



02 October – 08 October 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

No matter how committed we are to Jesus' mission, we will all face times of great challenge and struggle when we are tempted to give up, or at least reduce our faithfulness in order to reduce the cost. But, when we do this, we lose the very thing that gives us the strength to continue, and that brings us life in the midst of our struggles - our faith. In a world where following Jesus is often framed as a way to great personal benefit, the readings this week offer us a different way of living and believing. We do not need huge faith to follow Jesus. We just need to be willing to follow with faith as tiny as a minute seed. And we do not need to do great works to be part of God's mission, we only need to live as a simple servant of God, doing just what is required willingly and without expecting any special thanks or reward.

In those times when we grow tired and weak, it is important that we do not make choices that could hurt us in the long run. Rather, we need to take the time to reflect on why we started out on this journey, and the difference it makes, not just to us but to others, when we live Jesus' way. Sometimes our exhaustion stems from trying too hard or expecting more from ourselves than God expects of us. In these moments, it's helpful to recommit to being faithful in the small, seemingly insignificant actions and attitudes that Jesus asks of us. It is when we all remain faithful in small things that God can use our combined efforts to make a big difference in the world.

This week we will explore faithfulness in times of struggle, and in the small things that manifest the of God in our lives.

SUNDAY 02 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Luke 17:5-10

Reflect: Sometimes we may be tempted to believe that if something can be easily explained, it's not God at work. When we limit our view of God's work only to that which is "supernatural" or dramatic, we miss out on the myriad ways that God works in and through us. We may want to view Jesus' words in today's reading in this "supernatural" way - as if our faith can make trees uproot of their own accord and jump into the ocean. My suspicion is that this is not what Jesus had in mind. Rather, I believe Jesus was saying that when we apply our faith, no matter how small, to something as seemingly difficult as moving trees or mountains, we find a way to make it happen - even if it's just one leaf or stone at a time.

On the other hand, when we do use our energies and resources for the sake of God's Reign it is tempting to expect some kind of reward from God. This is why we so often fall into bargaining with God, promising to do certain things if God will only do what we want. But Jesus cuts through all of this, saying that we shouldn't expect reward - God has already given us life and all that we really need. Rather, we simply serve like faithful slaves, who expect and receive no special reward. When we learn to embrace this teaching, we are freed from any kind of "meritocracy" in our faith. We no longer expect God to treat us differently because of what we do, but we simply respond to God's grace and love by sharing it with others. This simple faithfulness is wonderfully liberating, and it gives us the great, healing gifts of humility and generosity.

How can you release your need for God to do "special" things, or to treat you as special today?

Do: One of the ways we can let go of our need for the dramatic and the special is by recognising, through the practice of thanksgiving, what we already enjoy. When we give thanks from a heart that is truly grateful, we quickly realise how much God has done for us and given to us, and we lose our constant need for more. Make today a thankful day.

Pray: For all the simple and natural ways that you show me your love and grace, O God, I thank you.

MONDAY 03 OCTOBER 2022

Read: James 1:2-11

Reflect: These surprising thoughts from James should bring comfort whenever we go through times of struggle or upheaval. Tough times test our faith, and this develops perseverance and maturity, so that we can live Jesus' way to the full. The word "test" here does not mean that God sets us a series of examinations that we either pass or fail. Rather, it is meant in the sense of metal being "tested" or "refined" by putting it in the flames. This doesn't mean that God creates struggles for us so that we will become mature, but that life's inevitable struggles are the opportunity for God's Spirit to work in us in a unique way that only suffering allows.

So, when we face these "testing times" how are we to respond? James gives some simple and practical guidelines. We can ask God for wisdom, trusting that God will supply. But we must be careful not to allow other voices - of our own self-centredness, of society's expectations, or of current spiritual fads - to cause us to question God's guidance. God's wisdom is unlike anything else, so it can sometimes seem strange or even questionable. This is where our commitment to trust is important. Finally, whatever our status (notice how James turns high and low and rich and poor upside down here) we must learn to find satisfaction or contentment, because this enables us to stand firm and stay faithful.

What "testing" are you experiencing at the moment? What wisdom is God giving you? How can you find satisfaction in Jesus today?

Do: James is bold to call us to pray for the wisdom we need. It's significant how often, when we pray, we suddenly receive new ideas or directions that lead us to life and goodness. Today, whatever challenges you may be facing, take time to ask for God's wisdom, and then go through the day listening for any new insights that come to you.

Pray: When I face life's tests, O God, please give me your wisdom.

TUESDAY 04 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Psalm 3

Reflect: The ascription on today's Psalm says it was written about the time when David was fleeing from his son Absalom. The relationship between David and his son had broken down over a long time. This was because of how badly David handled the abuse of Absalom's sister by their half-brother Amnon. Eventually things got so bad that Absalom staged a coup to take the throne from David. This was when David fled, but the result was that Absalom was killed in battle. This must have been a time of great anguish and self-recrimination for David, as well as a period of great fear and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of it all, he expressed deep trust in God's care and protection. Even though his circumstances seemed desperate, David had been in this situation before with King Saul, and he knew that it was his faith that would sustain him.

It is unfortunate that David, who was such a good king, was such a poor father. Yet, in spite of his weaknesses and failures, he never seems to have lost his faith in God's presence and care. Nor did he try to hang on to his throne. He fled the city before any violence could happen and harm the citizens, and he accepted that it might now be the time for his reign to end. He had placed his life in God's hands, and he trusted in God's presence through it all.

How can you strengthen your trust in God's presence no matter what life may throw at you today?

Do: Notice how David used praise to strengthen his faith. He recognised God as his shield and took comfort in the knowledge that God would never leave him. Today, whether you are rejoicing or grieving, praise God for God's presence and love.

Pray: For your presence and love that never leave me, O God, I praise you.

WEDNESDAY 05 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Habakkuk 2:12-20

Reflect: Habakkuk foresaw a great judgement coming on his nation because of their disobedience to God. Yet, as the last chapter of his book shows, he committed to praising God no matter what disaster he and his people would face. Nevertheless, in an attempt to call the people back to God so that they would avert the crisis, Habakkuk

lists some of the things they have done wrong. These are not really big, dramatic sins, but small acts of mindlessness and self-centredness that bring pain and destruction. Habakkuk challenges the people for accumulating wealth through corrupt and destructive means. He also confronts their faithless work-aholism, reminding them that their work is nothing compared to God's glory. He condemns the way they humiliate their neighbours and compete with one another to feed their arrogance, and how they exploit natural resources to the extent of destroying the earth and the creatures that live in it. And finally, he confronts their idolatry, and reminds them that God is alive and in their midst, and that the only appropriate response is silent awe and worship. This prophecy could have been written in the last few days!

Note that murder is not always about actually killing a person. Sometimes it's about perpetuating systems - like sweatshops and unliveable wages - that result in poverty, malnutrition and ultimately death. Where and how we buy our food and clothing matters! Notice also how materialism and consumerism divides communities, creating life-robbing gaps between rich and poor, and damages the environment. All of these small, destructive sins flow out of the big sin of idolatry - placing money, things and pride above God's presence and purpose. The failure to worship God and place our lives under God's Reign is more destructive than we may imagine!

Have any of these small sins crept into your life? How can you turn away from them and embrace small life-giving habits instead?

Do: The first step to healing is always to acknowledge where we are going wrong and then to change our behaviour. The twin disciplines of confession and repentance help us to do just this. Remember that it isn't only the "big" things that God is concerned about, but the small habits and attitudes that destroy us and those around us. Today, take note of the small sins that need change, confess them, and then turn away from them.

Pray: Forgive me for the little acts of destruction I do, O God, and teach me to turn away from them.

THURSDAY 06 OCTOBER 2022

Read: 2 Timothy 1:13-18

Reflect: Sometimes the toughest challenges we face have to do with welcoming and loving those with whom we disagree, or whose values contradict ours. On Sunday, we will start exploring the theme of radical inclusivity (again), and this week we've been challenged to stay faithful in the small things. Paul's letter to Timothy brings these two themes together. Because of preaching Christ, Paul ended up in prison and as a result, some of his companions deserted him. Yet, Paul mentions this with no anger. He simply refers to it in order to illustrate the call for Timothy to stay faithful and loving through the Spirit's power. Then, he spends much more time speaking highly of Onesiphorus who, unlike the other believers, was not ashamed of Paul's imprisonment, and stayed close to the apostle, visiting and encouraging him in his suffering.

Sometimes our faith in Jesus will lead us to make choices that others will reject or misunderstand, and they will abandon us. Although we may be tempted to judge them for this, it is better to forgive and to celebrate those who stay close and who continue to support us. And sometimes our friends may end up in situations that others view as shameful. The decision we must make then is whether to abandon these friends like everyone else, or to stay true to them and love them as Jesus would.

Who do you need to celebrate today for staying on your side? And who needs you to stand with them?

Do: Our faith is always worked out in our relationships. When the people around us are in trouble, or when they become difficult to love, that's the moment when our faith needs to sustain us in love for them. Even when this means having tough conversations, or standing together in difficult circumstances, our love will always support and strengthen both us and those we love. Today, make an effort to express your love for your companions in faith.

Pray: For those who stand with me, and who need me to stand with them, I pray and give thanks, O God.

FRIDAY 07 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Psalm 66:1-12

Reflect: The story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt and later entrance into the Promised Land can seem like a story of exclusivity - of God favouring one people over others - and it has often been read that way. But this view misses one of the most significant features of the Exodus story, which is highlighted by today's Psalm. For the time in which it was written, the idea that God watched over all nations - not just God's people - and drew the entire world into praise for God and God's miracles, was a radically new idea. Even at the time of Jesus, God's people were still struggling to understand what it meant that God was the God of all nations, and that God loved all people equally. Yet, beneath the story of the liberation of God's people and the birth of the nation of Israel lies a simple, powerful truth - God has always sought out those who could be channels to communicate and reveal God's grace and love to the world. The Exodus, then, is not a story of exclusivity, but of radical inclusivity - of God seeking to show the world, through the nation of Israel, God's love and grace, and the way God's ways lead to life.

This is why the Psalm begins with the call to proclaim to the world how great God is, and to let everyone hear God's praises. God's agenda is for everything on earth to be united in communion with God - which is where life is found. Our challenge, of course, is to answer God's call to be a "light to the nations". We, who seek to follow Jesus, are to proclaim God's goodness and love through our lives, so that others can be drawn to God as well.

How can you proclaim God's praises in your life today?

Do: In every word, every action, and every interaction our lives are proclaiming something. The question, though, is this: what message does your life proclaim? Does it reveal God's grace and love, or does it proclaim judgement, cynicism and despair? Today, be aware of the message your life speaks, and seek to proclaim God's love.

Pray: May my life proclaim praise for your grace and love, O God.

SATURDAY 08 OCTOBER 2022

Read: Luke 5:12-16

Reflect: We know from other stories, that Jesus did not need to touch people to make them well. Yet often, when he encountered

unclean lepers, Jesus made physical contact with them. This simple act of human touch must have been almost as healing as the curing of their diseased skin!

In today's reading, Jesus healed a leper this way. A moving moment in this passage is when Jesus tells the man - "I am willing [to make you clean]. Be healed!" It is important to remember that God always desires for us to be whole. God is always willing to heal us - but sometimes, we are healed but not cured. The other significant feature of this story is the way Jesus instructed the man to go and show himself to the religious leaders. This was required by the law and would have ensured that the man was publicly declared clean and able to return to a normal life within his community. It also showed that Jesus was not trying to rebel against the authorities of his day. Even they were included in God's work.

One of the results of Jesus' radically inclusive and healing work was that people got to know about it, and in the end vast crowds came to hear him and be healed. When people experience God's welcoming love in this way, they can't help but be attracted to it! And there can be no question that Jesus' love flowed from his intimate relationship with his divine Parent.

How can you allow God's healing love to flow into and through you today?

Do: In order to love others as Jesus did, and be God's channels of healing as Jesus was, we need God's Spirit to work through us. We cannot do God's liberating work in our own strength! Today, whenever you encounter a person or situation that needs God's welcome or healing, take a moment to invoke God's Spirit, and allow God's love and strength to flow through you.

Pray: May your love and healing power flow to me and through me, O Holy Spirit.