiness'.

Jesus was wounded for us, so we could be 'whole'. This is a glorious life-changing truth! Our Old Testament passage Isaiah 53:1-6 describes God's suffering servant as one who unselfishly took upon Himself the sins, the mess of others. By His suffering, His humiliation and death He provided forgiveness and new life. Though beaten and killed, this servant Jesus was triumphant! God chose to deliver and exalt Him. This servant is unique because He bore the sins of other people and continues to make intercession for them.

We see this same theme of triumphant power in our New Testament passage Mark 5:30-34 where Jesus specifically addresses the woman who touches His clothes. We read that Jesus feels the power coming out of Him. The woman believes that Jesus can heal her and her faith in Him does just that. She is restored and made well again by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Questions and Reflections

1 Read both passages in two different versions. What jumps out? If we believe that wellness and wholeness can happen because of God's Holy Spirit power, can we ask for that for ourselves today?

2. What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'whole not wounded?'

3. What can make us feel incomplete and wounded? Can we protect ourselves from such a feeling or do we resolve to just face it as a fact in life? What might God be wanting for you?

4. This prophecy in Isaiah is astounding – who would believe that God would choose to save the world through a humble suffering servant? How have you seen God work in ways that we don't expect?

5. Is 53 v 2 reminds us that there was nothing beautiful or majestic about Jesus appearance that would attract people to Him. What drew you to Jesus?

6. In what way was Jesus wounded and why?

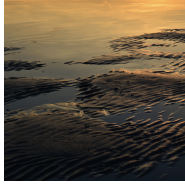
7. What is similar about Jesus' situation and the woman's story, in terms of their humanity? Image what might have held us back for the last twelve years? **Exercise our gift of faith and reach out to God for His help for the opening up and forgiveness for the things that bind us.**

8. Why did Jesus ask who had touched Him?

9. We can learn from both of the above scriptures that nothing and no one except God have the power to make us whole. *Psalm 73:26 reads, 'My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.'* Where have you known this truth in your own life?

● Points to Ponder

- In the story of the woman who was healed we are comforted by the fact that Jesus stopped to find out who she was, 'Who touched me?' He said, Mark 5:30 showing that He notices and takes time out of His schedule. That we are not a nuisance to Him. That He always has time for us.
- Sankey's hymn says this: 'She only touched the hem of His garment, as to His side she stole, Amid the crowd that gathered around him, and straightaway she was whole'
- Isaiah 53:3 gives one of the most well-known prophecies about the suffering Saviour, Jesus Christ – how is this relevant to us today?



Week 3 – September 26th 2021

Energised not Exhausted

OT – Isaiah 40:28-31 NT – Philippians 2:12-18

How are you feeling right now, energised or exhausted? And does it depend on what is in front of you? For most of us, it can be a mix of thoughts and emotions, head-space and heart! Isaiah 40:28 onwards presents a magnificent portrayal of hope, encouragement and energy. God's people at this time were weary, overwhelmed and discouraged because they had been defeated. This had left them living as exiles in a foreign land – Babylon. But they knew that God still had a plan for them. In their weariness, they wondered if God's promises could still be true?

We too go through health crises, financial crises, broken relationships, personal failures and weaknesses – and other experiences of deep pain and suffering. Like the Israelites, we too can become discouraged and doubtful, and then exhausted. How amazing then that God's strength can be given to us - Isaiah 40:29. God is at work within us. God can re-energise you.

Similarly, Philippians 2:13 tells us that it is 'God who works within you, giving you the will and the power to achieve His purpose'. Having Christ dwelling within us, by grace we have all we need. By possessing Christ's attitude, we can be loving, humble, unselfish, surrendered, obedient and courageous - and energised!

Questions and Reflections

- 1 Read through Isaiah 40:28-31 in two different bible translations and dwell on them for a few minutes. What immediately strikes you?
2. What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'energised not exhausted?'
3. God's enslaved people were weary and were tempted to give up - 'to faint' 40:31 but what was God's promise to them? What did they need to do?
4. Whilst we get tired and weary, God's strength never diminishes. How can we exchange our strength for God's?
5. v31 The phrase 'mount up' is a translation of the Hebrew word 'alah' which means to 'go up, ascend, go over a boundary'. What does this mean for you and I today? What are we promised?
6. What hope does this passage offer you and I? What's your working definition of hope?
7. Paul encourages the Philippians to work out their salvation v 12. What does this mean for you and I?
8. v13 What do we do when we don't feel like obeying? What is God's response?
9. v 13 How do you know that God is at work in you?
10. Where do you want God to be at work in and through you this week?

- **Points to Ponder**

- God in His grace will provide power, strength and courage to the weary, weak and downtrodden when they are willing to be patient and wait on Him.
- The eagle has two natural enemies: storms and serpents. He embraced the storm, waiting on the rock for the right thermal current and then using that to carry him higher. While other birds were taking cover, the eagle was soaring. An eagle would never fight against the storms of life'.

Karen Kingsbury



Week 4 – October 3rd 2021

Peaceful not Anxious

OT – Psalm 94:18-19 NT – Romans 8:31-39

Introduction and Background

Matthew Henry said, 'The Psalmist found succour and relief only in the Lord when all earthly friends failed.' How often do you and I keep trying to resolve our problems alone, or with the help of friends and family, to no avail? This makes us uneasy and anxious. But the Psalmist tells us, and so directs us back to the Lord for our joy, **'When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.'** **Psalm 94:19.** I don't know about you but I've lost count of how many times I've had to remind myself to pray first, not last when in desperation, to ask for God's help with solutions to life's everyday problems. Then peace comes because of God's intervening and unfailing love.

Romans 8:31-39 reminds us that 'Nothing can come between us and the love of God.' The sovereign power of God's love can protect and preserve God's people to the uttermost. This perfect love casts out fear 1 John 4:18 and peace resumes because there is no fear in true and pure love. God showed us the strength and depth of His love by sacrificing His own Son for us John 3:16. His love is total and stands up against the tests of all things. Peace can resume.

Questions and Reflections

1 Read both of the bible passages (OT and NT), in two different translations. Ponder on those for a few minutes. What are they saying to us?

2 What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'peaceful not anxious?'

3. Phil 4 v 7 reminds us that 'The peace of God that transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus'; John 14 v 27 says: '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'. What does God's peace mean to you?

4. How often in life may we say of ourselves that we were just on the verge of 'slipping' or 'sinking', when our strength was almost gone when we were overcome by anxiety, that God by His mercy, saved and supported us? Do you have an example in your own life story about this?

5. What does scripture tell us of God's loving kindness? Psalm 36 v 7, Ps 69 v 16, Is 63 v 7, Is 54 v 8, Eph 2 v 7, Titus 3 v 4-6.

6. Compare and contrast the two bible scriptures – what's the same and what's different?

7. In Romans 8: 38-39 we are given a whole list of things that are unable to separate us from God's love. Is there anything at all that we know of that 'can' separate us from God's love?

8. The one true God, creator of all things is 'for' us. 'If God is for us who could possibly be against us?' Romans 8:31. What do we say to someone who believes that God is against them?

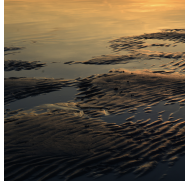
9. Where do you need to experience the peace of God today?

- **Points to Ponder**

- Nothing, absolutely nothing, can break the bond of love established between believers and God through Jesus Christ - Romans 8:31-39.

- Shalom is a Jewish religious principle. The webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice, fulfilment, and delight are what the Hebrew prophets call Shalom. We call it peace but it means far more than mere peace of mind, or a cease-fire between enemies ... Shalom in other words is the way things ought to be.

- Christ's faithfulness – and ours, by God's grace, overcomes the worst that life and work can do to us.



Week 5 – October 10th 2021
Organised not Overwhelmed

OT – Psalm 121:1-8 NT – 1Corinthians 14:26-33, 39-40

Introduction and Background

Many of the Psalms contain the theme of God as a helper in times of suffering, adversity, persecution or trouble. Sometimes the trouble is personal and sometimes it can be national. The key idea is that of deliverance, and Psalm 121 is such a 'go to' Psalm when we need to call upon God's help in times that we feel overwhelmed. We want to make some 'sense of order' to overcome the chaos we feel, and so we call out with the words, 'Where does my help come from?' Psalm 121:1 and the answer and the relief come, 'My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.' Psalm 121:2. God is a God of order, not chaos – we just have to look at the spectacular orderliness of His creation of the universe to know that. This Psalmist goes on to tell us that God watches over us and protects us from harm. We pray, and we breathe, and again all is well. Such prayer expresses confidence in God's protection through our daily problems.

The idea of 'order' comes up again in 1 Corinthians 14: 26-40 where Paul was encouraging the worshippers of Corinth to exercise their ministry gifts 'in a fitting and orderly way'. Over these few verses Paul talks of 'being silent' which had to do with 'taking turns', listening to one another 'so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.' If the turn-taking and order had not been observed in the meeting, then the people would soon have felt overwhelmed with noise and chaos.

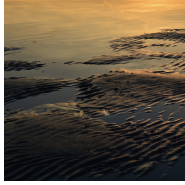
Questions and Reflections

1. What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'organised not overwhelmed?'

2. Read Psalm 121 in two different versions of the bible – take some time to meditate on it. What strikes you afresh in this psalm?
3. This Psalm was one of the songs likely sung by the Hebrew pilgrims travelling up to Jerusalem for the worship festivals. How would this Psalm capture their mood and experience together?
4. What does this Psalm reveal about God's character and God's ways? How does it shape your understanding of how God relates to you?
5. How have you experienced the Lord watching over you in the past?
6. What strikes you from 1 Corinthians 14:26-40?
7. How and why do we have order in worship today?
8. How do we express spiritual gifts for the benefit of one another?
9. What might be your one take-away message from these two different passages above?

- **Points to Ponder**

- Ben Franklin said 'God helps those who help themselves' but scripture teaches us that God helps those who seek His help. None of us are safe until we take refuge in God. Samuel Cox.
- Psalm 121 teaches us three big truths about God's help and care for you and I; firstly, the Creator is your helper, secondly, the God of Israel is our protector, and thirdly that He is close beside us.



Week 6 – October 17th 2021

Rooted not Restless

OT – Psalm 18:1-6, 46-50 NT – Ephesians 6:10-17

Psalm 18 shows us another example of God being our helper and our deliverer. The Psalmist writes, 'My rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock in whom I take refuge'. We know the story of the wise man who built his house upon the rock, which is taken from a parable where Jesus encourages us to build our lives on Him and His truth. In the 'rock' parable story, when the rains come down, the house built on the rock stands firm on its strong foundations Matthew 7:24-27. This teaches us that, if we build our lives on Him, if we are 'rooted in Him' we will not become restless when the storms come, but we will remain firm and unwavering. **David, like Paul, reminds us to 'Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might' Ephesians 6:10.**

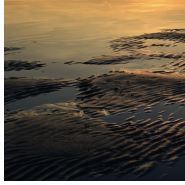
The closing verses of the epistle to the Ephesians reflect the theme of warfare. There is a need for strength as well as compassion. We are soldiers as well as servants. The various items in the armour have Isaiah verses behind them - see 11:5, 52:7, 59:17. The bible and prayer are indispensable aids to victory. The full armour of God is what protects us when we have doubts, fears and guilt. The way we stand against the accusations of the enemy is to believe what God's word says about us instead. This spiritual armour keeps us rooted in Him.

Questions and Reflections

- 1 Read Psalm 18: 1-6, and vs 46-50 in two different translations of the bible. Which verses resonate with you the most? In what ways does this psalm comfort and strengthen you and I?
- 2 What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'rooted not restless?'
3. This is one of the longest psalms, what is the message and why
4. Why is the imagery of a rock so helpful?
5. David has clearly known God's help and provision in a season of trial – what is your equivalent?
6. Read Ephesians 6 v 10-17 in The Message. What does this passage remind us about how we can stand firm and be rooted?
7. 'Restlessness' means being unable to rest, either physically or mentally. We can experience this feeling due to worry, discontent or sadness etc. But God's sovereignty over our problems gives us a solid foundation from which to battle worry. What happens when we pray about this?
8. Think about each piece of armour – what is easiest to put on and which is most difficult and why?
9. How can you be more rooted this week?

- **Points to Ponder**

- In **Colossians 2:6-7** it says, 'So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, **rooted** and built up in him, **strengthened** in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.' Strength, stability and encouragement for you!
- 'The whole basis for our relationship with God is rooted and grounded in grace, in that which is not earned.' RG Sproul.



Week 7 – October 24th 2021

Connected not Isolated

OT – Psalm 25:1-22 NT – Galatians 3:15-18, 22-29

'If God is your partner, make your plans BIG! Let God have your life; He can do more with it than you can' says D L Moody. This encourages us to be connected with the greatest partner and leader of our life, God our Father.

In our times of distress and isolation, we can seek God so that He can place us on top of His shoulders and leave us with no worries as He carries us. It reminds me of the poem 'Footsteps' in which the Lord is seen to be walking alongside us through every season of our lives. In the poem, it is in the toughest times that there appear to be only one set of footprints in the sand. The walker asks the Lord. 'Why is it that at the most sad or difficult times of my life did you leave me?' The Lord replied, 'I did not leave you. I would never leave you. It was in those lowest times that I picked you up and carried you.' For me, this is a beautiful image of God as our ultimate caring and life-long partner.

Psalm 25 depicts God as our helper, our partner, in times of suffering or trouble. What precious promises we have to encourage us in prayer, of guidance and instruction, the benefit of the covenant, v 10 and the pleasure of communion with God Psalm vs 13-14. This idea of being 'connected' in 'Him' is made perfect in Galatians 3:28, 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

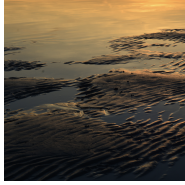
Questions and Reflections

1. Through the Coronavirus pandemic we have experienced that feeling of isolation and lack of connection. Read Psalm 25 and Galatians 3:15-18, 22-29. How do these Scriptures enable comfort and connection?
2. What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'connected not isolated?'
3. What do we do that enables us to make connections with God and one another?
4. How does David ask for God's help and guidance and how might we do the same?
5. Can you think of other passages that invite and assure of God's commitment to connection?
6. In what situations have you found yourself isolated? Who did you link up with, connect with, partner with? What helped and why?
7. Do we trust that God's guidance for our lives is the best thing for us? Are we willing to reject our own desires in favour of God's guidance?
8. Read Galatians 3:26-29 –what immediately strikes you from these verses?
9. What does being part of God's family mean to you?

- **Points to Ponder on**

At the beginning of Psalm 25, David professes his desire towards God and his dependence on him. He often begins his Psalms like this, not to move God but to move himself, and to engage himself to answer those professions. Such prayer is the ascent of the soul to God.

- 'Life is a gift, not to possess but to share.' Henri Nouwen
- 'My home is in heaven. I'm just travelling through this world.' Billy Graham



Week 8 – October 31st 2021

Focussed not Drifting

OT – Proverbs 3:1-8 NT – Matthew 6:19-34

Introduction and Background

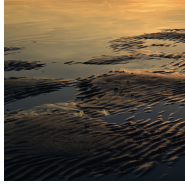
We know that accepting God's discipline is a part of being God's people. God directs the paths of those who wholeheartedly trust in Him. Proverbs 3:5-6 reminds: **'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.'** He keeps us focussed and on the 'straight and narrow' as the saying goes. That saying probably originates from Matthew 7:14 where it says 'straight is the gate and narrow is the road, that leads to life.' How easy is it to get side-tracked and submit to all sorts of temptations that divert us past the bounds of safety? Satan knows our weaknesses and puts attractive snares in our paths at just those moments when we are most vulnerable. Matthew 6:19-24 and Matthew 6:25-34 talk about us being side-tracked by 'our treasures' and 'worrying'. Well, these really are two of the 'biggies' for us, aren't they! If anything can distract us, these two can do a pretty good job on us. Good physical and spiritual health can help us to stay on the 'straight and narrow way.' Proverbs 3:1 'Son, don't forget my teaching, but keep My commands in your heart.' The wisdom teacher accepts the role of Father to his students; discipline is one expression of the Father's love for us, His children.

Questions and Reflections

1. Read both of the passages in two different versions of the bible. Try and follow the direction of focus of these passages. What gets our attention?
2. **What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'focussed not drifting?'**
So how do we keep on the 'straight and narrow' way, with the world so full of temptations?
3. What other Scriptures might you draw on to help you keep focussed.
4. **What particularly strikes you from the passage in Proverbs?** What are we asked to do with 'love and faithfulness' Proverbs 3:3 and why?
5. What does it mean to really trust God? How do we know that we're trusting in God rather than leaning on our own understanding?
6. Matthew 6:24: What might it look like if someone is 'serving' money? What happens to us if money is our master?
7. Matthew 6:25: Says 'For this reason ...' What is the reason?
8. In a world being driven by fear, how does trust in God help dispel the fear?
9. Matthew 6 v 19-24 asks us where is your treasure? What is our answer?

- **Points to Ponder**

- 'But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.'
Matthew 6:33
- Anxiety over life is a perennial problem. Jesus' remedy for anxiety is to make the kingdom of God and His righteousness, the centre of our priorities.
- Where is your treasure?



Week 9 – November 7th 2021

Satisfied, not Meaningless

OT – Ecclesiastes 5:1-10 NT – 1John 2:15-17

Introduction and Background

When you begin reading the book of Ecclesiastes, you can quickly feel overwhelmed with the words about meaninglessness and misery. **However, it makes an important contribution in that it forces us to question the claim to the 'good earthly life' and 'everything-is-fine-around-here' mantra.** It spotlights the truth about work, pleasure, wealth, truth, government, knowledge and a host of other things, and whether they deliver on their promises. It concludes that none of them is an adequate master for life. King Solomon was on a quest for the meaning and purpose of life!

Further on, when we get to Ecclesiastes 5:1-10 we are given instructions to be thoughtful in the worship of God when in God's house – that worship is to be done with serious purpose and honest intentions. That the attitude and humility of the person determine true worship, not the place. That God's authority, majesty and transcendence should make us cautious as we communicate with Him.

Life can be enjoyed if we are not greedy. Only then is it said to be satisfactory, and only a life centred on God can be satisfying.

In 1 John 2:16, we read, on a similar verse about the meaninglessness that, 'Everything in the world-the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world.' 1 John 2:17 follows with the satisfaction that **'the world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.'**

Questions and Reflections

1. Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-16, 5:1-10. Why might King Solomon, who was successful by human standards, write something so full of despair?

2. What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'satisfied not meaningless?'

3. What picture of the world is being painted here?

4. v 1&2: Why might we need to 'guard our steps' when entering God's house?

5. How might this passage **Ecclesiastes 5:1-7** change our attitudes to worship? Watch this video clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nEraXboshk> and see if this helps to steer your thoughts?

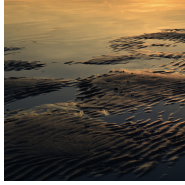
6. 'It is not how much we have, but how much we enjoy, that makes happiness.' Charles Swindoll. Discuss!

7. Re-read 1 John 2:15-17. Compare and contrast what the world appears to value and what God values.

8. What values are most important to you? Do our words and actions reflect the world's values or God's values? What do we struggle with most?

• Points to Ponder

- King Solomon, who wrote Ecclesiastes, was a seeker on a quest for the meaning and purpose of life. He began to search for the meaning of life 'under the sun', apart from God. In one sense we should be glad that he did. This is because he left us an account of the futility of life without trust in God. 'God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.' John Piper
- Worldliness is ... internal because it begins in the heart and is characterised by three attitudes: the lust of the flesh (preoccupation with gratifying physical desires); the lust of the eyes (craving and accumulating things, bowing to the god of materialism); the boastful pride of life (obsession with one's status or importance).
- 'Let us think often that our only business in this life is to please God'. Brother Lawrence.
- 'There will be no peace in any soul until it is willing to obey the voice of God' DL Moody



Week 10 – November 14th 2021

Mourning not Melancholy

OT – Psalm 116:1-9 NT – Revelation 21:1-7

Introduction and Background

Mourning means, 'the expression of sorrow after death', whereas melancholy means, 'a feeling of pensive sadness typically with no obvious cause'. They are different but both express deep feelings.

Psalm 116 calls on God to help in a time of suffering, distress and sorrow, surrounding near death. The Psalmist's love for God has grown because He answered his prayers. This Psalm is part of a group of Psalms known as the Egyptian 'Hallel' meaning 'praise'. This word is linked with Hallelujah (Praise the Lord). The Egyptian 'Hallel' has been used in the Jewish celebration of the Passover.

Whilst we know that death is a part of the cycle of life and that all families **mourn** their loved ones at appropriate times, these last eighteen months has highlighted a death pattern common across the whole world with the Coronavirus Pandemic. It has been in the media news coverage daily. Grief is everywhere, and what is in some cases 'avoidable' death has been hard to explain and comprehend. Only God can truly comfort those who mourn: 'The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.'

Psalm 34:18. Grief is a part of being human.

Looking ahead as Christians we believe that sorrow and mourning will come to an end for us all, 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' **Revelation 21:4.** It will be a remarkable time when it happens.

Questions and Reflections

1. Read Psalm 116 in two different bible translations. What strikes you or jumps out at you?
2. **What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'mourning not melancholy?'** What is the difference between these words for you?
3. What makes you mourn and why?
4. How does Psalm 116 help us manage our mourning?
5. v1&2: How and why is prayer an important part of the grieving process?
6. v5-8 What kinds of feelings and thoughts does a person have when they are physically or emotionally exhausted?
7. Read Revelation 21:1-7: What hope does this give us?
8. In what way should the truth about Jesus' Kingship, and imminent return, shape our lives here and now do you think?
9. How would you help a new Christian understand this passage?
10. What does God being the 'Alpha' and 'Omega' mean to you today?

- **Points to Ponder**

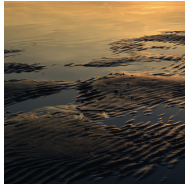
- 'Our glory is hidden in our pain if we allow God to bring the gift of Himself in our experience of it.' Henri Nouwen

- 'Bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love.' CS Lewis. *A Grief Observed*.

- 'He whose head is in heaven need not fear to put his feet into the grave.' Matthew Henry.

- 'Death to the Christian is the funeral of all his sorrows and evils, and the resurrection of all his joys'.

- James H. Aughey



Week 11 – November 21st 2021

Loved not Fearful

OT – Psalm 34:1-9 NT – 1 John 4:7-21

In different scriptures and text, we learn that love and fear do not reside together – one blocks out the other. There is no fear in true love. In 1 John 4:18 we read that, 'Perfect love casts out fear.' And we know that 'God is love.' 1 John 4:8. Perfect love is Jesus, God wrapped in human flesh.

In the musical *Les Miserables*, adapted from the novel written by Victor Hugo, Jean Valjean is dying and he sings a prayer to God to take him now, take him home. He knows that his life's mission has been fulfilled by keeping his promise to Fantine in raising her orphan daughter for her. He sings, 'Remember the truth that once was spoken, 'To love another person is to see the face of God.'

Psalm 116, a prayer of thanksgiving, begins in a rather unique way with the Psalmist declaring love for God. It is much more common for the Psalmist to speak of trusting God, or seeking refuge in God. Love is a covenant word here. The Psalmist simply promises to, 'call on Him as long as I live.' This Psalm, like others, begins by recognising reliance on God as the supreme expression of faithfulness. 'Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.' 1 John 4:7-8. This passage may be the strongest single passage in the Bible, concerning the love of God. The word used here for love is 'agape' meaning a self-giving love that is not selfish or self-seeking.

Questions and Reflections

1. Read Psalm 34 in two different versions of the bible. What strikes you most?
2. What do you think and feel when you hear the words - 'loved not fearful?'
3. What are the blessings that can be found in this Psalm?
4. v4: What do you fear and how does it affect the way that you live?
5. What truth about God gives us courage in the midst of all of our fears?
6. The verses in 1 John 4:9-10 say that Christ's birth and death show us God's love. How do these two events help you to understand God's love?
7. v 13: How do we know that we are in God and God is in us? What evidence is there?
8. v 21 Recognising that love is not always based on feelings, what are some of the practical ways that we can show love to others? What does Jesus say about loving others?
9. As a result of these scriptures how might you move from being fearful to the place of security that you are loved?

● **Points to Ponder**

- God pays attention to those who call on Him. Whether God offers escape from trouble or help in times of trouble we can be certain that He always hears and acts on behalf of those who love Him.
- 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8 says, 'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hope, always perseveres. Love never fails.
When you read these words of love above, there is really is nowhere that fear can get in between.
- 'God's love is so extravagant, so inexplicable that He loved us before we were us.' Judah Smith
- 'There is no-one who is insignificant in the purpose of God'. Alistair Begg.
- 'The shape of true love isn't a diamond. It's a cross'. Alicia Bruxvoort.
- 'The nature of God's love is unchangeable. Ours alternates all too readily. If it is our habit to love God with our own affection we shall turn cold towards Him whenever we are unhappy'. Watchman Nee.