

Meditation 01

I shall tell them about Jesus Read 1 John 1.1-4

In a court of law the claims and counter-claims of both prosecution and defence often serve more to obscure the truth than bring it to light. But when the eyewitness tells what he has seen and heard, we catch a glimpse of the truth. In the early Church there was much false teaching which obscured the truth about Jesus Christ. But John's testimony bears all the marks of the eyewitness: 'We have heard. We have seen. Our hands have touched.'

When Dr Cyril Garbett, a former Archbishop of York, was going to preach in a small village, he was asked what he intended to say to the congregation. The Archbishop was well known for his concern for social questions, but he simply replied, 'I shall tell them about Jesus.' The early Church grew rapidly because the first Christians told anyone who would listen about Jesus. Often they were persecuted for it, sometimes even put to death, but they would not be silenced.

What is your experience of Jesus? We, too, are given the task of telling others.

His only righteousness I show,
His saving grace proclaim;
'Tis all my business here below
To cry: Behold the Lamb!

(Charles Wesley)

Meditation 02

Light is a great blessing which given by God Read 1 John 1.5 to 2.2

Light is a great blessing which God gives us because we are creatures who need to see.

Light reveals the truth. X-rays often help doctors determine the cause of illness.

Light is a life-saver. Aeroplanes land safely at night by the light of a flare-path. Lighthouses help sailors travel safely.

Light is a comfort. We make the darkest journey with confidence when we carry a torch.

Light banishes darkness. The darkest dark is put to flight by a small candle.

Blessings like these may have been in John's mind when he wrote, 'God is light'. Notice how he uses the contrast of light and darkness to describe the Christian and the Christless life.

Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world' (John 8.12). He is the light who reveals the truth about our sinful lives; the Saviour whose light marks our path and guides us to our destination; the light of our lives who comforts us on our journey; and the light who banishes the darkness of sin. 'The light shines in the darkness,' says John in his Gospel (1.5), 'and the darkness has never put it out'

'Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord.'

(Book of Common Prayer)

Meditation 03

Knowing God Read 1 John 2.3-11

Some of the Greek Christians in Asia Minor to whom John was writing set great store by knowing God. They believed that it was very important to use the intellectual gifts God had given them in order to know all about him. Others insisted upon the necessity of having an emotional experience of him. They aimed at union with God which, they said, was an emotional relationship.

However, John gets to the heart of the matter when he writes in verse 3, 'If we obey God's commands then we are sure that we know him.' Obedience to God is the mark of those who really know and love him. Christian men and women can have no better example to follow than our Lord himself, whose obedience to his Father led him to live among us and offer his life on the cross for us. Obedience is costly, for we can rarely serve God and please ourselves at the same time. But we cannot know him and love him without wanting to do his will.

People are sometimes referred to as 'practising' Christians. John would applaud that description. For him it is just not enough to know about God or to feel his love. God calls us to do things for him, to serve others in obedience to his will.

What he says we will do,
Where he sends we will go -
Never fear, only trust and obey.

(John H. Sammis)

Meditation 04

The dangers of loving the world Read 1 John 2.12-17

When John warns of the dangers of loving the world, he gives three examples (verse 16): First of all, he warns against 'what the sinful self desires'. The word translated as 'desires' implies far more than simply wanting. It means wanting so intensely that everything else is crowded out of our heart and mind.

Secondly, he warns against 'what people see and want'. Hunters tell us that crocodiles are hard to capture. One way of catching them, however, is to go out at night in a boat and shine a light on the water. The crocodile follows the light so slavishly that it can be led to where it is easy to catch. Our eyes can be so fixed on worldly things that we fail to see God near at hand.

Thirdly, he warns about pride, that subtle and dangerous sin, which so easily convinces us that whatever is good in our lives is of our own making.

John's words should help us to look at our lives and ask God to help us make whatever changes are needed.

Merciful God, give us wisdom to understand the dangers of yielding to temptation, and the grace to resist.

Meditation 05

The true message of Jesus Read 1 John 2.18-25

Art experts are sometimes called upon to authenticate paintings. Today, they have many scientific methods to tell them about the materials employed and their age; and these things can help them decide whether a painting is likely to be by a particular artist. But, in the end, it is the characteristics of the painting itself which decide the matter. 'Look at this and this', they will say; 'these are just how he did things'. Because they know the artist they are able to recognise his work.

From the earliest days Christians have had to decide whether the teaching passed on to them by others is the authentic teaching of Christ. Sometimes, especially when his teaching has been hard to accept or put into practice, people have distorted it. These are the enemies of Christ.

How can we be sure that what we hear and read is the true message of Jesus? John says that it is through 'the Holy Spirit poured out on you by Christ' (verse 20). He will enable us to discern the truth and hold it for ever in our hearts.

Holy Spirit, truth divine,
Dawn upon this soul of mine;

Word of God, and inward light,
Wake my spirit, clear my sight.

(Samuel Longfellow)

Meditation 06

Called to be saints Read 1 John 2.26 to 3.6

Some years ago, when Gladys Aylward wanted a young woman to go out to Formosa to help her in her work, she advertised for 'a twice-born Christian'. One of the great advantages of the spiritual rebirth to which she was referring is that we know ourselves to be children of God. Out of his great love for us God confers this new status upon us. His Holy Spirit at work within us enables us to know in our hearts that he is our Father and we are his children.

When the New Testament writers describe the Christian believer, they sometimes seem to be making exaggerated claims. There are times when we fail to understand how anybody who really knows us can think we are 'called to be saints' or described as 'a royal priesthood' (Romans 1.7; 1 Peter 2.9 RSV). To claim, as John does, that we are 'God's children' may seem to some to be even more presumptuous. However, we have to remember that these writers aim to glorify God, not man. If they make breath-taking claims it is because he is a breath-taking God. We are his children not through any merit of our own but simply because, out of pure grace, he chooses to be our Father.

Behold the amazing gift of love
The Father hath bestowed
On us, the sinful sons of men,
To call us sons of God!

(Scottish Paraphrases)

Meditation 07

Being a child of God Read 1 John 3.7-12

In the golden age of Hollywood films just before the Second World War, Douglas Fairbanks Jr was a popular actor. His father, also Douglas Fairbanks, had been the dashing hero of many silent movies, and audiences were often reminded of the father when watching the son because of the strong family resemblance. As one critic put it, "He had a lot of the father in him".

Being a child of God confers a great status upon us. It also invests us with great responsibility. In the kind of people we are, the world should be able to see a family resemblance.

John says, when writing of the child of God, "God's very nature is in him" (verse 9). In God's dealings with us righteousness and love are very close together. If God does indeed dwell in our hearts, then they will be the pattern of our Christian living. Because unmerited generosity and love are known to be God's way of dealing with us, they should also be seen as the Christian's way of dealing with his neighbour.

In what we do and what we are, may people see the family resemblance in us and give glory to God.

Live thou within us, Lord .
That so our lives may teach
Thy children what thou art,
And plead, by more than speech,
For thee with every heart

(John Ellerton)

Meditation 08

Faith and love belong together Read 1 John 3. 13-24

In August 1983 a mother died in an Australian hospital. She made national news in Great Britain not only because her baby was born prematurely in the aeroplane taking her to Australia but also because, discovering she had cancer just after she became pregnant, she refused all forms of treatment in order to save her unborn child from harm. That is one way of giving one's life for another.

Blind from a very early age, William Jackson gave his short lifetime to improving life for the blind of Burma. C. T. Studd gave up fortune and fame as an England test cricketer to serve in the overseas mission field. Mother Teresa renounced life in her native land to devote herself to the destitute of Calcutta. These are all outstanding examples of the love in action to which John refers (verse 18). The supreme example is Jesus himself who gave his life for us.

Faith and love belong together. The people mentioned above did what they did because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Our response to him may never make headline news, but as we seek to serve others in the common round we shall know that we do his will. There is no greater reward.

Lord, grant that thy love may so fill our lives
that we may count nothing too small to do for thee,
nothing too much to give, and nothing too hard to bear.

(Ignatius Loyola)

Meditation 09

Look at Jesus Read 1 John 4.1-6

False prophets arose in the early Church, and it is to counteract the arguments of those who tried to spread a pseudo-Christianity that John writes here. The standard for the Christian to use is not a philosophical idea or any written words, however learned they may be, but, as John says, the truth that Jesus Christ came as a human being.

Christians today live in a world where the teachings of men, some great and some good, are beamed into their lives by radio and television. How difficult it is to see what is God's will for us! But the standard John points to is as valid for us as it was for those Greek Christians. When we want to know what course of action God wants us to take we look at Jesus, all he taught and all he was. In him we see summed up the mind and will of God, the Word of God, as John put it in his Gospel, who became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us" (John 1.14)

Pray that God may help you to know Jesus better and follow him more closely.

Meditation 10

God is love Read 1 John 4.7-21

In the film Love Story one of the characters declares her belief that love means never having to say you're sorry. The Christian understanding of love, however, is far more comprehensive. It has its origin in the person and nature of God. When John writes, "God is love" the emphasis is more on doing than saying. God acts and in his actions we see love perfectly revealed. He created the world out of love because, as William Barclay puts it, "Love must have someone to love and someone to love it".

When we went sadly wrong he showed his love for us by sending Jesus to be the means of our salvation. He offers us complete forgiveness, a fresh start, and a new relationship with him as his sons and daughters.

The Christian life, as John describes it here, is a life of love in action. Having known God's love in our own lives, we must love others. That is sometimes far from easy, especially when those we try to meet with Christian love are unresponsive, hostile or ungrateful. It may help us in that situation to remember what unpromising material we are ourselves and yet Jesus did not hesitate to die for us.

Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, should'st die for me!

Charles Wesley

Meditation 11

The three witnesses Read 1 John 5.1-12

John has a special reason for referring to the three witnesses the Spirit, the water and the blood. One of the heresies circulating in the early Church suggested that the Christ sent by God entered into Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove, but left him and returned to God before the crucifixion, leaving only the man Jesus to be crucified and raised to life. How untrue this is, says John, is proved by the evidence of these three witnesses:

- 1) the baptism of Christ when the Spirit equipped him for his mission;
- 2) the blood (or life) of Christ poured out to reconcile us to God;
- 3) the Spirit giving life to the Church and enabling men and women to confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

The three witnesses bear convincing testimony today to the truth of what John writes.

Christian baptism is the continuing evidence of the power of Christ and the love of God. At the Lord's Table we can still meet with Christ whose blood was shed for us, and know his forgiveness and peace. The Spirit who founded the Church at Pentecost is still the source of its life and the spur to every good and gracious deed we do.

Spirit of faith, come down,
Reveal the things of God;
And make to us the Godhead known,
And witness with the blood.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 12

Three words of encouragement Read 1 John 5.13-21

In these final verses John firmly counters the demoralising effect of false teaching by stating three great things all Christians can know.

Jesus keeps us safe (verse 18). As a human being the Christian cannot help falling into sin, but he is not a slave to sin. There is a difference between being defeated in one battle and losing the entire war. With Jesus on our side the enemy can never triumph over us.

We belong to God (verse 19). For two years Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran minister, was kept prisoner by the Nazis before being executed. His letters from prison show that, in spite of great ill-treatment, his captors were never able to break his spirit. He never forgot that he belonged to God and nothing his jailers did could destroy the love which surrounded him.

In knowing Jesus, we know God (verse 20). The first Christians, like John, knew Jesus personally. In his life and ministry they saw qualities which could only belong to God himself. When they declared "Jesus is Lord" they were saying that Jesus was God and that, in the person of Jesus, God had come among us. Now, through the Holy Spirit, all may know and thrill to the truth that by looking at Jesus they know what God is like.

Thank God that we may know his love in Jesus Christ.

Meditation 13

Pride and humility Read Philippians 2.1-11

Pride can set us at odds with one another and impair our relationship with God. When it causes harm to the fellowship of a church it is sad indeed. Clearly this was the case at Philippi. Euodia and Syntyche, two women in the congregation, had quarrelled (see Philippians 4. 2-3). No doubt some people supported one, some the other, and before long there was discord and bitterness in what had been a happy fellowship. It is to resolve this unhappy situation that Paul writes the verses in this reading.

Pride is a very subtle sin because, almost before we know it, God has been elbowed out of the centre of our lives and we, ourselves, have taken his place. Instead of his standards guiding our lives from day to day, our own ideas take over. Our neighbours suffer because it is no longer what God wants, but what we want, that governs our relationships with them.

If we have the same attitude as Jesus, writes Paul, we shall not fall into this error. Even though Jesus was God, his humility was such that he accepted all the limitations of humanity during his earthly life. He would not even use his divine power to avoid pain and death, but humbly and obediently went to the cross for us. Humility and service should also govern our lives.

It was God himself who washed the disciple's feet.

Meditation 14

The light Read 2 Corinthians 4.1-10

There is a rather amusing story told of a man who bought a flask of costly perfume and immediately poured the contents down the sink. "I've always wanted a flask like that", he said. Some containers are perhaps not attractive or desirable but they can still contain things of great value. The life of Jesus Christ at work within our lives is the treasure which belongs to every Christian believer.

The image of "common clay pots" used by Paul to describe our frail humanity is very apt. They are easily broken and have no great strength. How like our lives which can so easily come to grief! But, through the grace of God we are saved, and by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us we are strengthened.

When a very powerful light is placed inside a thin earthenware jar, the light can be seen shining out through the sides of the vessel. The light within us can shine out in the same way to help and comfort those around us "the light of God's glory shining in the face of Christ" (verse 6).

Jesus said, "Your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven". (Matthew 5.16)

Meditation 15

The road in the wilderness Read Isaiah c 40 v 1 to 11

When the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC many Jews were taken captive and deported to Babylon.

Nearly fifty years later the armies of Cyrus, King of Persia, marched on Babylon. His liberal policies led people to believe that he would release the exiled Jews and allow them to return home.

God gave the task of preparing the exiles for freedom to an anonymous prophet whom we know as Second Isaiah. His prophecies are found in Isaiah 40-55. Broadly speaking, he deals with three main themes:

The exile as God's punishment for Israel' sin.

The liberation which shows God's goodness and mercy.

The call to Israel to serve God by channelling his grace to the world. The most notable passages of this theme are contained in the poems, known as Servant Songs, found in Isaiah 42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-9 and 52.13 to 53.12.

During the years 1940 - 1945 great hope and encouragement were given to the peoples of occupied Europe by the radio broadcasts from Britain. As they listened in secret, they were strengthened by voices which told them they were not forgotten and that one day they would be set free.

The voice of the prophet must have given a similar thrill to the Jews in Babylon. After nearly fifty years of suffering in exile, liberation was at hand. During those years they had seen roads levelled out so that the kings and gods of Babylon could be borne triumphantly over them. Now their God would make a road through the wilderness and come to carry them home. His glory would be revealed in a great act of redemption and mercy.

There is a sense in which Christ operates like that road in the wilderness for us. Through him God comes and releases us from the captivity of sin and brings us home to himself. In the depths of sorrow or the bonds of sin we have cause for joy and hope. We are not bound to suffer for ever, our God is coming and he will bring us home rejoicing.

All my hope on God is founded;
He doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
Only good and only true.

Robert Bridges

Meditation 16

Times of adversity Read Isaiah 40. 21-31

Long periods of adversity have a weakening effect upon us. Our courage and determination become undermined. We begin to lose our hold upon things we once believed implicitly. As our faith is eroded, our hope grows dim.

The exiled Jews were no exception. The terrible questions, "Does our God still have power to help us?" and "Does he even care about us?", must have been voiced many times throughout their years of captivity. They must have felt at the mercy of powerful princes and victorious gods whose idols were openly paraded.

The prophet's own rhetorical questions in verse 21 introduce emphatic answers. He reminds the Jews of the majesty of the Creator and Lord of history who, with undiminished power, lends strength to the weak and, in infinite compassion, ministers to the faint-hearted.

Times of adversity often seem slow to come to an end. Sometimes it even appears that evil is firmly in charge and we have been forgotten by God. But the prophet's words remind us that nothing is farther from the truth. We shall prove in our own experience that "those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed" (verse 31).

Praise to the Lord, who, when darkness of sin is abounding,
Who, when the godless do triumph, all virtue confounding,
Sheddeth his light,
Chaseth the horrors of night,
Saints with his mercy surrounding.

Joachim Neander

Meditation 17

God the Redeemer Read Isaiah 41.5, 8-20

In Israelite community life, the go-el or redeemer was an important figure. When a clan member was injured by an enemy, the go-el would level the score (Numbers 35.19). Far more

often, however, he would act on behalf of those who had fallen into debt. He would purchase clan property to save it from leaving the clan, and he would buy back those who were forced to sell themselves into slavery.

Notice how, in verses 10 - 14 especially, the prophet puts forward the idea of God as the go-el, the redeemer, of Israel. Notice, too, that Israel has not chosen God for this purpose. It is he who has chosen her.

The Christian doctrine of redemption has its roots in this ancient Jewish custom. When we were at our lowest ebb, sold into the slavery of sin, God came to us in Jesus Christ to ransom us and bring us back to himself. Like the exiles, we were cut off from God by our own sin, unable to choose him to save us. But, through his immeasurable love and grace, he chose us. The cross of his Son, Jesus Christ, is the everlasting sign of our redemption.

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like thee his praise should sing?

Henry F Lyte

Meditation 18

To serve the present age Isaiah 42.1-9

Salvation always has two aspects: what we are saved from; and what we are saved for.

After fifty years of captivity, the exiles were in no doubt about the things from which salvation would free them. But God's purpose in saving them may have been more difficult for them to grasp. It was this that the prophet set out to explain.

Israel was to be God's servant, speaking on his behalf. This entailed absolute obedience. Israel's task was to bring justice, or the right way of living, which God had revealed, in every area of human life and to every nation on earth.

Israel's sense of inadequacy must have been enormous, but for two encouraging words:

The God who had chosen her for this mission was also the God who loved her.

God had filled her with his Spirit.

Today the Church, the new Israel of God, has the same task laid upon her. Having chosen us to serve, God empowers us with his Spirit and supports us with his love.

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfil;
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

Charles Wesley

Meditation 19

Slings and arrows Read Isaiah 43.1-7

Being a Christian never exempts us from "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (Shakespeare). On the contrary, experience shows that many Christians have more than their share of the world's ills and suffer persecution because of their faith. For example: Paul suffered from "a painful physical ailment" (2 Corinthians 12.7). His boldness in preaching led to imprisonment and finally execution in Rome. Father Damien contracted leprosy on Molokai, an island to which sufferers from this disease were banished. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed for his brave stand against Nazism.

God does not promise us exemption from the ills of life, but he does say:

"When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you".

(verse 2)

This may help us to understand how Fanny J Crosby, blind for most of her life, could write:

A wonderful Saviour is Jesus, my Lord,
He taketh my burden away.

It is God's presence with every Christian in the Holy Spirit which enables, empowers and finally triumphs.

Not a grief nor a loss,
Not a frown nor a cross,
But is blest if we trust and obey.

John H Sammis

Meditation 20

A new heart and mind Read Isaiah 43.14-21

Cyrus and his Persian army were advancing on Babylon and would soon break down the city gates (verse 14). This was wonderful news for people who thought that God's saving activity had ended at the exodus. But the prophet says that God does not rescue his chosen people from one captivity to abandon them to another. The exile had been the consequence of their sin, but God had forgiven them. Now they would again be free.

"Watch for the new thing I am going to do" (verse 19) is the focal point of this reading. It reminds us that God never stops working to free us from sin and its consequences. He is constantly making fresh attempts to break down the 'gates' of our lives. Over against the disobedience and foolish choices we all make, he sets his love. Against the persistence of our sin, he sets the exodus, the freedom from exile and the cross of our Lord. However desperate our situation, we need never lose hope, but look towards him for the new thing he is going to do.

I will give you a new heart and a new mind. (Ezekiel 36.26a)

Meditation 21

Faith in God Read Isaiah 45.1-4, 9-13

"What means will God use to deliver us?" must have been a much debated question among the captives.

Perhaps they were expecting a Messiah of the line of David, a Jew anointed by God and commissioned to save Israel. Certainly no one would have guessed that God would choose a pagan ruler like Cyrus to carry out his plan. Their sense of shock led many to adopt a questioning attitude towards God for which the prophet censured them. God often does unexpected things.

The danger is that our preconceived ideas can blind us to the unfolding of his plan for our good. In 1925 some schoolboys waited to see the Prince of Wales pass by. They pictured him in uniform in an open car but, in pouring rain, he travelled in a saloon car and wore a lounge suit. As a result, none of them recognized him. The Jews had a very clear picture in their minds of the kind of Messiah God would send to Roman-occupied Judah. But when Jesus came they rejected him because he did not match up to it. Faith in God means accepting whatever he decrees, not only those things which fit in with our preconceived ideas.

Forgive us, Lord, if we have made ourselves blind to your glory and deaf to your voice.

Meditation 22

Obligations and blessings Read Isaiah 48.1-11

When the air raids on London began during the 1939-1945 war, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were advised to seek a place of safety away from the capital. They declined to go because, if Londoners were prepared to put up with the danger, then they felt duty-bound to share it with them. It was a demonstration of what the French mean by noblesse oblige: that nobility of birth brings obligations as well as blessings.

It is clear from this reading that Israel had forgotten this. She could proudly claim to be God's chosen people and a royal priesthood (Exodus 19.6), but these were empty titles while she refused to accept their obligations. Far from being the channel of God's blessing to other nations, Israel had rebelled against him. Hence there was the Babylonian captivity which the prophet saw as God's punishment. But even if Israel had broken her covenant vow, God could not break his. Punishment is never the end of the story for him, but forgiveness and home-coming, peace and joy.

Jesus said, 'Not every one who says to me "Lord, Lord" shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father'. (Matthew 7.21, RSV)

Meditation 23

God calls unlikely people Read Isaiah 49.1-7

This second Servant Song stresses Israel's role as the servant who is to carry God's message of salvation to every nation on earth. It is characteristic of God that he chose for this high calling the very people who had so recently denied him. So often, in the Bible and in history, God has taken the most unlikely people and moulded them into profitable servants. He called:

Paul, persecutor of the early Church to be its great apostle.

Peter, the faithless, from the shame of the high priest's courtyard to lead Christ's flock.

John Newton, the one-time slave captain, to be a minister of the gospel.

John Bunyan, drunkard and bully, to write the unforgettable Pilgrim's Progress.

Now, here are you and I and every Christian believer, knowing in our hearts what we might have been were it not for God's grace. His servants are the weak of the world, empowered by his Spirit to confound the mighty. The prophet puts it in a nutshell in verse 5: The Lord gives me honour; he is the source of my strength.

And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every blessed moment spend
In publishing the sinners' friend.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 24

Identifying with God's will Read Isaiah 50.4-11

Another characteristic of the servant's mission is that the word he carries from God to others often involves him in suffering and ridicule. When Toyohiko Kagawa began to preach Christ in Japan a gang of men beat him up so badly that his face was smashed. His jaw never fully mended and his speech was flawed. He did not retaliate, but simply went on telling of God's love in Jesus Christ.

Turning the other cheek has never been the way of the world. But here the prophet says clearly that it is God's way. Meeting violence with violence is negative and unproductive. God's response to evil is positive and recreative and, where his servants follow his way, he is close at hand to help. In identifying with God's will in this way, the servant empties himself out so that God can act through him without hindrance. By the servant's words and actions, the light of God breaks in upon those who walk in darkness (see Isaiah 9.2) to light them home to him.

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (Matthew 5.11, RSV)

Meditation 25

Your God is King Read Isaiah 52.1-12

One summer evening on an Austrian mountainside a man climbed to a small platform and began to yodel. His high-pitched voice rang from the distant peaks and filled the valley beneath. It was a message to someone waiting and hoping, a sign that all was well and that there would soon be a happy reunion.

When the messenger called from the mountain (verse 7), he would be calling to people who were waiting and hoping for his call, people who needed to be told that all was well. Suddenly the sound was heard and the message rang out, Your God is king! For those who had been weighed down by the years of captivity it was the best message of all. Evil had not won the day. God still ruled, his mercy and justice had prevailed.

On Good Friday with Jesus dead and the disciples in hiding it seemed that the very worst had happened. Every hope of Jesus being God's Messiah had been crushed. God appeared to have been deposed by Satan. But on Easter Day the joyful news revived the despairing followers of Jesus: "He is risen! Your God is King!"

Times of discouragement can whittle away our faith and hope in God. If we endure we shall surely know that he is still on the throne, that his kingdom and glory can never pass away.

Lord, when darkness is all around, help us to trust you still.

Meditation 26

Suffering on behalf of others Read Isaiah 52.13 to 53.12

It is tempting to interpret the fourth Servant Song as a prediction of the passion of our Lord, but the task of the prophet was not so much to foretell the future as to forthtell the word of God for his own generation. However, the New Testament writers saw how closely Jesus fitted this description of God's servant and so were right to point to it as helpful in our understanding of the cross.

It is rarely possible for us to suffer on behalf of others, but there are circumstances where the acceptance of suffering by a few can result in blessings for the many. Modern trades unionists owe a great debt to the Tolpuddle martyrs and others who suffered in the early years of trade unionism. The sufferings of the suffragettes helped change Parliamentary policy to give British women the vote.

In March 1912, when Robert Scott and his three companions were camped in the Antarctic ice, Captain Oates, sensing that his illness was delaying their progress, walked out into a blizzard to die. It was in vain, for none of the party survived, but no one can deny the courage of his decision, nor the nobility of a suffering that seeks the good of others.

The greatest love as person can have for his friends is to give his life for them. (John 15.13)

Meditation 27

Restored relationships Read Isaiah 54.1-10

The effect of the servant's suffering and death is now spelled out. The prophet pictures it in terms of a broken marriage and a restored relationship.

A husband is bound to his wife in a covenant very like the one between God and Israel, a covenant of mutual love grounded in self-forgetting love. Although Israel, the bride of God, has betrayed that trust, she is not shamed by her husband and put away in divorce. Instead she is allowed to experience the greatness of God's grace and the boundlessness of his love. Note how this is expressed:

The reunion of God and Israel will make the once-barren partnership fruitful.

Israel need never feel guilty. True love never harbours grudges, nor can it perpetuate guilty feelings for past wrongdoing.

God's love for Israel will endure for ever. He may turn away for a moment, but his love is stronger than his wrath.

God's love brings everlasting peace. The Hebrew word for peace, shalom, means much more than freedom from war. It includes wholeness, prosperity and completeness.

On this my steadfast soul relies Father, thy mercy never dies!

Johann A Rothe

Meditation 28

Celebration Read Isaiah 55.1-13

The emphasis in this chapter is upon celebration. It is, however, typical of Jewish celebration that it should be expressed in terms of a meal. The covenant between God and Israel had been sealed by a feast (Exodus 24.8-11). The Passover is celebrated in a supper (Deuteronomy 16.1-3). Each Sabbath in Jewish households is signalled by a family meal. In every case the meal is sacramental.

In this reading God himself spreads the banquet for his bride, Israel, who has been brought home to her divine husband's side. What is offered is food without price – the bread and water of life; and wine, the symbol of joy. The implication is that this is not merely a temporal celebration, but an everlasting one.

There are strong similarities to our Christian Eucharist or Holy Communion. We participate not as strangers cut off by our sin, but as the Church, the Bride of Christ, reconciled to God by his suffering and death, who is himself the perfect servant. The sacrament reminds us that, however great our joy is now, it cannot compare with the joy to come, when we eat the bread and drink the wine of the new life in heaven which is to be ours.

Feast after feast thus comes and passes by,
Yet, passing, points to the glad feast above,
Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy,
The Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love.

Horatius Bonar

Meditation 29

Unity in Christ Read Philippians 1.1-11

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Philippians was written when he was in prison, probably in Rome. Its chief purpose was to thank the church at Philippi for a generous gift, carried to him by one of their number, Epaphroditus. Paul had founded the church at Philippi during his second missionary journey (Acts 16), and his letter is a personal message from a loving pastor to his flock. Nevertheless, he also writes of matters of concern for the whole Church: unity in Christ, humility, courage in the face of adversity, and the fulfillment of God's promises. In spite of Paul's imprisonment, the letter is a joyful one and has been called 'the epistle of joy'. It is a shining example of how God can speak, even through adversity, to encourage and strengthen his people.

Read Philippians 1.1-11

The Christians of Philippi were the kind of friends everybody needs in time of trouble. Through all the ups and downs of Paul's ministry they had never let him down. They had repeatedly

made generous gifts to enable the gospel to be preached and, hearing that Paul was in prison, had again sent a gift to aid and comfort him. Paul's joy was, therefore, the joy of one who had experienced true friendship.

Spreading the gospel in a Roman colony was both difficult and dangerous. Paul and Silas had been imprisoned for it in Philippi (Acts 16.16-24), so in these opening verses there is also admiration for those who had been partners with Paul in spreading the gospel and suffering for their faith in Christ.

Partnership is a key theme in this reading. Giving our friendship without reserve, and spreading the gospel by the life we lead are things that make us partners with all other Christians now and with the church at Philippi to whom Paul was writing. They are things in which we can all share some of the 'truly good qualities which only Jesus Christ can produce' (verse 11).

Help us to help each other, Lord,
Each other's cross to bear,
Let each his friendly aid afford,
And feel his brother's care.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 30

Adversity and opportunity Read Philippians 1.12-17

When Leonard Wilson, a former Bishop of Birmingham, was a prisoner of the Japanese during the second world war, it was his practice to pray for his captors. One of them was so impressed by this demonstration of Christian love in action, that he accepted Christ as Lord and later preached the gospel in his homeland.

Paul, too, found that his imprisonment opened channels for preaching which would otherwise have been closed to him. The short length of chain that bound him to his Roman guard may have helped the gospel to be heard in the imperial palace.

One lesson this reading has for us is that what we regard as adversity may be our best opportunity to proclaim the love of God. When Father Damien took the gospel to the leper island of Molokai he encountered many difficulties. It was only when he contracted leprosy himself that the patients there accepted him without reserve and the work of God took a great leap forward.

The rivalry among those who preached the gospel (verse 15) shows that even our sinfulness is unable to frustrate God's loving purpose. The channels through which his love is proclaimed are ever imperfect, but it is encouraging to know that, in the face of adversity and despite our sinfulness, his love and his will may still win through.

'We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him.' (Romans 8.28)

Meditation 31

The light of resurrection Read Philippians 1.18-26

Paul's chains constantly reminded him that his life might be ended by the executioner's sword. But his trust in Jesus Christ was completely unshaken by the prospect of death. On the contrary, he welcomed it as the means of entering the fuller life or heaven and the unbroken communion with Christ which is promised to all who follow him. The Greek words Paul uses in verse 23 are those for an army striking camp or a ship setting sail. They convey all the voyager's longing for the known, safe harbour and all the joy of home-coming at the end of a long journey.

Dr W E Sangster, a well-known Methodist preacher, once visited a sick friend. He knew the man was desperately ill and sought for the right words to comfort him when, suddenly, his friend said, 'I'm not afraid, Will. If I get well I shall go on a nice holiday with my wife. If I don't, I shall fall into the arms of my Saviour. Whatever happens, I can't lose.'

The light of the resurrection shines in every dark corner of life for the Christian believer and, at

the last, it lights our way to heaven.

I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if thou abide with me.

Henry F. Lyte

Meditation 32

God gives us the victory Read Philippians 1.27-30

Being a Christian in a pagan world has never been easy. Difficulty and danger have so often been the lot of the Christian believer. It is the case for many today. Paul's words show that it was so for the church at Philippi. He pictures life in terms of a battle in which the Christian may suffer, but which he will ultimately win.

After the second world war, a Jewish survivor of Nazi concentration camps told how she had been hidden in a Berlin flat for two years by a Quaker. Eventually, they were discovered. She survived, but the woman who had risked everything for her died in captivity. Perfect love sometimes demands that kind of sacrifice from us.

The key to victory is in living out the gospel. The path of perfect love is not an easy one, but there is no other which the Christian believer may tread. It is when we are prepared to follow the way of life which the gospel of Christ requires, taking up the cross whatever the cost, that God gives us the victory.

The only route to Easter was via Calvary. Meditate on this.

Meditation 33

The pattern for all Christians Read Philippians 2.1-11

There had been discord in the church at Philippi. Pride and self-aggrandisement had taken their toll. Christ was beginning to be pushed out of the centre of the worshipping fellowship. It was Paul's desire for a return to Christian unity in the church which led him to set down the sublime thoughts expressed in verses 6-11.

Nowhere in the New Testament is the cost of our salvation more movingly uttered than in these lines. Willingly and unreservedly Jesus gave up his equality with God to serve and to save us. He was born in a stable, reared in a village carpenter's home; his ministry was lived out among poor people, his companions were fisherfolk with provincial accents. His death on the cross was one that ranked him among the lowest in Jewish eyes. It is a picture of perfect humility, absolute obedience and loving service.

Here is the pattern for all Christians, not just the church at Philippi. Christ brings us to our knees not by overwhelming us with his glory, but by putting it aside and serving and loving us even to the cross.

When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Isaac Watts

Meditation 34

The light that God has given Read Philippians 2.12-18

The light that God has given to the stars is a gift not to the stars alone but also to the dark world they illumine. This is the sense in which the working out of our salvation should be understood. Divine grace not only frees us from sin, it also frees us for loving service of our fellow-men and women. At its best it is the kind of discipleship which lights up the darkness, shows that God is at work and, sometimes, evokes a response from those who witness it.

A few years ago, during a cricket tour of India, the England wicket-keeper, Bob Taylor, spent a day among the desperately poor and ill people being cared for by Mother Teresa and her Sisters in Calcutta. He saw the patient, uncomplaining way the nurses went about their work and sensed their deep affection for their charges. Next day, at breakfast, he told his team-mates what he had witnessed. On the table was a box used to collect fines from players who had broken the tour rules. At the end of the tour it would be used for a lavish party. Somebody picked up the box and passed it round the table. When everybody had given, all the money was sent to Mother Teresa for her work.

Jesus said, 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.' (Matthew 5.16, RSV)

Meditation 35

Our service is invaluable Read Philipians 2.19-24

Most of our knowledge of Timothy comes from Paul's letters. There he is always spoken of with affection and often with admiration for the way he served Christ.

Timothy was the son of a Greek, but his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, were Jewish Christians whose sincere faith made an impression on Paul (2 Timothy 1.5). Timothy clearly exhibited some of the same qualities. When Paul went to Lystra on his second missionary journey he persuaded Timothy to help him spread the gospel.

He was one whom Paul could trust with the most difficult of delicate of tasks, such as reconciling the factions in the divided church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 4.17). When Paul needed to send emissaries to Macedonia, Timothy was one of the two men he chose (Acts 19.22). Generally, however, Paul kept Timothy close by him as one whose friendship and collegueship he valued. He describes their relationship as 'like a son and his father' (verse 22).

It was through the support of people like Timothy that Paul was able to accomplish so much during his ministry. In our own church life we may not all be called to lead, but our service is invaluable.

Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to thee.

Frances R. Havergal

Meditation 36

Risking life for God Read Philipians 2.25-30

When the church at Philippi heard that Paul was in prison, they made a collection and chose Epaphroditus to take it to the apostle. Paul's description here shows that Epaphroditus was a courageous, generous and devoted servant of Christ. William Barclay indicates that his illness may well have been the fever which frequently swept through Rome and was often fatal. That was one danger. Personally ministering to a man awaiting trial on a capital charge was another. However, Epaphroditus 'risked his life and nearly died for the sake of the work of Christ' (verse 30).

The unstinting work of Epaphroditus is emphasized by the Greek word Paul uses to describe the 'who has served' (verse 25). He chose a word from secular Greek leitourgos.

This described a great benefactor whose love for his city and fellow-citizens was such that he would personally foot the bill for works of public service. Anyone with the title leitourgos would be honoured as one who knew the great personal cost involved in such an undertaking, yet willingly carried it to its conclusion.

Paul thus tells the church at Philippi that Epaphroditus is one who has risked his life and given his all to serve Jesus Christ. Thank God there are such people in the Church even today.

Pray for grace to know when God is calling you and the courage to respond.

Meditation 37

A special relationship Read Philippians 3.1-11

I have a friend who lost her wedding ring. Fortunately, she found it again after a few days, but while it was missing she was very upset about it. The ring itself is not a very valuable one, although it is the best her husband could afford, but it is the mark of a special relationship and, as such, could never be replaced.

The Jewish Christians, who were urging the Philippians to insist on circumcision as a condition of entry to the Church, were those who saw circumcision in similar terms. The Jews were a covenant people and it was the mark of their special relationship with God.

Jeremiah, in his teaching on the circumcision of the heart (Jeremiah 9.25-26), reminded the Jews that outward signs were useless unless God was at work in their lives. Here, Paul takes that idea and develops it. It is not keeping the covenant and obeying the law that matters, but Jesus Christ living and working within us, so that we are completely united with him (verse 9). That is the true mark of the Christian.

O Jesus Christ, grow thou in me,
And all things else recede;
My heart be daily nearer thee
From sin be daily freed.

Johann C. Lavater

Meditation 38

Don't look back Read Philippians 3.12-21

In the 1984 Olympic Games, a woman hurdler lost the gold medal through looking back over her shoulder. It slowed her enough for her nearest rival to sweep past and win the race.

If Paul had not forgotten what lay behind him (verse 13) he might never have been able to achieve as much as he did. He had stood by while Stephen was stoned, and sought to destroy the Church (Acts 8.1-3); but through the love of God in Jesus Christ he knew himself to be forgiven.

Some Christians, by constantly looking back at their past sinfulness, deny themselves the peace of heart and mind God wants them to have.

An alcoholic, petty thief was seriously ill in hospital. His alcoholism and problems with the police had led his family to cast him off. But God had not cast him off. Every time I saw him he told me a little more of the sins which had made such a mess of his life, but there was always a golden moment in each recital when his face would light up and he would say, 'But I've been saved!' He had discovered the secret of leaving the past to God and running to claim the prize.

Bold shall I stand in thy great day;
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

Nicholas L von Zinzendorf

Meditation 39

Stand firm Read Philippians 4.1-9

In this reading we have some advice on how to 'stand firm in your life in the Lord' (verse 1):

Agree in the Lord. Paul tries to reconcile two women who had quarrelled. One of the great themes of the New Testament is reconciliation. Peace with God is an unrealized ambition unless we have peace with one another.

Rejoice. In spite of Paul's imprisonment and the difficulties he was experiencing, this is a joyful letter. The source of Paul's – and every Christian's – joy is living in union with the Lord.

Show a gentle attitude towards everyone. Some people were once called gentlemen and gentlewomen. These titles had to do with wealth and social rank. But every Christian who has received God's mercy should be a gentle man or gentle woman in their dealings with others.

Ask God for what you need. A deep-sea diver's lifeline provides air to keep him alive and a means of communication with the surface. Prayer is the Christian's lifeline, the means of communication on which our spiritual lives depend.

Get your thinking right. Being God's people in a sinful world is no easy task, but right thinking is a great help to us. Let the good things God has given us fill our minds

Lord, open our hearts to your love and our lives to your guidance.

Meditation 40

Good companions Read Philippians 4.10-23

The power that Christ gives is a recurring theme in Paul's letters. It is the power that enables us to act as 'citizens of heaven' (Philippians 3.20) in the world, to be born of woman and yet know ourselves to be children of God. It is the power which enables Paul, no stranger to suffering, in prison and aware that he may be put to death, to say 'I am content'.

Towards the end of his ill-fated expedition to the South Pole, when there was no longer any hope, Captain Scott of the Antarctic left a letter for the author J M Barrie. It said, 'We are pegging out in a very comfortless spot. We are in a desperate state – feet frozen etc, no fuel, and a long way from food, but it would do your heart good to be in our tent, to hear our songs and our cheery conversation.' Good companions can help us to triumph over the gravest situations.

Jesus Christ is our constant companion. Through the power of his presence with us we know what it is to be content in every circumstance of life. In his presence the darkest situations are shot through with glory.

My hope I cannot measure,
My path to life is free;
My Saviour has my treasure,
And he will walk with me.

Anna L Waring

Meditation 41

Blessedness in Heaven Read Ephesians 1.3-14

At the time Paul was writing, the Roman slave wore a badge with a Latin inscription which said, 'Seize me if I should try to escape and send me back to my master.' The master's name would also be there so that everyone would know who owned the slave.

Paul writes that the Holy Spirit is the stamp of ownership which every Christian bears (verse 13). With Christ at work in our lives we are indelibly and unmistakably marked out as belonging to him.

Paul also refers to the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of God's promises to his people. He uses here the Greek word arrabon taken from the business world. The arrabon acted like a deposit or payment in advance. It sealed a contract and meant that in due time everything in the agreement would be paid in full. So, however blessed our present state as followers of Jesus Christ, it is only a very small part of the blessedness which will be ours in heaven. We look confidently to God to fulfil his promises, because he has given us the arrabon of the Holy Spirit a little on account to assure us that the greater and more glorious part will one day be ours.

Come, Holy Ghost, all-quickening fire,
Come, and in me delight to rest.
Seal of my sins in Christ forgiven,
Earnest of love, and pledge of heaven.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 42

Turn away from your sins Read Acts 2.37 – 47

The most important question of all concerning salvation is 'What shall we do?'. Peter's answer is as valid today as when he first gave it.

Turn away from your sins. We cannot have our sins and Jesus Christ at the same time. Jesus is always ready to come into our lives to redeem them, but the first step is a positive act on our part: to turn away from our sins and turn towards him.

Be baptized. The life of a forgiven sinner is completely new. All who experience the forgiveness of God through faith in Jesus Christ will agree that it is vastly different from the old, sinful life. Baptism is the public confession of faith that God is saving us. Going under the water symbolizes the death of the old, sinful self; emerging from the water symbolizes the new life of the forgiven sinner.

Receive the Holy Spirit. The new life can only be sustained by living day by day with Jesus. He strengthens us in our weakness, supports us in adversity and brings God's glory to transfigure and lift us above all that tries to drag us down to our old sinful ways.

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 43

Part of God's plan Read Ephesians 1.1-14

Introduction

Ephesians was written by Paul from prison towards the end of his life. Because it lacks his customary words of personal greeting, it is thought to be a circular letter addressed in general to the churches in Asia. Some early manuscripts do not have the words 'in Ephesus' in the opening verse and this seems to support such a theory.

The theme of the letter is the unity of God's creation through Jesus Christ. The divisions between one person and another, and between mankind and nature, have been done away by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the unified Church which is to be Christ's agent in healing the divisions in the world.

Paul's inspired writing and the relationship between faith and action of which he writes makes Ephesians one of the treasures of the New Testament.

Read Ephesians 1.1-14

The world we live in is one of discord and division. The Bible teaches that the perfect world which God created was marred by the sin of mankind. The result was that nature became 'red in tooth and claw' (Tennyson), animals were set at enmity, men and women fell out with one another and separated themselves from God. Hostility took the place of peace.

Right at the beginning of Ephesians, however, Paul points to Jesus Christ as God's answer to this dilemma. Christ is the agent through whom God will reconcile the whole of creation, beginning with us who have been reconciled to him through the cross. Indeed the main emphasis of the letter is on union our union with Christ; the drawing together of the nations, the oneness of those who believe in Christ.

What a comfort it is to know that we are part of God's plan for the future! The end of all things is not the disintegration of the world, but restoration and renewal, the establishment of God's kingdom of love and peace and the coming of Christ in glory.

Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.

Arthur C Ainger

Meditation 44

Hope, blessing, power Read Ephesians 1.15-23

Paul touches here upon three great benefits we receive with of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Hope. So many of the hopes Of the people Around us are forlorn hopes fame, fortune, power and so on. But our hope 'does not disappoint us' (Romans 5.5). We have an assurance of salvation, of comfort in distress and, at the last , of everlasting glory.

Blessing. The Christian does not measure his blessings merely in terms of good health, great wealth and a trouble-free life. Many people who do not follow Christ have these things. But thousands of Christians who have none of them know far richer blessings in the daily presence of Jesus, the fulfilment of God's promises and the awareness in their lives of a guiding, loving hand.

Power. The power at work in us is resurrection power a power so great that not even death can overcome it. Whatever battles we have to fight, we are not alone. In the face of temptation, adversity and danger the mighty power of God is our ally.

When all thy mercies,
O my God, My rising soul surveys,
Transported with the view I'm lost
In wonder, love and praise.

Joseph Addison

Meditation 45

God's grace Read Ephesians 2.1-10

God's grace is a spring which bubbles up and springs over into all Paul's writings. Here he summarizes its meaning for us:

We are all sinners and deserve God's anger.

Instead of punishing us God sent Jesus Christ to save us.

We have been brought from death (doing what we want) to life (doing what God wants).

We have done nothing to earn God's goodness, indeed we cannot it is a free gift.

In the original Greek of these verses Paul's words flow on from phrase to phrase without heed to grammar. Here is not the reasoned argument of the theologian expressed in carefully chosen words, but the passionate outpouring of a heart full of love and wonder at God's mercy. We begin to understand Paul's feelings when we consider what we have been and know what we have become through the grace of God.

But O above all thy kindness we praise,
From sin and from thrall which saves the lost race;
Thy Son thou hast given the world to redeem,
And bring us to heaven whose trust is in him.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 46

No divisions among Christians Read Ephesians 2.11-22

The early Church consisted of two main groups of Christians: Jews who recognized in Jesus the Christ promised by their ancient faith; and Gentiles who were the product of a pagan Greek culture. The difficulties of reconciling the two factions (see Acts 11.1-18) has not been fully overcome by the time Paul wrote this letter.

Often there was resentment among the Jews that uncircumcised Greeks were able to share the benefits of a religion they had struggled to preserve over many centuries. Also there was disappointment among the Greeks that some Jews expected them to adopt traditional Jewish customs such as food laws and circumcision as a condition of entry into the Church. It was Paul's task to show both sides that Jesus was not just a Jewish Messiah, but the universal Christ sent to all people. Jesus had proved this by his death on the cross.

In the light of this reading there can be no divisions among Christians. Petty disagreements and the mistrust of centuries are shown to be not only futile but completely inconsistent with Christ's reconciling sacrifice. To foster and perpetuate them is to sin.

Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void;
Names, and sects, and parties fall:
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 47

God has a purpose for us Read Ephesians 3.1-13

When Paul made his fateful appeal to be tried by the emperor (Acts 25.11) it may well have been because he feared the outcome of a Jewish trial in Jerusalem. In retrospect, however, Paul could discern the hand of God moving to bring him to Rome, the very centre of the Gentile world, so that Gentiles as well as Jews might know that they had a place in God's kingdom. He was not the prisoner of the Roman emperor but 'of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles' (verse 1). His days were passed, not in awaiting the emperor's pleasure, but in doing the will of Christ. The prison had become a pulpit.

God has a definite purpose in mind for us and, sometimes such incidents are his way of giving us a prod in the right direction. In times of adversity we can be so overwhelmed by the circumstances that we fail to see his hand at work in what has befallen us. But the Holy Spirit enables us to lift the veil of sorrow or self-pity and to discern God's will. Also in following him we are richly blessed.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

William Cowper

Meditation 48

Things every Christian needs most Read Ephesians 3.14-21

Paul's prayers for the Church demonstrate his ability to ask God for the things every Christian most needs. Here he asks for three essentials of the Christian life:

Spiritual strength (verse 16). The Holy Spirit is able to give us an inner strength which outweighs our bodily weakness. A woman I knew lay terminally ill but her spiritual strength and joy in the Lord so radiated from her that every visit was a joyful occasion.

Christ in us (verse 17a). Paul indicates how life in Christ begins for us. We have to open our hearts to him and allow him to make the decisions which govern our lives.

Rooted in love (verse 17b). A cutting from a plant placed in a glass of water will throw out roots. But if it is to grow into a strong plant, it needs to be placed in the right kind of soil so that its roots can draw up the nourishment it needs for life. The nourishment of the Christian soil is the love of Christ. We draw all we need for our Christian lives from that rich and inexhaustible supply.

'O fill me, Saviour, Jesus, with thy love!

Mary Shekleton

Meditation 49

Rank and file Read Ephesians 4.1-16

At my place of work there was a computer. It was made up of a large number of components, many of them very expensive to replace. However, when it broke down some time ago the part causing the problem was very small and cost very little, but without it the machine was unable to function. The value of that small part was out of all proportion to its price.

When God bestows his gifts he gives wisely. Some are indeed appointed to be evangelists, pastors and teachers. But most of us are the rank and file without whom the Church would never be able to function at all.

A woman I know knits squares which are sewn into blankets for elderly people. A good knitter, she knits to the glory of God. Another person I know writes letters to students and others who are away from home, keeping them in touch with the life of their church. Yet another makes special intercessory prayer for the sick. It is by using the gifts we have, whether great or small, in the loving service of our neighbour that the body of Christ is built up.

Love is the mortar that holds the house of God together.

Meditation 50

The new life Read Ephesians 4.17-32

The new life in union with Christ which Christians have is not won without sacrifice nor maintained without struggle. The devil is constantly seeking to lure us back to the things we renounced when we accepted Jesus Christ as Saviour. The vigorous action needed to combat the enemy is emphasized by the strong active verbs Paul uses: 'Get rid of your old self'; 'Put on

the new self'; 'No more lying'; 'Stop robbing and start working' (verses 22, 24, 25, 28).

In the symbolic act of baptism, plunging beneath the surface of the water represents the death of the sinful self, while emergence from the water represents the rising to a new and better life in Christ. The break between old and new should be as decisive as that.

But remaining in union with Christ can sometimes be difficult. Periods of spiritual barrenness disturb our peace. In adversity we may even think that God has deserted us. These are the times when temptation seems to have extra power to deceive us. But if we remain true to Christ, the Holy Spirit will help us to regain our peace and joy in him.

Fierce may be the conflict,
Strong may be the foe;
But the King's own army
None can overthrow.

Frances R Havergal

Meditation 51

A sacrificial offering Read Ephesians 5.1-7

The people to whom Paul was writing were products of a society which regarded sexual licence as an acceptable feature of everyday life. The great temples of Corinth were maintained by the earnings from prostitution of the hundreds of priestesses who staffed them. Therefore, Paul's words must have come as something of a culture shock, as well as a breath of fresh air, to the Christians.

The important point to note is that sexual immorality and greed are two powerful enemies that threaten our oneness in Christ. They are unacceptable in those who, as God's children, are made in his image and called to love one another 'as Christ loved us' (verse 2).

There are many idols that threaten our peace. Pride, ambition, envy or an unkind tongue can be as damaging to our life in Christ as the things Paul mentions in these verses. But the way of the cross is a sacrificial one. Those things that hinder our following Jesus Christ have to become a sacrificial offering to him who sacrificed himself for us.

Pray for wisdom to see ourselves as we are, and grace to become what God would have us be.

Meditation 52

The born again experience Read Ephesians 5.8-20

The symbols of light and darkness are employed many times by the Biblical writers. In this reading Paul uses them in the same way as Jesus himself had done (see John 8.12) to contrast the Christian life with that of the unredeemed sinner. In the Old Testament darkness is often a symbol of death, and light a symbol of life. This appears to be behind the lines which Paul quotes in verse 14, which are thought to be part of an early Christian hymn.

Passing out of the darkness of sin into the light of life in union with Christ is, in a very real sense, a passing from death to life. It is the 'born again' experience of those who were spiritually dead through sin and who have been called into life by Jesus Christ (see John 3.3-7).

Paul's words in these verses are, therefore, a plea for consistency. There are many whose 'foolish words' would try to deceive us by calling us back to the sins we have relinquished. But, if we examine their arguments in the light of what Jesus teaches, we shall soon discover how foolish they are. The light enables us to see clearly and choose wisely.

Pray that the true light which enlightens everyone may continue shining in our lives.

Meditation 53

Reconciliation Read Ephesians 5.21-33

Paul's words about the status of wives have been regarded by some as evidence of male chauvinism. Yet, when Paul was writing, they were revolutionary ideas which immeasurably advanced the status of women.

To the Jews a wife was a chattel with no rights. In the Greek world she was kept secluded in her own private quarters and enjoyed no social life with her husband whose free time was spent with concubines and courtesans. In Rome she could be passed from man to man because divorce was so easy.

The emphasis Paul gives to love and reverence in these verses meant that among Christians there was to be a revaluation of the wife's role. Christ loved the Church enough to give his life for it. A husband's love for his wife should be no less than this a sacrificial, self-forgetting love.

Here again Paul's message of reconciliation and the oneness in Christ of all creatures and all relationships is clearly in evidence.

So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus (Galatians 3.28)

Meditation 54

Christian responsibility Read Ephesians 6.1-9

History records many changing attitudes towards children. The people to whom Paul was writing, for example, would have included Christians who knew the Roman practice of throwing out unwanted children and leaving them to die. The Romans and others also sold children into slavery. All this seems to be a long way from modern standards of care for children. But the Christian attitude fostered by Paul has had an effect far beyond anything he could have imagined.

The social concern of Christians in the nineteenth century In England, for example, brought about the introduction of Sunday schools and tremendous growth in education for the poor. Certain Christian organizations gave abandoned children a home and apprenticed them to a trade. In these and many other ways Christian men and women saw that children received Christian discipline, love and instruction.

The theme of Christian responsibility at work was recently highlighted in a busy bank. The customers gravitated towards a clerk who gave excellent and cheerful service. One day he dislodged the small plate bearing his name. On the back were the words: 'Do it as unto Christ.

How important a factor is Jesus Christ in our relationships at home and at work?

Meditation 55

God's equipment for us Read Ephesians 6.10-24

In battle the greatest danger to an army comes when scattered groups of the enemy join up to form a united front. Similarly, it is the strength of all creation fully unified by Christ that will finally defeat 'the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world' (verse 12). Consequently, Christians are constantly under attack from the enemy, who seeks to frustrate the work of reconciliation by driving a wedge between the Christian believer and God.

It may well have been the sight of fully armed Roman soldiers near the place where Paul was imprisoned, or even the guard to whom he was chained which prompted the illustration in this reading. How very apt it is! Every piece of equipment used by the Roman army had a specific purpose in protecting the soldier on the one hand or making him an effective attacker on the other. So it is with God's equipment for us: truth, righteousness and faith for our protection; the good news of peace to carry us along; the word of God against which no evil can prevail. Above all we take heart from a Captain who overcame evil and who, however hard the battle, will not leave us to fight it alone.

Who in the strength of Jesus trusts,
Is more than conqueror.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 56

Dealing with sin Read Romans 8.1-11

In September 1943 the Italian dictator, Mussolini, was rescued from imprisonment in the Gran Casso mountains by a daring raid. Major Otto Skorzeny, a German officer, leading a small force of paratroops, snatched Mussolini out of his captors' hands and took him to freedom in Germany. It was a classic act of rescue. The rescuer had to get right into Mussolini's prison and, by dealing with the guards and lifting the prisoner to safety, was able to do for him what he could not do for himself.

How like God and us! When we were unable to break the stranglehold of sin, because our human nature was weak, God sent Jesus into our situation to deal with sin and lift us out of its captivity.

No one who has tasted freedom would choose to become a captive again. That is what following our human nature would mean. But if Christ so lives in us that we are able to say, 'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2.20), then we shall hold fast the blessed state of peace and freedom which God gives to his children.

My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 57

CREATION AND CREATIVITY Read Genesis 1.1-19

Introduction

The Bible is the record of a saving God and a saved people. In book after book, we read of a disobedient race, but also of a God who never allows their sin to affect his love for them. Part of the creation story tells of an act of initial wrongdoing by which men and women separated themselves from God. The rest of the Bible sets out to show us God constantly in action to restore that broken relationship. It is never merely the sad record of mankind's sin, but the good news of God's gracious dealings with people.

The creativity that God has given to men and women is to some extent a part of their being made in his image. He has made us not only for communion with him, but to be his fellow-workers in caring for, beautifying and enriching the world in which he has set us. So, as his stewards, we need to exercise every talent he has given us in the service of our neighbours. By doing that, we serve him best.

CREATION

Preparing the Ground

Throughout the Bible, God is shown to be making himself known – to patriarchs like Abraham, through spiritual leaders like Moses and prophets like Elijah, and supremely through his Son, Jesus Christ. At the beginning of Genesis, God makes himself known as one who brings order out of chaos, harmony out of discord.

Read Genesis 1.1-19

Modern science tries to discover how the universe came into being. The writers of Genesis, however, make it plain that it did not happen by accident. God is there at the beginning. What occurs is by his express will. There is planning and purpose in it, and, at every stage, the mind that plans and the hand that performs are God's.

The view, held by ancient peoples, of heaven as a solid vault (dome, GNB) over the earth may seem rather primitive to us. But without this they believed that the waters above would engulf

and destroy the earth. Thus they stated the great truth that God prepared the world for human habitation, and he can be relied upon to maintain it. Without that constant concern on his part, his created work would be wiped out in a moment and would revert to its original chaos.

Give God thanks that his mercies still endure, ever faithful, ever sure.

Henry W. Baker

Meditation 58

Filling the Earth with Living Creatures Read Genesis 1.20 to 2.4a

The creation of man and woman 'in his own image' is the crowning achievement of God's creative work. There is the same order and harmony in the provision of plants and animals as there was in the beginning of creation, but the maintenance of that relationship is now given into the hands of humans.

To be 'in the image of God' means to share God's character. So we can never treat any part of his creation carelessly; we must accord it the same respect as he did when he made it and 'saw that it was good'. Because God's creatures are given into our keeping, we need – for example – to adopt ways of developing improved strains of livestock which do no harm to the animals. Weed-killers and fertilizers should be chemically safe so as not to upset the balance of nature, and waste products from our industries should not be allowed to pollute the environment.

God is love. If we are made in his image, then we must be governed by love in all our dealings with his creation.

Earth is the Lord's: it is ours to enjoy it,
Ours, as his stewards, to farm and defend.
From its pollution, misuse and destruction,
Good Lord, deliver us, world without end!

F. Pratt Green

Meditation 59

God is in charge Read Genesis 2.4b – 25

What is the significance of the one tree that the man (Adam) and woman (Eve) were forbidden to touch? Why is it that God, having provided everything for the life and comfort of human beings should withhold the fruit of just one tree?

One explanation may be that by reserving one fruit God is reminding the man and woman that the garden is not wholly at their disposal. They are tenants, not owners. By this one rule God makes plain his intention of keeping sovereignty over the world he has created.

A world without God would be a world without love. In the battle for supremacy by one group over another, compassion would be the first casualty. It would also be a world in which evil would reign and men and women would be condemned to be everlasting prisoners of sin. Instead, God is still in charge. He is able to overrule our disobedience and folly, give love for our lovelessness and deliver us from the captivity of sin.

What God's almighty power hath made,
His gracious mercy keepeth;
By morning glow or evening shade
His watchful eye ne'er sleepeth;
Within the kingdom of his might,
Lo! all is just and all is right:
To God all praise and glory.

Johann J Schultz

Meditation 60

Mankind's Revolt Read Genesis 3.1-24

The story of Adam and Eve is the story of every man and woman since human life began. In their disobedience and desire for more than their allotted portion, we recognize our baser selves. Here is portrayed the temptation to make our own standards of right and wrong, to put ourselves at the centre instead of God, to think that what we want is somehow better than what he wants for us.

The catastrophic results of sin for the human race are immediately apparent. Man and woman are no longer at ease with each other (verse 7), and they are out of harmony with God (verse 10). Suffering and hard labour are to be their companions in life and, at the end of it, death and a return to the earth from which they came (verses 16 - 19).

God is judge and we must pay the price of our failure to live according to his will. But he is also a God of mercy and forgiveness who will never give us up. His care is shown in the tunics of skins he makes for the man and woman. He keeps them in life and shields them from the thorns and thistles. Even though they are unfit for full communion with him, in the name of Eve, meaning 'life', they are given the hope of a new life.

Father, I dare believe
Thee merciful and true:
Thou wilt my guilty soul forgive,
My fallen soul renew.

Charles Wesley

Meditation 61

God's Answer to Mankind's Revolt Read Romans 5.12-21

Paul's writing sometimes reflects the old Jewish idea of 'solidarity', whereby a person was regarded less as an individual and more as a member of a family or tribe. If he did wrong, then the whole family or tribe was held responsible. Similarly, his good works advanced the standing of his tribe and family. This helps us to understand this reading.

How do we explain our human tendency to sin? Why, when we have a free choice, do we so often fail to do what is right and good and settle for something less worthy? Paul writes that because Adam, representing the human race, gave way to sin, all of us have become sinners deserving nothing but death.

But God sent Jesus as man to represent all humanity and reverse the process. His perfect obedience cancels out our disobedience and turns the finality of death into the promise of eternal life. However great our sin, God's grace is greater. If his love could be measured, the scales would crash down on our side.

O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

John H Newman

Meditation 62

God's Gift of New Life Read 2 Corinthians 5.11-21

The New Testament teaches us two important things about salvation: first, what God has saved us from; and, secondly, what God has saved us for. Paul pictures it in terms of life and death, alienation and reconciliation, sinfulness and goodness. Because Jesus died and was raised to life as the representative of all mankind, he has made it possible for all to put their sinful nature to death and begin a new life in union with him. This is what Jesus was inviting Nicodemus to do when he told him, 'No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' (John 3.3 GNB)

The world that God made has been marred by human sinfulness; through disobedience man cut himself off from God. Now, through Jesus, God has created a new world of grace... He has lifted us out of the grip of our sinfulness, reconciled us to himself and crowned us with his goodness. How is it possible for a sinner such as I to live this new life? The answer is given in verse 17. On my own I am weak, a prey to temptation, but united to Christ I am a different person. The strength he lends me is sufficient for my every need.

Meditation 63

God's Spirit Inspires Artistic Creation Read Exodus 31.1-11

During Israel's exodus journey from Egypt, God had revealed his presence in many ways. In the flight from Pharaoh he had made himself known as the spirit of deliverance. In the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night he was the spirit of guidance. He was the spirit of understanding to the complaining Israelites and the spirit of providential care in his gift of manna and of water in the wilderness.

Now, in his plans for the Tent of the Presence, the Ark, the fine furnishings and costly vestments, he shows that he is also the spirit of beauty, who inspires his chosen to beautify their place of worship and gives them the skill to do so. It may be that these people, left to their everyday crafts, would hardly have considered themselves fit to perform the great tasks God had for them. But somehow during their journeying God had equipped them with the special skills which would be used to his glory.

Today, churches and cathedrals of great beauty testify to one who is a God of beauty as well as a God of power. He still inspires men and women to give of their best in whatever task he calls them to do, and still endows them with the skills they need to do it.

Thank you, Father, for all who make churches beautiful, especially those whose beautiful lives encourage us to do better ourselves.

Meditation 64

Only our Best is Good Enough to Offer to God Read 2 Chronicles 2.1-16

When Solomon decided to build the temple he decided that it would be as worthy a means of honouring God as he could possibly make it, incorporating the costliest materials he was able to obtain and using the most highly skilled craftsmen. Solomon's desire to offer God the best of which he was capable has been echoed many times in the lives of men and women as they have experienced his love and mercy and responded to it.

It was this desire which prompted a novice monk to astound his brethren by somersaulting before the altar. 'I was a circus acrobat', he said. 'This is the only thing I can do well and I do it to the glory of God.'

On the island of Orkney Italian prisoners, during the second World War, built a beautiful church. It is still there. The extraordinary thing about it is that every part is made out of scrap materials. That was the best they could find; but, in skilled hands, other people's rubbish was made fit for a cathedral.

You and I can offer our gifts and talents to the Lord. However inadequate our gifts may seem, he will bless them and use them powerfully.

O Lord, help me always to offer you the best I can.

Meditation 65

To Use or to Lose Read Luke 19.11-27

Getting up for the first time after a long period of lying ill is a bewildering experience. We lose our balance because the brain has forgotten how we find our bearings in an upright position. Leg muscles are weak through lack of use, so we tire very quickly.

Abilities that are not used may be lost for ever. On the other hand, abilities that are used will grow. Musicians practice many hours a day to perfect their playing. Their reward is an ability to play increasingly difficult music and make its beauty available for their hearers.

If we let the pounds of the parables represent the talents that God has given us, we shall see that this principle of gain and loss is present. Whether our talents are great or small does not matter. What does matter is that we use what we have been given as much as we can. When God entrusted us with these talents he expected us to use them, not lose them through neglect.

Two women were baking bread. One forgot to put in the yeast and when her son remarked that their neighbour had two loaves for every one of theirs his mother replied, 'I had the yeast but forgot to put it in.' Using what we have brings its reward; we pay the penalty when we fail to do so.

The greatest gift of God to us is love. By hiding it away we lose the ability to use it for others. On the other hand, our love grows as we practice using it. And the more we love, the more love we receive to use.

Father, give me grace to use my talents in loving service of my neighbour.

Meditation 66

Courage to Abandon Wrong Use of Skills Read Acts 19.11-20

This story, dealing with the use of supernatural powers to cast out evil spirits, has an important sequel. Some of the believers among the Ephesians had practiced magic and, since books were costly, must have earned much money by it. To give it up meant not only self-discipline, but a considerable sacrifice on their part.

Contrast this with the anger and frustration of Demetrius the silversmith in the verses which follow (verses 23-27). The reason for his opposition to the gospel was the threat it posed to the rich rewards he got from making and selling his models of the temple. If Jesus took the place of Diana at the centre of Ephesian religion, his trade would be gone.

Giving up our wrongdoing is always a costly exercise. When we have misused our God-given skills in order to profit from the furtherance of evil, it also takes a great deal of courage: our livelihood is threatened and our ability to earn impaired. That so many still do renounce evil practices and unworthy employment at great personal cost is a credit both to them and to God's enabling grace.

Thank you, Lord, for the grace to renounce what is evil
And choose what is good.

Meditation 67

Serving God Together Read Romans 12.3-13

In the long history of Christianity are found many saints whose names remind us of great movements for social good. William Wilberforce is one who comes to mind. But without the work of his colleagues in the evangelical group known as 'the Clapham Sect' Wilberforce's great work of abolishing the slave-trade could never have been accomplished. They were all men with different gifts which, in isolation, were of limited use. But when each contributed what he could

do best in a venture to which the Lord had called them, they became a powerful force for good. One man had a talent for painstaking work in building up the case against the slave-traders. He once spent more than a year searching for a sailor who could provide a vital piece of evidence. Another did nothing but write letters, but the thousands of letters he wrote were a vital part of the work of winning public support for the anti-slavery campaign.

One of my friends is the caretaker of a London church. He believes that God has called him to his position there. It is known in the neighbourhood as 'the shining church' because of the way he keeps it. We are not all called to be leaders in the Church, but to use whatever gift we have to God's glory.

Although my gift is small, Father, it is great in your eyes when it is the best I can possibly give.

Meditation 68

Jesus Promises: 'I Will Make You....' Read Mark 1.14-20

When Peter had healed the crippled man at the temple gate (Acts 3.1-8), he and John were brought before the Jewish Council to account for their actions. Boldly Peter confessed his faith in Jesus Christ, refusing to be silent. (See Acts 4.8-13) How could this be the same Peter who had denied Jesus in the High Priest's courtyard after Jesus' arrest or who had trembled with fear behind locked doors with the other disciples just after his death?

The answer is to be found in this reading. The promise of Jesus – 'I will make you ...' (verse 17) – came true in the experience of Peter and those early disciples. Through the power of the Holy Spirit fishermen became evangelists, cowards were changed into heroes, Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle.

That same power is still able to change people's lives. A pawnbroker's assistant in Nottingham heard Jesus' promise and, through faith in him, William Booth founded the Salvation Army. A little-educated housemaid in London put her trust in him and Gladys Aylward was made to take the gospel to China.

In our weakness we know that we are unable to cope with the sins that disable us and the problems that beset us. But Jesus makes us the same promise today. Let him take us as we are and make us what he wants us to be.

Take me just as I am, Lord, and make me what you would have me be.