

Lent Course – The birth and growth of a church

Paul the Apostle was a church-starter. On his travels around the known world he covered around 18,000 miles, 10,000 of them on foot. On one journey he arrived in Ephesus, a busy port in what we know as Turkey, and stayed there for three years.

After he left Ephesus he kept in contact and wrote to the people who had become the church there, and what he wrote has come down to us as the letter to the Ephesians, or Ephesians for short. One wonders how many of Paul's letters may have not survived.

There is yet another letter to the church at Ephesus. This one wasn't written by Paul. You will find this in the book of Revelation.

In this study I want to look at Paul's stay, to find out what he did there, and how a church was started and developed under his guidance. We'll also look a little into Paul's calling.

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when:2014-03-05 06:02 GMT

Day 1

Acts 7:51-60

Stephen addresses the council

You stubborn and hard-headed people! You are always fighting against the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors did. Is there one prophet that your ancestors didn't mistreat? They killed the prophets who told about the coming of the One Who Obeys God. And now you have turned against him and killed him. Angels gave you God's Law, but you still don't obey it.

When the council members heard Stephen's speech, they were angry and furious. But Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. He looked toward heaven, where he saw our glorious God and Jesus standing at his right side. Then Stephen said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right side of God!"

The council members shouted and covered their ears. At once they all attacked Stephen and dragged him out of the city. Then they started throwing stones at him.

The men who had brought charges against him put their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

As Stephen was being stoned to death, he called out, "Lord Jesus, please welcome me!" He knelt down and shouted, "Lord, don't blame them for what they have done." Then he died.

While Stephen's speech in its entirety is quite long and really does not warm up until the final words it was necessary for him to remind his accusers that they had lost their way with God. This was not an easy message to present to those controlling the Jews' religion (as opposed to the faith) or those invested with position, power and influence.

One of them was Saul of Tarsus, a young man who had studied the Law and was considered an expert. He would probably have been moved to anger by this upstart Stephen's speech, though it's also likely that Stephen's message had cut deeply into Saul's core. In the same way that Jesus had been silenced by the religious authorities Saul may have seen suppression as the only way. He may have only been the cloakroom attendant at this event but he was a willing participant.

- **How far should you go in telling a difficult truth to those that do not want to hear it?**
- **What in our Church today has caused ministers and people to cover their ears?**
- **What courageous act are you longing for your church to do?**
- **Stephen's face was like that of an angel (Acts 6:15). What was the writer attempting to communicate with the readers?**

Father God, I stand amazed at the courage of Stephen. Your Holy Spirit is both powerful and dangerous for us, revealing truth where lies persist, shining light into places that would remain dark and emboldening those who yield to him in Christ.

I imagine that Stephen had not planned his martyrdom, but he saw Christ revealed in his glory and did not step back.

Give me courage to speak the truth. In Jesus' name.

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Day 2

Acts 11:19-24

Some of the Lord's followers had been scattered because of the terrible trouble that started when Stephen was killed. They went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, but they told the message only to the Jews.

Some of the followers from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and started telling Gentiles the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's power was with them, and many people turned to the Lord and put their faith in him.

News of what was happening reached the church in Jerusalem. Then they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When Barnabas got there and saw what God had been kind enough to do for them, he was very glad. So he begged them to remain faithful to the Lord with all their hearts. Barnabas was a good man of great faith, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Many more people turned to the Lord.

It's hard to comprehend that in the very early days of the Church there were people who had had to leave their homes and families as they were scattered across the known world because of persecution. You need a map to see how far people went.

With that scattering came expansion of the Church - those who were scattered were not silenced. It would be natural to share The Message with your fellow Jews rather than anyone else, as so much of our understanding of who Christ is rooted in the Jewish Scripture.

God is now opening the Gospel to non-Jews. Through his power at work in the followers new converts from outside Judaism are coming into the faith. From this moment on there will be a struggle between the Jewish and the Gentile believers over what constitutes proper practice, and there will be challenges for the church in Jerusalem as it attempts to regulate the faith.

We start to see particular people being raised up by God for specific purposes. Barnabas, "the encourager" is one of Paul's companions for a while.

- **How much of your faith resides in the traditions and teachings of Judaism?**
- **How would you share your faith with someone from outside that?**
- **What causes people to turn to God?**

Prayer

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Day 3

Acts 9:1-9

Saul kept on threatening to kill the Lord's followers. He even went to the high priest and asked for letters to the Jewish leaders in Damascus. He did this because he wanted to arrest and take to Jerusalem any man or woman who had accepted the Lord's Way.

When Saul had almost reached Damascus, a bright light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice that said, "Saul! Saul! Why are you so cruel to me?" "Who are you?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus," the Lord answered. "I am the one you are so cruel to. Now get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do."

The men with Saul stood there speechless. They had heard the voice, but they had not seen anyone. Saul got up from the ground, and when he opened his eyes, he could not see a thing. Someone then led him by the hand to Damascus, and for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink.

Saul is now a man with a mission. Unfortunately it is not God's mission but Saul's own. Saul has identified a threat and his one aim is now to destroy it, single-handedly if necessary (give or take a posse). Saul is filled with all the righteous sentiments that would be admired by so many of the Jews, or at least the Jewish leaders – a passion for keeping the faith intact, to preserve the purity of its teachings as interpreted by the Pharisees (of which Saul was one), to maintain the traditions as handed down by rooting out blasphemers and subversives.

Once he gets the necessary papers he's off, hoping to reap a harvest of these troublesome followers of Jesus. First stop, Damascus. On the way he had some sort of seizure, and his plans changed in an instant.

- **In what ways have you carried out or experienced actions that purport to be Christian but may actually be more about squashing change?**
- **God did not save the lives of all the people Saul had intended to kill. Why did he not act earlier?**

Father God, we so often complain that you do not step in and deal with things the moment we spot them, but if you did we'd be dust.

Thank you for your long-suffering righteousness and your delaying of anger against us. Help us to understand your righteousness in favour of our own. In Jesus' name.

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Day 4

Acts 9:10-16

A follower named Ananias lived in Damascus, and the Lord spoke to him in a vision. Ananias answered, "Lord, here I am." The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the house of Judas on Straight Street. When you get there, you will find a man named Saul from the city of Tarsus. Saul is praying, and he has seen a vision. He saw a man named Ananias coming to him and putting his hands on him, so that he could see again."

Ananias replied, "Lord, a lot of people have told me about the terrible things this man has done to your followers in Jerusalem. Now the chief priests have given him the power to come here and arrest anyone who worships in your name."

The Lord said to Ananias, "Go! I have chosen him to tell foreigners, kings, and the people of Israel about me. I will show him how much he must suffer for worshipping in my name."

Who'd be a prophet? Ananias was just a follower but God chose him to encounter Saul. When Ananias confesses his fear of Saul he gets a short response: Go!

God had already given Saul the vision and Ananias is named in it. God tells Ananias that a man named Saul of Tarsus has had a vision. Is God having a little smile in this vision? Saul from the city of Tarsus – now does that name ring a bell, Ananias?

It's clear that Saul has already been up to mischief in Jerusalem, and the Christians in Damascus are already feeling threatened. We could imagine that Damascus had seen a number of new believers and a church that was beginning to grow. Could this Saul of Tarsus destroy it all?

- **Am I less insignificant than Ananias?**
- **We may enjoy singing "Here I am, Lord" in the chorus to "I, the Lord of sea and sky". Who is the I being referred to?**
- **Why did God choose Saul of Tarsus?**
- **Whose church is it anyway? How can we align our church life to that?**

Father God, everything is great in your kingdom until we hear words like "suffer". Help me understand why suffering is a part of the life we have in You. In Jesus' name.

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Day 5

Acts 22:1-5

"My friends and leaders of our nation, listen as I explain what happened!"
When the crowd heard Paul speak to them in Aramaic, they became even quieter. Then Paul said: I am a Jew, born and raised in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia. I was a student of Gamaliel and was taught to follow every single law of our ancestors. In fact, I was just as eager to obey God as any of you are today.

I made trouble for everyone who followed the Lord's Way, and I even had some of them killed. I had others arrested and put in jail. I didn't care if they were men or women. The high priest and all the council members can tell you that this is true. They even gave me letters to the Jewish leaders in Damascus, so that I could arrest people there and bring them to Jerusalem to be punished.

Many years later Paul (new name) is in a similar position to that which Stephen faced. He is in Jerusalem having to defend himself against Jewish accusers in an incident that flared up almost out of nothing. It was only because the Roman army came out to protect him that he didn't get lynched by the mob (read the previous chapter to find out more – should Paul have been in Jerusalem?).

He tells the people what he was once like, a devout and sincere follower of Judaism, taught by a Pharisee, and a persecutor of those who followed a different way. People had died because of Paul's actions.

Paul goes on to describe how Jesus spoke to him on the road to Damascus and how, through Ananias, he had been

- **Was Paul right to be zealous for the faith of his ancestors?**
- **How would you greet Paul in heaven if you were a Christian who had died at his hands?**
- **What aspects of the present age would cause you to be zealous for the faith we have?**

Father God,

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Day 6

Acts 9:17-25

Ananias left and went into the house where Saul was staying. Ananias placed his hands on him and said, "Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me. He is the same one who appeared to you along the road. He wants you to be able to see and to be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Suddenly something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see. He got up and was baptized. Then he ate and felt much better.

For several days Saul stayed with the Lord's followers in Damascus. Soon he went to the Jewish meeting places and started telling people that Jesus is the Son of God. Everyone who heard Saul was amazed and said, "Isn't this the man who caused so much trouble for those people in Jerusalem who worship in the name of Jesus? Didn't he come here to arrest them and take them to the chief priests?" Saul preached with such power that he completely confused the Jewish people in Damascus, as he tried to show them that Jesus is the Messiah.

Later some of them made plans to kill Saul, but he found out about it. He learned that they were guarding the gates of the city day and night in order to kill him. Then one night his followers let him down over the city wall in a large basket.

Ananias did as God had commanded him. There must have been some relief on his part when he saw before him a blind man. Saul was healed of his blindness and was baptised. Ananias understands about the Holy Spirit, and this gift was passed on to Saul as well as the healing.

It is not long before Saul is using his learnt knowledge and understanding alongside what the Holy Spirit reveals to him as he goes out to the familiar Jewish meeting places but now tells the people a new message that this dead trouble-making false prophet Jesus is not dead at all, but is actually the Messiah and Son of God.

That is a double whammy to the Jews. A Messiah who ended up on a Roman cross? No way. The Son of God? How can the One God have a son – is this not blasphemy?

Death plots have already started. Who'd be a Christian, eh?

- **When was your faith last offended?**
- **What did you do in response?**
- **When was your faith last challenged?**
- **Have you ever mistaken challenge for offence?**

Father God, I love to lie down in green pasture. But if I get lazy and fat in my life and faith then shake me a little and lead me on through the tougher pathways. In Jesus' name.

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Day 7

Acts 9:26-31

When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to join the followers. But they were all afraid of him, because they did not believe he was a true follower. Then Barnabas helped him by taking him to the apostles. He explained how Saul had seen the Lord and how the Lord had spoken to him. Barnabas also said that when Saul was in Damascus, he had spoken bravely in the name of Jesus.

Saul moved about freely with the followers in Jerusalem and told everyone about the Lord. He was always arguing with the Jews who spoke Greek, and so they tried to kill him.

But the followers found out about this and took Saul to Caesarea. From there they sent him to the city of Tarsus. The church in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria now had a time of peace and kept on worshiping the Lord. The church became stronger, as the Holy Spirit encouraged it and helped it grow.

Saul comes back to Jerusalem and finds that no-one wants to be his friend. He appears to call first on the believers rather than go to his fellow Jewish scholars and teachers. The followers are perhaps not unreasonably suspicious.

Barnabas offers him his hand, and stands as a witness on Saul's behalf. Saul is accepted and he begins to work with the followers, concentrating on the Greek-speaking Jews – Peter was not educated – he only spoke fish and boats.

We may wonder at religious fundamentalism but it's not new. Saul is already the subject of death plots. He's whisked away to another place – a season in Caesarea by the sea.

- **How much of your time do you spend with the believers and with the unbelievers?**
- **Who is the Barnabas in your fellowship, the one who steps forward and risks criticism for reaching out to the rejected?**
- **Have you ever been threatened because you have shared your faith openly? Why not?**

Father God, you give us times of peace and times of conflict. Though the fig tree does not blossom and there be no fruit on the vine, yet will I rejoice in you. Amen

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Day 8

Acts 11:25-30

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. He found Saul and brought him to Antioch, where they met with the church for a whole year and taught many of its people. There in Antioch the Lord's followers were first called Christians. During this time some prophets from Jerusalem came to Antioch. One of them was Agabus. Then with the help of the Spirit, he told that there would be a terrible famine everywhere in the world. And it happened when Claudius was Emperor. The followers in Antioch decided to send whatever help they could to the followers in Judea. So they had Barnabas and Saul take their gifts to the church leaders in Jerusalem.

Saul was last heard of in Caesarea, the Southend of Jerusalem. Now he's up north in Tarsus, his home town, and Barnabas takes him round the corner to Antioch. If you are reading these place names without any idea of where they are situated then your understanding of the distances these people travelled is severely diminished, as is, too, that of the time they spent in travel. Paul does not seem to have a donkey or horse to his name, just sandals.

They respond to the prospect of famine by sending gifts to the believers in Jerusalem. Saul gets to go back to Jerusalem after a year away. He likes to live dangerously.

- **How long have you lived in one place?**
- **How far was your last walk?**
- **How far is it from Antioch (the one in Syria, not the other one) to Jerusalem (i.e look at the back pages of your Bible or Google up a map)?**

Father God, when Jesus says 'follow me' I perhaps like to do that from my armchair. Teach me how to follow, how to go where he leads me and to bring the geography of my environment into your mission plan for me. Amen.

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Day 9

Acts 13:1-4

The church at Antioch had several prophets and teachers. They were Barnabas, Simeon, also called Niger, Lucius from Cyrene, Manaen, who was Herod's close friend, and Saul.

While they were worshipping the Lord and going without eating, the Holy Spirit told them, "Appoint Barnabas and Saul to do the work for which I have chosen them." Everyone prayed and went without eating for a while longer. Next, they placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul to show that they had been appointed to do this work.

Then everyone sent them on their way. After Barnabas and Saul had been sent by the Holy Spirit, they went to Seleucia. From there they sailed to the island of Cyprus.

The group of people who were praying together had no idea of the plans that God had for Saul. They were told to appoint Barnabas and Saul, which is what they did. They didn't rush into it, and prayed and fasted some more. I think we can presume that fasting for, say, an extra hour is not what is meant here – it would have been for a significant amount of time.

The action of placing hands on the two appointees is not only a symbolic gesture. Jesus did not heal people symbolically when he placed his hands on their heads. Saul's eyes were not opened symbolically when Ananias reached out his hands to him. The level of symbolism we impart to gestures like these may indicate inversely back to us the level of our faith in what may be actually achieved by them through the Holy Spirit's power.

They're off! Saul and Barnabas did not plan the route or book their tickets in advance, even though Cyprus might be a nice place to go. They certainly did not have special tee shirts made with "Tarsuz ladz on a mission #1" printed on the front. They did not know where they were heading, where they would end up, how long it would take, or even whether they'd ever return.

- **Do you know where you are going?**
- **Do your plans for your future follow God's plan for you?**
- **When is God most likely to speak to his people?**
- **When did you last have your role confirmed?**

Father God, you had great things in store for Saul, and because he responded you did great things through him. There is nothing in your plan for my life that would leave me worse off than I am now. Help me to believe that, then set me apart.. Amen.

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Day 10

Acts 18:19-23

[Paul arrives in Ephesus with two friends Priscilla and Aquila]

He then went into the Jewish meeting place to talk with the people there. They asked him to stay longer, but he refused. He told them good-bye and said, "If God lets me, I will come back."

Paul sailed to Caesarea, where he greeted the church. Then he went on to Antioch. After staying there for a while, he left and visited several places in Galatia and Phrygia. He helped the followers there to become stronger in their faith.

We skip ahead now and find Paul (new name!) on his second missionary journey. He is popping into one or two of the places he had visited on his previous journey, and he stops off at Ephesus, because that's where the boat from Greece stops off on his way back to Syria. Remember to check out your maps.

This is a short, unplanned stay, but Paul is clearly welcomed by the Jews in Ephesus. He can't stay, but some other characters do. Aquila and Priscilla are recent companions of Paul, and it seems they and Paul got on well together and they'd become Christians through Paul's witness to them. They stayed on in Ephesus while Paul continued his pastoral journey, visiting new churches on his way back.

A man called Apollos arrives in Ephesus, and appears to be travelling in the opposite direction to Paul. He speaks boldly in the synagogue, but his knowledge and experience is limited. Aquila and Priscilla put him right, enabling Apollos to have a complete picture of who Jesus Christ is. Apollos then goes off to Achaia (Greece), which is where Paul had just come from. He meets up with some of the new Christians in Corinth and proved his worth in debate.

Do you get the feeling that people of Paul's time travelled far more than we do today?!

- **Apollos knew about the baptism that John offered. How is the baptism that Christ offers different?**
- **Can you put into one paragraph of writing what Apollos needed to know to make his understanding complete?**
- **When was the last time you were excited about what you believed?**

Lord God, I want to know more fully what it means to receive Christ's baptism that John the Prophet described as being of "fire and the Holy Spirit". Set me once more on fire for You. Amen.

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Day 11

Acts 18:24-28

A Jewish man named Apollos came to Ephesus. Apollos had been born in the city of Alexandria. He was a very good speaker and knew a lot about the Scriptures. He also knew much about the Lord's Way, and he spoke about it with great excitement. What he taught about Jesus was right, but all he knew was John's message about baptism.

Apollos started speaking bravely in the Jewish meeting place. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him to their home and helped him understand God's Way even better. Apollos decided to travel through Achaia. So the Lord's followers wrote letters, encouraging the followers there to welcome him. After Apollos arrived in Achaia, he was a great help to everyone who had put their faith in the Lord Jesus because of God's kindness. He got into fierce arguments with the Jewish people, and in public he used the Scriptures to prove that Jesus is the Messiah.

A man called Apollos arrives in Ephesus, and appears to be travelling in the opposite direction to Paul. He speaks boldly in the synagogue, but his knowledge and experience is limited. Aquila and Priscilla put him right, enabling Apollos to have a complete picture of who Jesus Christ is. Apollos then goes off to Achaia (Greece), which is where Paul had just come from. He meets up with some of the new Christians in Corinth and proved his worth in debate.

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Day 12

Acts 19:1-7

Paul travelled across the hill country to Ephesus, where he met some of the Lord's followers. He asked them, "When you put your faith in Jesus, were you given the Holy Spirit?" "No!" they answered. "We have never even heard of the Holy Spirit." "Then why were you baptized?" Paul asked. They answered, "Because of what John taught." Paul replied, "John baptized people so that they would turn to God.

But he also told them that someone else was coming, and that they should put their faith in him. Jesus is the one that John was talking about." After the people heard Paul say this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Then Paul placed his hands on them. The Holy Spirit was given to them, and they spoke unknown languages and prophesied. There were about twelve men in this group.

Paul finds his way back to Ephesus and meets with some new believers. It seems they may have had the Apollos treatment, which is a fine preparation but not the complete package. There's baptism, like that John offered to people as a sign of repentance, and there's baptism, like that Jesus Christ offers, which is quite different. Christ's baptism takes us beyond the religious to the spiritual. While forgiveness was seen as an outcome of the baptism John offered, the baptism offered in Christ brings us to a new state of being, beyond anything the world can give.

Our baptism in Christ is an enactment of dying with him as we go down into the water, and rising to new life with him as we come up out. In Christ we die to our old life of sin, as his death paid the price for our sin, and in him we rise to a new and eternal life as kings, priests and rulers with our resurrected Lord in Glory. Quite a difference.

- **Can you re-do your baptism?**
- **Have you ever been on the side of the complainers in your church life?**
- **How should the church respond to those who mock the gospel message?**
- **Why did Paul stay for three years?**
- **At what point can a group of people be called a church?**

Lord God, it is not always easy to live life Your way. I'm tempted to take the easy way, to keep my head down and my mouth shut when I should be standing up and confessing the truth of the Gospel. Help me see the importance of Church. Re-charge me with your Holy Spirit so that I might once again be fired up for You. Amen.

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Day 13

Acts 19:8-10

For three months Paul went to the Jewish meeting place and talked bravely with the people about God's kingdom. He tried to win them over, but some of them were stubborn and refused to believe. In front of everyone they said terrible things about God's Way.

Paul left and took the followers with him to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. He spoke there every day for two years, until every Jew and Gentile in Asia had heard the Lord's message.

Another few months pass. How does Paul survive? He's a tent-maker, and he must be working enough to earn the money that he needs to survive. It's important to remember that the story of Acts does not dwell on what the apostles did on a day off. In those days time passed more slowly and people moved according to the sun's cycles and the seasons' rhythms.

However, it does not take long for opposition to rise. How long would you put up with the rubbish people were saying and the unfounded accusations? Paul stays on for three years in all.

Did the Bible say "every Jew and Gentile in Asia?!"

- **When did you last say something bad about another Christian? Oh, yes, you did.**
- **Have you ever been on the side of the complainers in your church life?**
- **How should the church respond to those who mock the gospel message?**
- **Why did Paul stay for three years?**
- **At what point can a group of people be called a church?**
- **What happens when the whole world has heard the message?**

Lord God, it is not always easy to live life Your way. I'm tempted to take the easy way, to keep my head down and my mouth shut when I should be standing up and confessing the truth of the Gospel. Help me see the importance of Church. Re-charge me with your Holy Spirit so that I might once again be fired up for You. Amen.

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Day 14

Acts 19:11-13

God gave Paul the power to work great miracles. People even took handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched Paul's body, and they carried them to everyone who was sick. All of the sick people were healed, and the evil spirits went out.

Some Jewish men started going around trying to force out evil spirits by using the name of the Lord Jesus. They said to the spirits, "Come out in the name of that same Jesus that Paul preaches about!"

Despite the opposition Paul is being used mightily by God. In verse 11, "God gave Paul the power...", we realise that God provides what is necessary for the situation. Remember that God is in control and what He provides is for His glory, not Paul's, nor is it for Paul's benefit. God did not give Paul such power as a permanent gift, though we should not forget that God had already given Paul clarity of thought and speech, (sufficient) grace and boldness to do what He had called Paul to do.

What amazing power! The woman who touched Jesus' garment knew it. People are taking tokens, items that had merely brushed against Paul, to other people and using them in healing and casting out demons, or, perhaps more likely, just taking them and seeing what would happen. They were not disappointed.

There is power, too, in the name of Jesus. There is power in the name of Jesus. There is power in the name of Jesus. There, typed out by hand three times, not copied and pasted. Why such an effort on my part? Because sometimes we read words like those and they flow past the eyes like rain off a car windscreen. Perhaps a little repetition might help the words sink in. Invoking Jesus' name is a powerful tool - health and safety issues are involved, but not the sort the H&SE can deal with. The Jewish men using Jesus' name may have had some success, but I note that they went round *trying* to force out evil spirits, not necessarily succeeding in their quest. Jesus cast out demons from people as he encountered them. He did not specialise in exorcism or go out with an evil spirit quota to fulfil.

- **A television evangelist is offering free "miracle handkerchiefs" for healing and miracles. Can they work?**
- **Are horoscopes harmful or just a bit of fun?**
- **Where might spiritual forces of evil lurk or have influence in today's world?**
- **Where do we need spiritual armour?**

Lord God, I want to know Jesus and his transforming power in my life. I want to know the power of his name. Help me in everything I do to do it in his name. Amen

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when:2014-03-21 06:02 GMT

Day 15

Acts 19:14-16

Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this, when an evil spirit said to them, "I know Jesus! And I have heard about Paul. But who are you?" Then the man with the evil spirit jumped on them and beat them up. They ran out of the house, naked and bruised.

The seven sons did not put on the full armour of God. They spoke, and the evil spirit spoke back; we should let those words teach us about spiritual warfare.

The seven sons were using poor fire-power. "Come out in the name of that same Jesus that Paul preaches about!" does not express much about their confidence in Jesus. If we want to use the power of Jesus' name we have to understand why it has power and acknowledge and witness to it in our own lives first. The one who bore that name created me, died for my sins, was brought back to life and now reigns with the Father in heaven. His name has power and authority over earth and all the heavenly places. Those men were in some other dimension.

"I know Jesus", said the evil spirit. Not "I know about Jesus". The evil spirit was admitting to the spiritual majesty and authority of Jesus Christ. Even Paul was mentioned, but the seven men were nonentities and the evil spirit saw nothing in them to fear. They got their just desserts.

- **A television evangelist is offering free "miracle handkerchiefs" for healing and miracles. Can they work?**
- **Are horoscopes harmful or just a bit of fun?**
- **Where might spiritual forces of evil lurk or have influence in today's world?**
- **Where do we need spiritual armour?**

Lord God, I want to know Jesus and his transforming power in my life. I want to know the power of his name. Help me in everything I do to do it in his name. Amen

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to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-03-22 06:02 GMT

Day 16

Acts 19:17-22

When the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus heard about this, they were so frightened that they praised the name of the Lord Jesus. Many who were followers now started telling everyone about the evil things they had been doing. Some who had been practising witchcraft even brought their books and burned them in public. These books were worth about fifty thousand silver coins. So the Lord's message spread and became even more powerful. After all of this had happened, Paul decided to visit Macedonia and Achaia on his way to Jerusalem. Paul had said, "From there I will go on to Rome." So he sent his two helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia. But he stayed on in Asia for a while.

The attack on the seven sons did not, however, go entirely the evil spirit's way. People were so frightened by what they saw or by the reports of the attack that they turned to Christ for safety. People started to get rid of the trappings of witchcraft and other occult practices. The only safe thing to do with a book of witchcraft is to burn it. The same goes for horoscopes, lucky charms, objects of superstition, star signs, rabbits' feet, horseshoes, tarot cards, symbols and artefacts of other religions, to name but a few.

And the Lord's message grew and became more powerful.

- **A television evangelist is offering free "miracle handkerchiefs" for healing and miracles. Can they work?**
- **Are horoscopes harmful or just a bit of fun?**
- **Where might spiritual forces of evil lurk or have influence in today's world?**
- **Where do we need spiritual armour?**

Lord God, I want to know Jesus and his transforming power in my life. I want to know the power of his name. Help me in everything I do to do it in his name. Amen

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when:2014-03-24 06:02 GMT

Day 17

Acts 19:23-24

At that time there was serious trouble because of the Lord's Way. A silversmith named Demetrius had a business that made silver models of the temple of the goddess Artemis. Those who worked for him earned a lot of money.

It's frightening to see how quickly things can get ugly when someone's prosperity is being threatened. We will see as we continue this passage how opposition can spring up and truth fall as an early casualty.

When we are threatened by, say, a neighbour's planning application that might spoil our view, or some change to the way we like to do things, there is always the temptation not just to present a fair case in defence, but also to attack the integrity of the threat as well as that of the people who represent it.

Demetrius made good money selling miniature temples, as did some other craftsmen in Ephesus. The new faith was starting to undermine their trade and Demetrius' income and comfortable lifestyle could suffer considerably because of these recent arrivals who were promoting another faith.

- **What articles of our faith should we hold sacred and unalterable?**
- **When did Christianity last challenge your wallet/purse?**

Lord God, help me see beyond that which clutters my faith to the One who lived on earth without riches or a home of his own, who stood for righteousness and justice, and died for love of mankind. Amen.

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when:2014-03-25 06:02 GMT

Day 18

Acts 19:25-29

Demetrius brought together everyone who was in the same business and said: Friends, you know that we make a good living at this. But you have surely seen and heard how this man Paul is upsetting a lot of people, not only in Ephesus, but almost everywhere in Asia. He claims that the gods we humans make are not really gods at all. Everyone will start saying terrible things about our business. They will stop respecting the temple of the goddess Artemis, who is worshiped in Asia and all over the world. Our great goddess will be forgotten!

When the workers heard this, they got angry and started shouting, "Great is Artemis, the goddess of the Ephesians!" Soon the whole city was in a riot, and some men grabbed Gaius and Aristarchus, who had come from Macedonia with Paul.

Then everyone in the crowd rushed to the place where the town meetings were held. Paul wanted to go out and speak to the people, but the Lord's followers would not let him. A few of the local officials were friendly to Paul, and they sent someone to warn him not to go. Some of the people in the meeting were shouting one thing, and others were shouting something else. Everyone was completely confused, and most of them did not even know why they were there.

Have you ever visited Walsingham? This small Norfolk town has two shrines, one Catholic and one Anglican. Walsingham attracts very large numbers of visitors. What always fascinates me is the amount of stuff you can buy in the local shop - crosses, any type (Celtic, Bridget, Byzantine, ...), any size, any material; "holding" crosses (they apparently fit into your hand quite nicely - nice to have a comfortable cross, don't you think?), statues, statuettes, figurines, perfumes, incenses, fonts, garden items, etc. - in fact, more stuff than a seaside trinket shop. By comparison Demetrius was small fry.

Demetrius called a business meeting. Item one on the agenda is to name the threat - Paul is saying that the Artemis/Diana models we make are not gods at all. Item two is to darken Paul's character or intentions with vague accusations - he's going around upsetting lots of people. (How often do we hear in a church meeting, "a lot of people are upset about so-and-such", without their names ever being revealed?) Item three - stir the emotions: Artemis will be forgotten (some god she must be, then).

If there's one thing that must dismay a church minister, it's when members of the flock get together and grumble. Onto little niggles are embroidered half-truths and rumour, and before you know it there's a disgruntled faction of people who seem happier complaining than growing in faith.

So, Demetrius, and any of you who have niggles, exaggerate the situation, puff yourself up, make your people feel threatened or uneasy, mobilise your people, start a demo, provoke lawlessness. Give them a cause and a mantra and you have the framework for any of the unpleasantness, nastiness and downright evil of this and the last century.

•What traditions of our own home church should we hold sacred and unalterable?

Lord God, you call me to live in harmony and unity, for that is what pleases you. Prick my selfish heart so that I might always see your hand behind it all. Amen.

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when:2014-03-26 06:02 GMT

Day 19

Acts 19:30-20:1

Several of the Jewish leaders pushed a man named Alexander to the front of the crowd and started telling him what to say. He motioned with his hand and tried to explain what was going on. But when the crowd saw that he was Jewish, they all shouted for two hours, "Great is Artemis, the goddess of the Ephesians!"

Finally, a town official made the crowd be quiet. Then he said: People of Ephesus, who in the world doesn't know that our city is the centre for worshipping the great goddess Artemis? Who doesn't know that her image which fell from heaven is right here? No one can deny this, and so you should calm down and not do anything foolish.

You have brought men in here who have not robbed temples or spoken against our goddess. If Demetrius and his workers have a case against these men, we have courts and judges. Let them take their complaints there. But if you want to do more than that, the matter will have to be brought before the city council. We could easily be accused of starting a riot today. There is no excuse for it! We cannot even give a reason for this uproar.

After saying this, he told the people to leave. When the riot was over, Paul sent for the followers and encouraged them. He then said good-bye and left for Macedonia.

Do you remember at school the one thing that brought everyone together in the playground was the words, "Fight! Fight!" It doesn't take much to disturb the normal order of things. In Ephesus there is chaos you visualise a situation church life where you feel that God has spoken to you but you fear to speak that message because people might just start to react in the way the silversmiths did?

The situation in Ephesus does not get fully resolved. We, too, face situations in our churches that stay as open wounds for ages, where one group of people claims itself to be implacably opposed to something and refuses to budge from its position.

There is principle, and there is humility. Jesus had every reason to condemn each and every one of us. Instead he took the blame and died in our place.

- **How are we to treat the trouble-makers in our church?**
- **How do you respond to someone who says "over my dead body" to what you believe is the way God is leading us?**

Lord God, help me see beyond the principles of my faith to the One who lived on earth without riches or a home of his own, who stood for righteousness and justice, and died for love of mankind. Amen.

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when:2014-03-27 06:02 GMT

Day 20

Acts 20:14-28

When [Paul] met us in Assos, he came aboard, and we sailed on to Mitylene. The next day we came to a place near Chios, and the following day we reached Samos. The day after that we sailed to Miletus. Paul had decided to sail on past Ephesus, because he did not want to spend too much time in Asia. He was in a hurry and wanted to be in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. From Miletus, Paul sent a message for the church leaders at Ephesus to come and meet with him. When they got there, he said: You know everything I did during the time I was with you when I first came to Asia. Some of the Jews plotted against me and caused me a lot of sorrow and trouble. But I served the Lord and was humble. When I preached in public or taught in your homes, I didn't hold back from telling anything that would help you. I told Jews and Gentiles to turn to God and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

I don't know what will happen to me in Jerusalem, but I must obey God's Spirit and go there. In every city I visit, I am told by the Holy Spirit that I will be put in jail and will be in trouble in Jerusalem. But I don't care what happens to me, as long as I finish the work that the Lord Jesus gave me to do. And that work is to tell the good news about God's great kindness.

I have gone from place to place, preaching to you about God's kingdom, but now I know that none of you will ever see me again. I tell you today that I am no longer responsible for any of you! I have told you everything God wants you to know. Look after yourselves and everyone the Holy Spirit has placed in your care.

I find this passage heart-rending. A few months (that's a guess) later Paul has come back round to Miletus, a few miles from Ephesus, and he called for the elders of the Ephesian church to come over to meet him. Paul had set up the church with people in charge, not just one single person. I can imagine that the elders would be excited by the prospect of meeting with Paul again. While it is true that people moved around quite easily, time was much slower in those days. Do you ever wonder what you actually do and achieve in your comparatively busy life?

Paul pours out his heart to them. He reminds them of his own honesty and integrity when he was with them, how he preached to both Jews and Gentiles. The church met in people's homes, for that was the most natural place to meet. As you read this study, why not invite some people to your home to look at a particular passage together over coffee? If you have questions you cannot answer among yourselves then test your elders, readers, deacons, ministers.

The Holy Spirit had laid upon Paul's heart the need to go to Jerusalem, and the prospect of suffering for his faith. Paul was able to say that the task he was called to do took precedence over any avoidance of suffering on his part.

Paul must move on, and the church at Ephesus must start to look after itself. The elders were entrusted to God's care and called to be shepherds of the flock, protecting them from predators. They never saw Paul again, though Paul did write them at least one letter, and what a letter that was!

• **How well trained do you think the Ephesian elders would be?**

• **Why does Paul carry on, seeing that imprisonment and trouble await him?**

• **Why am I still where I am?**

Lord God, each one of us is a member of our church and therefore carries some responsibility, for none of us are only sheep. I trust in your kindness, your guidance and your protection. Amen.

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when:2014-03-28 06:02 GMT

Day 21

Acts 20:28-35

Be like shepherds to God's church. It is the flock that he bought with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I am gone, others will come like fierce wolves to attack you. Some of your own people will tell lies to win over the Lord's followers. Be on your guard! Remember how day and night for three years I kept warning you with tears in my eyes.

I now place you in God's care. Remember the message about his great kindness! This message can help you and give you what belongs to you as God's people. I have never wanted anyone's money or clothes. You know how I have worked with my own hands to make a living for myself and my friends. By everything I did, I showed how you should work to help everyone who is weak. Remember that our Lord Jesus said, "More blessings come from giving than from receiving."

Paul lays upon the elders of the church at Ephesus the role of shepherds - pastors. A shepherd usually looks after someone else's sheep, and in the Church it is Christ Jesus who owns his flock. Paul had pastored and pastured this flock for three years and had taught them everything that they could manage to understand. New people would be joining all the time and they'd need nurturing. Coming from total unknowing to a measure of maturity in faith in Christ Jesus would take some time. Paul now hands authority over to the elders. It is not Paul's desire to stay in charge, but simply to bring these new Christians to a point where, as a church, they are able to stand together as they venture forward.

He warns against false teachings. We think that this is something you get in Wild West frontier churches and not the established churches of the UK. Think again. Our churches are riddled with watered-down teachings, words of convenience rather than the challenge of holy living; words of ease rather than the true cost of taking up our cross, words of tradition rather than the challenge of what stares us in the face today in the homeless, the hungry, the dispossessed, the broken relationships, the shattered families, drug dependents, self-harmers, modern slavery, the people still walking in darkness looking for the great light.

Having just watched a programme on television about a South African pastor who wears A-list designer clothes and owns a personal fleet of top-end cars supported by a six-figure salary I am heartened to be reminded that Paul, this giant of faith, this man chosen and blessed by God, this scholar and interpreter of the faith, made tents. He sewed for a living and took nothing from the people he lived amongst.

- **What orders of authority are actually needed in a church?**
- **What developments have you seen in your faith over the last three years?**
- **Has God called you to be anything other than a sheep?**

Lord God, each one of us is a member of our church and therefore carries some responsibility, for none of us are only sheep. I trust in your kindness, your guidance and your protection. Amen.

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when:2014-03-29 06:02 GMT

Day 22

Acts 20:36-38

After Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. Everyone cried and hugged and kissed him. They were especially sad because Paul had told them, "You will never see me again."

Then they went with him to the ship.

And Paul sails away, never to see them again. He'd spent a lot of time with these people, people who were new to faith, people who were largely ignorant of the history of their new-found faith, for they were not Jewish believers, but Greeks. Paul was not living amongst his brother Jews and he could not seek the comforts of the rituals and practices of his original faith.

Everything was new. In living with these people Paul was building up his own understanding of what Christian faith is as it was being lived out. He was formulating Christian teaching for church life, which Christ had not majored on. He was coming up against error and misinterpretation, ignorance and no doubt some competition or rivalry.

We see in his letters to the church in Corinth that they'd got all sorts of things wrong – they'd let things slip to such a degree that they were drifting off course and needed some unequivocal rebuke and re-direction from Paul.

Paul has made yet more enemies, outside and even possibly inside the new church at Ephesus. Like as in the parable of the sower, some of the seed that Paul had sown would have fallen on stones or in shallow soil or amongst weeds. Some people would have joined and then turned away, or have left in anger or bitterness. Paul will still have made some deep friendships and experienced some amazing acts of God within that church.

But now he was being called to move on.

- **Who or what have you entrusted to God's care?**
- **How much do you trust that trust?**
- **Do you still hanker after anything of the past?**

Lord God, each one of us is a member of our church and therefore carries some responsibility, for none of us are only sheep. I trust in your kindness, your guidance and your protection. Amen.

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Day 23

Acts 20:22-24 (re-visited)

I don't know what will happen to me in Jerusalem, but I must obey God's Spirit and go there. In every city I visit, I am told by the Holy Spirit that I will be put in jail and will be in trouble in Jerusalem.

But I don't care what happens to me, as long as I finish the work that the Lord Jesus gave me to do. And that work is to tell the good news about God's great kindness.

What is it that drives Paul on? What is the Good News for Paul? It seems like it's trouble most of the way and then imprisonment. Why did Paul and Silas sing hymns to God in the jail in Philippi? They'd been arrested for ruining the business of another Demetrius, this time the man who'd been making money out of a girl who had a spirit of divination. I suppose that the miraculous release of a young girl from Satan's grasp is worth more than the anger of her exploiters, the severe beating and the imprisonment they received as their earthly reward for it. Even after all that, Paul and Silas are still praying and singing to God at midnight. They'd have carried on if it wasn't for the angel interrupting them, releasing them from the chains around their feet and leading them straight out of the prison. Did I mention the jailer who came to Christ as well?

Seeing God at work, fulfilling his promises, using Paul in a mighty way: that's what drove Paul on. The promise of imprisonment and death hold no fear for Paul. His mission is clear, even though he doesn't know how it will turn out or when it will end. All Paul hopes for is to be able to say that he completed the work God had sent him to do.

- **Does God only have work for the important Christians to do?**
- **How can I find out more about what it is that God wants me to do?**
- **What happens if I do not do that work?**
- **Did Paul finish the work God gave him?**

Read more about God's kindness in Ephesians 1:3-6 (Message Bible)

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

Father God, thank you for what you have given us in the Bible. Assist us by your Holy Spirit to understand the truths revealed in its pages, and challenge us to live by its message. Amen.

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Day 24

Ephesians 1:1-2

From: Paul, chosen by God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.

To: God's people who live in Ephesus and are faithful followers of Christ Jesus.

I pray that God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ will be kind to you and will bless you with peace!

We move to the letter Paul wrote from prison to the church in Ephesus. He did not leave stranded the fellowships he helped to found. It is clear from the opening remarks in his letters that Paul continues to be exercised in prayer for them and eager to hear how they are progressing in faith and love. He is also concerned enough about the welfare of those churches to write stern or corrective words should the need arise. Word travelled fast in those days, too, and Paul had friends who would get back to him and let him know how the new fellowships were progressing.

Paul's letters to new churches contain teaching and spiritual revelation and insights. What Paul has written, or to be more precise, what we have that remains of what Paul wrote, for it is probable that some letters have been lost, forms the basis of Christian doctrine regarding Father God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in the church.

Paul is probably in prison in Rome as he writes. He seems to be able to receive visitors though he describes himself as "in chains". This letter is brought to the church at Ephesus by Tychicus, who gets a mention later and in another letter. Paul launches into the letter in his usual way, a minimum of formalities followed by words of praise, teaching, correction and encouragement.

- **When was your church last personally written to?**
- **Where today might we see a similar scenario to that Paul was in?**
- **Write a letter to your church. What would you say?**

Lord God, I can sometimes feel tired by the weight of burdens or misguided or drifting away from the beaten track. I pray that the truths of Paul's letter plunge into my heart. Amen.

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when:2014-04-02 06:02 GMT

Day 25

Ephesians 1:3-10

Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for the spiritual blessings that Christ has brought us from heaven! Before the world was created, God had Christ choose us to live with him and to be his holy and innocent and loving people. God was kind and decided that Christ would choose us to be God's own adopted children.

God was very kind to us because of the Son he dearly loves, and so we should praise God. Christ sacrificed his life's blood to set us free, which means that our sins are now forgiven. Christ did this because God was so kind to us.

God has great wisdom and understanding, and by what Christ has done, God has shown us his own mysterious ways. Then when the time is right, God will do all that he has planned, and Christ will bring together everything in heaven and on earth.

Paul likes to use long sentences. I don't. Paul also loves to express his joy in the faith he now has. This new faith has so many blessings and promises beyond the faith Paul formerly held. Paul loves to remind us of the joys of faith in Christ Jesus. If Paul seems to us to be frequently off on a joy trip then perhaps we're still standing at the joy bus stop facing the wrong way, as we should really be riding along with him, holding firmly on to our hats as we go.

Jesus Christ has changed the world. He brought with him Father God's love, a love so deep that the One who came to this earth and lived on it was willing to give up his life for me, and you.

Paul reminds his dear friends in the church at Ephesus that they, and we, were chosen before the world began. If you think that you are the result of twinkles in parents' eyes then think again. You are planned. You are loved. You are forgiven. You are family. You are so special.

- **How might you see your life differently knowing that you were on God's drawing board?**
- **How might this affect our views on abortion and euthanasia?**
- **What does it mean to be a child of God by adoption? Are we second class?**

Lord God, I want the truth of Paul's writings to permeate into my whole being. Quicken my spirit with your Holy Spirit so that I may come to know the blessings you have given me in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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when:2014-04-03 06:02 GMT

Day 26

Ephesians 1:11-14

God always does what he plans, and that's why he appointed Christ to choose us. He did this so that we Jews would bring honour to him and be the first ones to have hope because of him.

Christ also brought you the truth, which is the good news about how you can be saved. You put your faith in Christ and were given the promised Holy Spirit to show that you belong to God. The Spirit also makes us sure that we will be given what God has stored up for his people. Then we will be set free, and God will be honoured and praised.

I am a chosen one. So are you. We are individually hand-picked. Much as we like to think that in Christian terms when they choose the teams we're the ones who are still sitting on the bench, it is simply not the case. Benches are for losers and in Christ we are the victors. If I'm chosen then Christ must think I'm the one to do the task he has assigned to me and to be the person he wants me to be. He has a plan for me.

Christ came to demonstrate God's truth and love in a way that could not be equalled – he, God in Jesus, died in our place. No other world religion comes close to that devastating premise. There is no God that proved his love by hanging on a cross than our God. And that is not the end of it, for there are hints of more to come in the future. And it will happen, because God planned that, too.

Years ago, at a Christian presentation in Ipswich, I was asked by a steward at the door if I was saved. It's a difficult question to answer, unless you are saved, of course. My friends and I answered with some harrumphing and sidled in. I'd never heard the question before, and I didn't understand its full meaning. Saved from what? Saved for what? This is the question in a longer version: Are you a person who has accepted that in life you are unable to match up to the demands of the Law (the 10 commandments are a good summary) because you just aren't perfect, and the only one who can save you from God's punishment for this is Jesus Christ, who took the hit for you on a cross and won by his resurrection and glory a place for you in God's heaven and eternity? I may have understood that, had he asked that, but the people queuing up behind me to get in may have got a little restless. Yes, I'm saved. I'd have still struggled with it back then, and that has to be the most basic Christian teaching!

Pending Christ's return we have God's Holy Spirit, the most understated member of the Trinity, at least in most churches today. The Holy Spirit is often comfortably passed off as the Comforter, which He is, while His other characteristics are largely ignored. Paul talks of spiritual blessings in Christ – to be cashed at the bank of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit realises in us the truth that we are God's children. We cannot understand what it means is to be children of the Almighty One unless the Holy Spirit makes this real in us. Without the Holy Spirit we merely walk the earth.

- **For what purpose has God chosen you?**
- **Are you saved?**
- **Can we really do greater things than Jesus did? Does the bible say this?**

Lord God, I want to live as a chosen person known to and knowing Jesus Christ. I want to live my life and breathe each breath as one who is saved. I want your Holy Spirit to fill me throughout so that every part of who I am responds as a son to your loving fatherhood. Amen.

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when:2014-04-04 06:02 GMT

Day 27

Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God's people. So I never stop being grateful for you as I mention you in my prayers. I ask the glorious Father and God of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you his Spirit. The Spirit will make you wise and let you understand what it means to know God. My prayer is that light will flood your hearts and that you will understand the hope that was given to you when God chose you. Then you will discover the glorious blessings that will be yours together with all of God's people.

I want you to know about the great and mighty power that God has for us followers. It is the same wonderful power he used when he raised Christ from death and let him sit at his right side in heaven. There Christ rules over all forces, authorities, powers, and rulers. He rules over all beings in this world and will rule in the future world as well. God has put all things under the power of Christ, and for the good of the church he has made him the head of everything.

The church is Christ's body and is filled with Christ who completely fills everything.

Paul now turns to his listeners (the letter would have been read out loud to the whole church). Did you get the warp and weft of what he has written here? If not, try writing it down as notes, e.g.

I'm grateful to God for the faith and love you display, so I pray that God will send his Holy Spirit to give you wisdom, knowledge of God and understanding. I pray that you will know about the hope and blessings you have together in God. God's power is great – it raised Jesus from death and placed him in authority over all things. He is the head of his church and we are the body.

Still quite a few words! How does the reduced version compare? The next task is to get a grasp of what Paul is saying and where his words are leading us.

Here are some thoughts. Only through God's Holy Spirit in us can we know God. Our life has a purpose, and that is to He wants this church to understand how powerful the gift is that we have been given. God's power raised Christ from death and it will do the same in us. Jesus is Lord over all, and nothing can defeat him. In Jesus Christ we have his authority and power. Think of what Jesus did and believe that you can do likewise, and greater.

We cannot be sure if Paul wrote his letters to address a specific need or to correct a misunderstanding or some errant behaviour (definitely the case in letters to the church in Corinth), or whether he was writing a general message of encouragement or teaching. What we can be sure of is that today's church has much to learn from the teaching, interpretation, wisdom and insight that God's Holy Spirit has imparted through Paul.

•**How would you re-write this extract?**

- **What do you think will happen when Christ brings everything together in heaven and on earth?**
- **What does it mean to be a child of God by adoption? Are we second class compared to God's son Jesus?**
- **Can we really do greater things than Jesus did (see John 14)?**

Lord God, I want the truth of this passage to flood as light, as flowing water, as a rushing wind into my whole being. I want your Holy Spirit to live within me as the proof of Christ's resurrection and glory. I want to know the hope-promise of glory in the church today and in the heavenly realms in eternity with Christ ruling over all. Amen.

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to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk
when:2014-04-05 06:02 GMT

Day 28

Ephesians 2:1-10

In the past you were dead because you sinned and fought against God. You followed the ways of this world and obeyed the devil. He rules the world, and his spirit has power over everyone who doesn't obey God.

Once we were also ruled by the selfish desires of our bodies and minds. We had made God angry, and we were going to be punished like everyone else.

But God was merciful! We were dead because of our sins, but God loved us so much that he made us alive with Christ, and God's wonderful kindness is what saves you.

God raised us from death to life with Christ Jesus, and he has given us a place beside Christ in heaven. God did this so that in the future world he could show how truly good and kind he is to us because of what Christ Jesus has done.

You were saved by faith in God, who treats us much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to you, and not anything you have done on your own. It isn't something you have earned, so there is nothing you can brag about.

God planned for us to do good things and to live as he has always wanted us to live. That's why he sent Christ to make us what we are.

It may be hard for people who have been brought up as Christians to realise what it can be like for someone who comes to faith later in life. Paul's friends at Ephesus obviously were not brought up as Christians. They were once dead because of sin and also subject to Satan. They would have no difficulty in agreeing with Paul.

When Paul says that God was merciful we should be breathing a sigh of relief! We were dead because of sin, and that's how it could have remained but for what God did in Christ Jesus. People who have grown up in a Christian family or within a society that acknowledges Christian traditions may have difficulty in understanding just how merciful God has been.

Acknowledging the overwhelming power of sin can be difficult. Accepting that you were subject to the rule of Satan may not even register as a reality to some. Satan and sin get mentioned together quite a lot in the Bible. Paul states clearly that those who are not in Christ are subject to sin and punishment. Satan is a fallen angel and is, like all angels, a spiritual being. He can blind, mislead and repress the truth of the Gospel while he has mastery. His influence and the pull of our selfish desires can easily draw people into a sinful lifestyle.

However, in Christ we have a new master. If we accept Jesus only as a teacher, or a good man, or one to follow we have not fully accepted him. Jesus the man is less than Christ the Lord. Jesus the man is a pattern of holy living. Christ the Lord is the Son of God who came to earth to die for us, revealing Father God's love and kingdom, who rose from death and is glorified at God's right hand, the first-born of a new creation to be shared by all who accept him as lord of their lives.

It's not until you *know* forgiveness that you can begin to understand God's holiness. God's anger at sin is real because He is a holy God. We who choose to sin deserve God's

punishment, which is death. It seems a high price to pay. But that's the price Jesus paid when he took our sins to Calvary.

Forgiveness is a precious gift from God.

- **Have you known God's mercy?**
- **Is there someone you have not yet shown mercy?**
- **Is our church growing?**
- **Where should the Church be?**

Father God, I want to repent of the sinful things in my life that keep me apart from you. Help me understand that nothing is hidden from you.

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Day 29

Ephesians 2:11-22

Don't forget that you are Gentiles. In fact, you used to be called "uncircumcised" by those who take pride in being circumcised. At that time you did not know about Christ. You were foreigners to the people of Israel, and you had no part in the promises that God had made to them.

You were living in this world without hope and without God, and you were far from God. But Christ offered his life's blood as a sacrifice and brought you near God.

Christ has made peace between Jews and Gentiles, and he has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us. Christ gave his own body to destroy the Law of Moses with all its rules and commands. He even brought Jews and Gentiles together as though we were only one person, when he united us in peace.

On the cross Christ did away with our hatred for each other. He also made peace between us and God by uniting Jews and Gentiles in one body.

Christ came and preached peace to you Gentiles, who were far from God, and peace to us Jews, who were near God. And because of Christ, all of us can come to the Father by the same Spirit. You Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens with everyone else who belongs to the family of God. You are like a building with the apostles and prophets as the foundation and with Christ as the most important stone. Christ is the one who holds the building together and makes it grow into a holy temple for the Lord. And you are part of that building Christ has built as a place for God's own Spirit to live.

Paul makes much of the way Jews and Gentiles feature in God's plan of redemption. Gentiles were outside the blessing given to God's people the Jews. Some godly non-Jewish people did appear in the history of the Jewish nation, but they were oddities. Jesus was born into the Jewish race. The Jewish race was created for Jesus. That makes them special in many ways.

Paul is not saying that the people at Ephesus shouldn't forget that they are second-class. He is reminding them that they were once, but are no longer. Christ removed the distinction through his death – he died for all mankind. Jew and Gentile in God's dispensation are now one.

As if Samaritans weren't bad enough, imagine how Saul the Jew would have despised Gentiles. Unholy, unclean, uninvited. Through his experience of Christ he turned completely and concentrated on evangelising Gentiles and building churches.

Paul describes the church of God in terms of a building, though we should be careful not to get rooted in physical buildings, for that is not the Church. The Church is *like* a building, with Christ as the keystone, that continues to grow. Not many buildings continue to grow. Think of the Church firstly as a family. That can.

- **Should we evangelise Jewish people?**
- **How about foreigners, or Moslems, or the despised of society?**
- **What compartment would I take on the glory train – royal carriage, first or second class?**
- **Where do I belong in the building – pent-house, main floor or basement?**

Father God, I want to know who I am in Jesus and to live the life that he won for me.

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when:2014-04-08 06:02 GMT

Day 30

Ephesians 3:14-20

I kneel in prayer to the Father.

All beings in heaven and on earth receive their life from him.

God is wonderful and glorious.

I pray that his Spirit will make you become strong followers and that Christ will live in your hearts because of your faith.

Stand firm and be deeply rooted in his love.

I pray that you and all of God's people will understand what is called wide or long or high or deep. I want you to know all about Christ's love, although it is too wonderful to be measured. Then your lives will be filled with all that God is.

I pray that Christ Jesus and the church will forever bring praise to God. His power at work in us can do far more than we dare ask or imagine. Amen.

We've skipped a bit, but if you feel cheated there's nothing to stop you reading it for yourself.

Paul offers a prayer for the people at Ephesus. This prayer is what a prayer should be like! It is powerful, expectant, broad but also specific. It excites and challenges his listeners.

Paul starts with bold statements of faith – nothing lives that did not receive life from Him. God is wonderful and glorious – are these not words we so easily throw around without pausing to steep ourselves in their true meaning – wonderful; glorious? Breathe these words over and over: wonderful God, glorious God; God of wonder, God of glory ...

Paul earnestly prays that the Christians in Ephesus will grow strong in their discipleship and that Christ will live in them and they in him.

Our imaginations are captured and stretched as Paul challenges us to begin to understand the infinite and eternal dimensions of Christ's love for us – *Jesus' love is very wonderful* is a song for children's imaginations. While we may enjoy singing along let's ponder that Jesus' love is broader than the cosmos, spans beyond than the furthest horizons of time, plumbs deeper than the deepest and darkest recesses of our souls. *O wonderful love.*

But we're not done. We've not seen nothing yet - His power working in us can do more than we dare ask or imagine. This must be the most positive encouragement to Christians everywhere to put God to the test, to open our minds to believe that nothing is impossible to God, to realise that His plans are far greater than we can comprehend, and yet He still wants us to ask! God wants us to be part of His plan. He wants us to be in it. When we see face to face in heaven and all is revealed we will see that "our little bit" is not so little after all.

- **Have we lost awe when we prefer to sit rather than kneel?**
- **How wonderful is God?**
- **How glorious is God?**
- **How do I become rooted in Christ's love?**

•**Read this prayer in the New International Version – it has a more poetic flow.**

Prayer – pray Paul’s prayer, once for yourself (“I”) and once for our church (“we”).

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Day 31

Ephesians 4:17-22

As a follower of the Lord, I order you to stop living like stupid, godless people. Their minds are in the dark, and they are stubborn and ignorant and have missed out on the life that comes from God. They no longer have any feelings about what is right, and they are so greedy that they do all kinds of indecent things.

But that isn't what you were taught about Jesus Christ. He is the truth, and you heard about him and learned about him. You were told that your foolish desires will destroy you and that you must give up your old way of life with all its bad habits.

Paul moves on to the sterner stuff – did you notice how far he'd got in this letter before he writes about this sort of thing? Well, stupid, godless – surely that's not us! I've heard sermons where the preacher has told us what good Christians we are (simply because we come to church?). Unfortunately, I recognise myself in this passage. You may, too, but do you also recognise yourself?

I'm trying to imagine what it must have been like for these folk to have had Paul as their pastor. What a man! What a teacher! What an inspirer! What a rebuker. Paul is telling this church that they are behaving like the godless. They have fallen out of the relationship with Father God in Christ. It is easy to fall back into old ways, and the old ways lead to the old sinfulness. Evangelical preachers would call it *backsliding*. In Christ we should be moving forwards. If you are not moving forwards then perhaps there's a need for reflection, admission and repentance.

A life not lived in Christ is subject to the powers and authorities of this world – refer back to chapter 2, verse 1. We do not have the strength in ourselves to resist. Any amount of "I can handle it", or "I won't do it again" with human resolve will not free us from the powers of this world, and we will be rehearsing those words over and over again. We can only succeed in Christ, in his authority, surrounded by his power. Only by acknowledging that Jesus and Jesus alone defeated sin and alone has the power to save us from sin can we even start to move out of the worldly and into the spiritual.

- **What causes you to act in a stubborn or ignorant way?**
- **Why is greed so attractive to us?**
- **When did you last bring these things before God?**
- **Why do we find it difficult to accept God's complete forgiveness?**

Father God, you allow me to act according to my free will, but this so often offends and saddens you. Help me recognise the "old man" in me and teach me obedience. You call us to live in the light of Christ. Help me to be a torchbearer and not a light-snuffer. Amen.

to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk
when:2014-04-10 06:02 GMT

Day 32

Ephesians 4:23-32

Let the Spirit change your way of thinking and make you into a new person. You were created to be like God, and so you must please him and be truly holy. We are part of the same body. Stop lying and start telling each other the truth. Don't get so angry that you sin. Don't go to bed angry and don't give the devil a chance. If you are a thief, quit stealing. Be honest and work hard, so you will have something to give to people in need. Stop all your dirty talk. Say the right thing at the right time and help others by what you say.

Don't make God's Spirit sad. The Spirit makes you sure that someday you will be free from your sins. Stop being bitter and angry and mad at others. Don't yell at one another or curse each other or ever be rude. Instead, be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ.

Life in Christ is a process. While Christ set me free from sin I still have to want to move away from it! As we grow in Christ we also become more aware of sin in our lives, and this could be a discouragement to us. But that is what is supposed to happen. My study looks very tidy at night when the light is off.

God does not want us to be sorry for sins we have committed. Did the prodigal son apologise to his father? He wants us to recognise what sin does to us and others and repent. We say sorry to people we've hurt.

Do we ever think that the relationship we have with God is complete and that we reach a level where we can rest and stay? If we stop growing spiritually we stagnate. Aspects of our lives that need dealing with can fester if we put them off. Wrong attitudes may calcify in us rather than be cleansed. Bad habits stick. Unclean thoughts swirl around in the head. Dark practices stay safe in the dark.

Christians live in the light, and the light uncovers the darkness. Ask yourself which way you go when the light of truth shines – towards it or away from it?

In our Christian life we are called to behave lovingly and honourably towards each other. It is not easy. When people get together for a moan are you going to join in or bring a positive slant instead? Are you prepared to stand against people who are experts at manipulating things for their own advantage? Are you happy to be spoken about harshly behind your back or even to your face because you do not compromise the Gospel message with worldly practice? That may be the cost of honouring God.

We hold the light of Christ. This is the most precious thing God has given us to share with the world. We cannot sully the light in us by ungodly behaviour or disunity.

Read on into chapter 5.

- **How quick am I to condemn others?**
- **What behaviour do I need to stop right now?**

• **Am I a backslider?**

Father God, you call your church to be family. You call us to live in the light of Christ. Help me to be a torchbearer and not a light-snuffer. Amen.

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to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk
when:2014-04-11 06:02 GMT

Day 33

Ephesians 5:21-33

Honour Christ and put others first. A wife should put her husband first, as she does the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head and the Saviour of the church, which is his own body. Wives should always put their husbands first, as the church puts Christ first.

A husband should love his wife as much as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. He made the church holy by the power of his word, and he made it pure by washing it with water. Christ did this, so that he would have a glorious and holy church, without faults or spots or wrinkles or any other flaws.

In the same way, a husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself. A husband who loves his wife shows that he loves himself. None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church, because we are each part of his body. As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother to get married, and he becomes like one person with his wife." This is a great mystery, but I understand it to mean Christ and his church. So each husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself, and each wife should respect her husband.

Am I hearing a harrumph or two from among the sisters? Is Paul a misogynist? Is this passage only relevant to Paul's time and not appropriate for our times?

While Paul is looking at the relationship of husband and wife, he is actually comparing the relationships of marriage with the relationship of Christ and his church. Paul has things to say to the wife, politely dealing with her first, and things to say to the husband. But what is more important is that these human relationships reflect those in the church.

Now if marriage relationships have changed over time the simile is a little less clear, but the truth still remains. Think of Christ Jesus as a loving, caring husband to the Church that he loves and gave his life for. Consider that we as Church are as one in Christ, adorned and beautiful for him, preparing ourselves for the marriage-feast in eternity. Let's be careful not to let rights triumph over grace and mercy and sacrificial love.

- **If Paul's picture of marriage is such a good match for the relationship of Christ to his church, then should we perhaps consider whether Paul's views on marriage relationships have some validity today?**
- **Does the Church exist for Christ alone?**

Father God, help me understand the truth of Paul's words in the context of their writing. Reveal to me how I am more than a name on an electoral roll in your Son's Church. Amen.

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Day 34

to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-04-12 06:02 GMT

Reading - Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, let the mighty strength of the Lord make you strong. Put on all the armour that God gives, so you can defend yourself against the devil's tricks. We are not fighting against humans. We are fighting against forces and authorities and against rulers of darkness and powers in the spiritual world.

So put on all the armour that God gives. Then when that evil day comes, you will be able to defend yourself. And when the battle is over, you will still be standing firm.

Be ready! Let the truth be like a belt around your waist, and let God's justice protect you like armour. Your desire to tell the good news about peace should be like shoes on your feet. Let your faith be like a shield, and you will be able to stop all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Let God's saving power be like a helmet, and for a sword use God's message that comes from the Spirit.

Never stop praying, especially for others. Always pray by the power of the Spirit. Stay alert and keep praying for God's people. Pray that I will be given the message to speak and that I may fearlessly explain the mystery about the good news. I was sent to do this work, and that's the reason I am in jail. So pray that I will be brave and will speak as I should.

Why wear armour if you hide in the shadows? Why put on the belt of truth if we do not speak out for truth? If you have nothing to share of your faith then carry on bare-footed. Who needs a shield when faith is running on empty? If you have never known redemption then the helmet won't fit, and why carry a sword when you are a pacifist for the Gospel?

Paul is arming up his church at Ephesus and reminding them that Christian life is active. The Gospel is a threat to many, and we need to be prepared for a fight. Lurkers in the shadows is the very antithesis of who we are called to be. Only a soldier needs armour, and we know why. Unless we see our Christian life as something beyond Dibley and cucumber sandwiches we will have no impact, no glory, no victory, and of course, no casualties. Remember where Paul is as he writes.

Paul calls us to pray. Continuously. Prayer is many things. It can be on your knees (or backside) in church, or in a group, or by yourself. It can happen at appointed times or in an instant. It can be a spoken script or as led by the Holy Spirit. It can be in your native tongue, but Paul prefers a different way. "Pray by the power of the Spirit" is a reminder that we should always be open to the Holy Spirit's leading as we pray. As God already knows what we want before we ask we need to be comfortable in not presenting God with lists. As God knows our thoughts, our desires and longings are these not in themselves a prayer. So, come to God in a different way.

We're getting near the end of the course and there is so much to fit in. It is important to have some passages of the Bible tucked away in your head. So here's some homework.

Read the passage below out loud together a few times and try to learn, or at least keep the thread together as you read it or rehearse the main threads.

I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

•Which piece of the armour do you value the most?

•Did God place Paul in jail?

Father God, thank you for what you have given us in the Bible. Assist us by your Holy Spirit to understand the truths revealed in its pages, and challenge us to live by its message. Amen.

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Day 35

to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-04-14 06:02 GMT

Revelation 1:1-3

This is what God showed to Jesus Christ, so that he could tell his servants what must happen soon. Christ then sent his angel with the message to his servant John. And John told everything that he had seen about God's message and about what Jesus Christ had said and done. God will bless everyone who reads this prophecy to others, and he will bless everyone who hears and obeys it. The time is almost here.

Revelation 1:9-11

I am John, a follower together with all of you. We suffer because Jesus is our king, but he gives us the strength to endure. I was sent to Patmos Island, because I had preached God's message and had told about Jesus.

On the Lord's day the Spirit took control of me, and behind me I heard a loud voice that sounded like a trumpet. The voice said, "Write in a book what you see. Then send it to the seven churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

We turn now to the end of our Bible, to the book called Revelation. Revelation is not an easy read. Many books have been written about it and what it means, and they do not all agree with each other. Best to keep an open mind.

A revelation is a revealing, an uncovering, a making known. It could be a new way of looking at what is current (re-visionist) or it could be a prophetic revealing of what the future holds. Some people refer to this book as the revelation of St John. It isn't. The first verse says why. John is only the messenger who records what Christ has revealed.

John was exiled to the isle of Patmos because of his faith. God chose to reveal to him a picture of the way the whole of creation was to come to a conclusion. It may be that John had been out in the sun too long, of course, but the content of Revelation is far, far more than the disturbed dreams and hallucinations of an old man.

God spoke to John on the Lord's day, possibly when John was worshipping God. Why would he mention what day it was unless it was a significant day?

Now trust that you will indeed be blessed, as the angel promised, when you read this book and obey it.

- **Do we have space in our worship to encounter the risen Lord?**
- **How close is the time that is almost here?**

Lord God, I want to understand what Christ reveals to us in this book. Help me come to terms with the constant imminence of Christ's return and the truth of eternity. Amen.

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Day 36

to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-04-15 06:02 GMT

Revelation 1:12-20

When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. There with the lampstands was someone who seemed to be the Son of Man. He was wearing a robe that reached down to his feet, and a gold cloth was wrapped around his chest. His head and his hair were white as wool or snow, and his eyes looked like flames of fire. His feet were glowing like bronze being heated in a furnace, and his voice sounded like the roar of a waterfall. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp double-edged sword was coming from his mouth. His face was shining as bright as the sun at noon.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead person. But he put his right hand on me and said: Don't be afraid! I am the first, the last, and the living one. I died, but now I am alive for ever more, and I have the keys to death and the world of the dead.

Write what you have seen and what is and what will happen after these things. I will explain the mystery of the seven stars that you saw at my right side and the seven gold lampstands. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the lampstands are the seven churches.

Christ sent an angel to speak to John. The person we read about in this passage does not seem like an angel, but rather the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps the angel took over later.

The strange figure with snow on top and glowing hot metal beneath is none other than the risen and ascended Lord, revealed in His glory, and whose appearance is not unlike that of Jesus the man on the mountain where he revealed his true self to his three special disciples.

John is having a problem putting into words what he is seeing. It wasn't being out in the sun that caused the problem. The vision he received transcends mortal description and so, like Ezekiel seeing the buzzy thing on wheels that shot around like a pinball (read the first chapter of Ezekiel), any attempt to describe what he saw falls far short of what John actually saw and experienced. A voice resembling the white noise of a waterfall is hardly going to make speech clear, let alone the sword in the mouth. However, Jesus had ascended to heaven in a body that still largely resembled his earthly body, and John knew who it was he was seeing.

Go beyond the seemingly contradictory or fantastical and start to search for the One who is Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End of everything. Start to look into the face of the risen Lord, and let the eyes of fire consume you.

- **Why would Christ have a sword in his mouth?**
- **Would we recognise him if he appeared?**
- **What does Jesus mean when he says he is the last (or the Omega)?**
- **Does he still bear the scars on his hands and feet?**

Lord God, please re-ignite in me the fire that once roared (or perhaps was never more than smoking embers). I do not want to be the damp firework that never left the ground. Use me for your glory. Amen.

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Day 37

to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-04-16 06:02 GMT

Revelation 1:4-8

From: John

To: the seven churches in Asia.

I pray that you will be blessed with kindness and peace from God, who is and was and is coming. May you receive kindness and peace from the seven spirits before the throne of God.

May kindness and peace be yours from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness.

Jesus was the first to conquer death, and he is the ruler of all earthly kings. Christ loves us, and by his blood he set us free from our sins. He lets us rule as kings and serve God his Father as priests.

To him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds. Everyone will see him, even the ones who stuck a sword through him. All people on earth will weep because of him.

Yes, it will happen! Amen. The Lord God says, "I am Alpha and Omega, the one who is and was and is coming. I am God All-Powerful!"

John starts his message to the seven churches in much the same way as Paul did in his letters. A friendly and encouraging greeting that does not waste time in asking how the family are and how did the hamster's operation go, but gets straight to the point. Be blessed. God is eternal. Peace to you from Jesus. Kindness, too – perhaps an underestimated gift.

This foreword is full of powerful statements. So full, in fact, that they can easily lose their individual meaning, and so powerful that we let them pass over us as so many words, because the truth contained in them and presented through them is such a challenge to us.

And John says that Jesus is the ruler of all earthly kings. That includes good and bad kings, elected leaders and dictators. Does Jesus rule over Mugabe, Putin, Obama, Merkel, ER, to name a few? This book says he does. Makes you think, but do you believe it?

One of our fundamental Christian principles is that we are set free from sin. Anything we do or any disposition we have which goes against what God has decreed is sin. The punishment for sin is death. It still is. Our being freed from our sins was not just a waiver from God as a light favour – our right to be free from sin was paid for in full by Jesus' blood as he died upon the cross. The Father looked away as the Son suffered on the cross and became sin for us. Never forget what Jesus did, and never treat sin as anything less than deadly.

It takes some faith to believe that we are reigning kings and servant priests. It takes a little more to live as kings and priests. Have you ever stopped to think of the consequences this has on the way we live our lives and bring our worship?

John offers a prophecy regarding the return of Christ. This book is about the way things will end. Let the words "for ever and ever" refresh themselves in your heart and spirit. Those words come to us so often in collects and prayers that we can give a conditioned *amen* response without even thinking what we're saying.

- **What do you think John means by God's kindness?**
- **When was the last time you spoke a blessing to someone (and not a quick "Ah! Bless!")**
- **For how long will we be saying "Glory" in heaven?**
- **If I am a priest, how should that affect my life and worship?**
- **If I am a king, how should that affect my life and worship?**

Father God, you are All-Powerful. I pray that you act in power in my neighbourhood, in Ipswich, and in our nation. It may be that are calling me, your resident king and priest, to rule and serve on your behalf. Amen.

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Day 38

to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-04-17 06:02 GMT

Revelation 2:1

This is what you must write to the angel of the church in Ephesus: I am the one who holds the seven stars in my right hand, and I walk among the seven gold lampstands.

Nice and short today. Who is the angel? There are some difficult bits in the Bible and we should never give up the desire to understand what they mean. If you let something go it may affect your attitude to the rest of Scripture. It is good to have a Bible that has footnotes and I would recommend that you pay some cash for a good life-long Bible. Spend an hour in CLC in St Matthews Street. Some commentaries will point to guardian-angels appointed by God to protect a church. But you don't write letters to angels! The Greek word *angelos* that is being translated here means *messenger*. It still doesn't make it obvious, but it may well mean simply the person who carries the message back to the church.

Now imagine Christ writing a letter to the Church at Westerfield, Tuddenham or Winesham. What would he put into it? What would the people in those churches hear being read out to them? Would it be good stuff or not so good stuff?

A church that knows who it is and where it is going will know the answer to those questions. It's simple – we are in Christ, and we are Christ to the world. We go wherever the shepherd leads us. As for our own church, are we, and do we? If you enjoy singing "we feebly struggle" (from the hymn *For all the saints*) and do just that then you've missed the point.

Churches have people in them. Now is the church there to serve the people who come to it Sunday by Sunday or is the church the body that brings Christ to the world (or the parish)?

It's a bit of a mix of the two. The church is there to nurture people, to bring them up and help them grow in Christian faith and discipleship. It's these same people who are called to bring Christ to the world. It's a rolling programme and there is no place appointed for static people in a church. I think we all find that bit difficult, as part of what we like about church is its constant and unerring truth and God's unchanging nature. God does not need to change - we do. Each and every one of us is called personally by God to take up in obedience what He has planned for us to do and to be.

A good business develops its employees so that they can best contribute to the business. There is training and appraisal to make sure each employee best serves the company. Some move up to management roles. Others train new people, passing on their skills and wisdom. Some are sent to other parts of the company and some may be out in the world drumming up business and setting up branches.

- **How far does this business model reflect the Church of Christ?**
- **Is it relevant to our Benefice?**
- **Am I moving along in Christ?**
- **What is God calling His church to be in our Benefice?**

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Day 39

to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-04-18 06:02 GMT

Revelation 2:2-3

I know everything you have done, including your hard work and how you have endured. I know you won't put up with anyone who is evil. When some people pretended to be apostles, you tested them and found out that they were liars. You have endured and gone through hard times because of me, and you have not given up.

Revelation was written not that long after Paul had written to the church at Ephesus. Paul's letter was overflowing with joy and excitement. This letter is a little different. It is short, and to the point. This church is going to be in for it.

The first part acknowledges that this church has had some struggles. It managed to reveal some people as imposters. That's not an easy thing to do – we are talking early days in the church, with little structure and sparse information. There was no New Testament apart from the odd letter, and the Old Testament would not really have been available to them either, as Jews were hardly likely to have shared their scrolls with these Gentiles.

The church relied heavily on messengers coming from other churches bringing news and teaching. It did have members or leaders who are spiritually aware and were able to discern that certain visitors were not who they purported to be. We struggle in today's church with messages and messengers who bring other gospels. The Anglican Communion does struggle at times to hold together (that church-splitting John Wesley came to no good, I hear); the Catholic church has been shamed over child abuse; sects and wayward groups abound because people are drawn into comfortable words that are not the truth and are fooled by strong personalities and deceptions.

The church at Ephesus has worked hard. They suffered for their faith. It was not a popular choice to be a member of a church, but the church at Ephesus had not given up.

Today's struggles are about membership numbers, being relevant in a changing world, bringing a message to young people and families, finding people to volunteer, getting church members to do more than just turn up on a Sunday morning. There is a growing tide of atheism that is making a throne for itself in public services (lest we be seen to favour one religion over another) and is beginning to prune away the ivy of Christendom clings to some of our national structures.

- How do I know if my church has got it right?
- What do you long for in your church?
- How far are you prepared to be involved in achieving what you long for?
- Is atheism a spiritual force?

Father God, I pray that you will reveal your glory to me, so that I may stand amazed in your presence. I pray that you will reveal your glory in me, so that others may be amazed. I pray that you will reveal Your glory in each church, so that together we see who we are. Amen.

Day 40

to:everyone@wtandw.org.uk

when:2014-04-19 06:02 GMT

Revelation 2:4-7

But I do have something against you! And it is this: You don't have as much love as you used to. Think about where you have fallen from, and then turn back and do as you did at first.

If you don't turn back, I will come and take away your lampstand.

But there is one thing you are doing right. You hate what the Nicolaitans are doing, and so do I.

If you have ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. I will let everyone who wins the victory eat from the life-giving tree in God's wonderful garden.

A salutary passage to end this Lent Course, but one to remind us that we may not sit back in the pews and let the fire go out.

The church at Ephesus was well-known amongst early Christians. The writer of Revelation may have even been associated with it and certainly others would have stopped off on their travels or stayed awhile. And yet, with everything it has going for it, it stands accused of backsliding on the intensity of the love it shared. What's the lampstand? The Tent of Meeting, the place where the High Priest met with God when the Israelites were in the wilderness, and the later temple in Jerusalem had a lampstand, and this had a ritual significance in that its light was never allowed to go out. Read Leviticus 24:3. It was the job of the priests and Levites to maintain the light as a sign of God's presence in that place. God threatens to quench that light in the Ephesian Church. No lampstand, no lamp, no light, no presence. God ups sticks and moves on.

The presence of God is not created through lights, and no amount of lights will make an unholy place holy, or induce God to be present. When we light a candle in church we may want to remind ourselves that God is present, but if He is not then the candle is of no use. God does not reside in a building any more – he dwells in us through His holy spirit.

There is some cheer for the Ephesian church. They are standing firm against the Nicolaitans – we're not sure what the Nicolaitans were doing, but you can bet they were up to no good. It is probable that they were promoting a false teaching or practice within the church. Thank goodness we have it all sorted today and that our teaching is clear and we are of one mind in the CofE – if only! Any half of the Anglican Communion seems ready to split from the other half over a range of issues. Pray for the Archbishop of Canterbury.

So we are called to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. This last sentence is appended to each of the messages to the seven churches. We all have ears, or at least there are enough ears to go round so that we can hear. Why does God repeat it for each church? Surely we read our Bibles, we come to services, we tend not to stray from reasonable preaching and intercessory prayer. So what's God getting at?

Each church is an entity, complete in itself. While it might subscribe to one or other denomination and follow the general teachings or slant of that denomination (and most denominations are seldom more than slants or particular views on the same basic corpus of teaching) it is still in itself responsible to God for what it does. Each of our parish churches

has a duty before God that far, far supersedes any duty it has to the Archdeacon. We may keep our records and reports up to date and in order for Archidiaconal inspection but this is not what the Church has been set up for by God. We are called to be salt (irritating stuff, especially if it gets under the skin) and light (pervasive stuff) to our world. We are called to be messengers of Good News, cross-bearers for Christ Jesus, shepherds seeking the lost sheep, a royal priesthood, a holy people, as Peter puts it.

God has his eye on our little church.

- **Could God stamp out the light in a church today?**
- **How do we keep the flame burning in our own church?**
- **When did I last irritate someone with a bit of salt, or cast light on their condition?**
- **If I am a priest, how should that affect my life and worship?**
- **If I am a king, how should that affect my life and worship?**

Father God, thank you for what you have given us in the Bible. Assist us by your Holy Spirit to understand the truths revealed in its pages, and challenge us to live by its message. Amen.

Father God, I pray that you will reveal your glory to me, so that I may stand amazed in your presence. I pray that you will reveal your glory in me, so that others may be amazed. I pray that you will reveal Your glory in each church, so that together we see who we are. Amen.

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