

The Doctor's Life Support 2

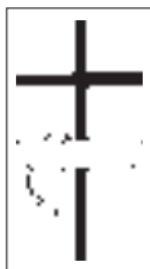
Refreshing Spiritual Vitality



daily devotional readings through the year

THE DOCTOR'S LIFE SUPPORT

2



Refreshing Spiritual Vitality

Foreword

Paul Brand

Edited by

George Chalmers
Janet Goodall
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The Editors are immensely grateful to all who have helped in the production of this book. Dr Paul Brand set the book's spiritual tone in a foreword and elsewhere there are contributions from around the world. We cannot sufficiently thank all whose input appears and is acknowledged in its pages. Inevitably we were not able to use all the material we received but without the hard work and prayerful commitment of all, this book would not have been possible.

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Drs John and Alethea Reader at the ICMDA initiated this project and their successor, Dr Peter Pattisson and the Executive Committee, advised and encouraged as it progressed. Mrs Jenny Darkin in the Cambridge office kept the papers flowing and Mrs Diana Roberts prepared the final manuscript, while Mrs Marion Sanders helped with proof reading. Denise Lloyd and Richard Parsons, of Stanley L. Hunt (Printers) Ltd., advised on production. To these and many others we give heartfelt thanks.

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Preface

... guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour ... Psalm 25: 5

The psalmist's prayer underlines the purpose of this new book. It succeeds the 1994 edition of *The Doctor's Life Support*, published by the Christian Medical Fellowship (UK) for the International Christian Medical and Dental Association (ICMDA). Daily devotional readings from ICMDA members highlight spiritual lessons from their clinical and dental practice and aim to bring support and nourishment to workers in, and perhaps users of, the health care services. Some contributions come from areas where fear of persecution may exist.

Each entry starts with a short Bible quotation and ends with suggestions for further Bible study on that day's theme. The New International Version is used unless otherwise stated. The new format, the desire to achieve a reasonably consistent style, and especially the needs of readers whose first language is not English, have all called for considerable sifting and editing. We hope that all who have contributed will understand and accept this for the sake of our diverse readership.

Our shared belief is that the Bible, as God's word, provides the bedrock on which the best health care can be provided. Through our Lord Jesus Christ we are able to offer more than physical healing when we serve others in the power of his Love. Both as writers and readers, we are so much blessed by the growing work and fellowship of the ICMDA, yet many members also experience loneliness and hardship. We hope that this new '*Life Support*' will live up to its name, bringing just the right word for the day to any who are finding it a struggle to show and to share God's love within this needy world.

Our prayer is that each of us will find help each day to lean harder on our loving Lord, to listen to and obey his word, and to find fresh energy from his Holy Spirit as we seek to work for him.

George Chalmers

Janet Goodall

Harold Jones

Keith Sanders

Foreword

This is the third edition of this collection of daily readings for Christian doctors, dentists and clinical students. Like the first two editions it is written by Christians and based on Scripture. Each day's theme is based also on the practical experience of that day's author of the importance of some aspect of their own Christian Faith as it relates to the needs of their patients, or of keeping their own personal priorities in order.

One minor change in this edition is that it is just a little smaller than the earlier ones. The editors tell me that this is so that it will fit into a pocket or handbag. Now this must mean that doctors or students have asked for this. I'm sure the editors had visualised readers keeping the book by their bedside, or at their desk. That is how I would have seen it too. However I like the idea – wherever it came from.

The doctor or dentist gets ready for the clinic and puts on a coat. He or she checks the essentials. There is the stethoscope, the patella hammer, or whatever, and the Doctors' Life Support! O.K. we are ready. Let's go!

This attitude puts the day into perspective. It is a reminder that one is trying to identify the problems of a patient who is a person. It is a reminder that you – the clinician – are depending on God-given spiritual insights to be able to recognise spiritual need and hunger even while the patient may have told you only of indigestion, headaches or a mouth ulcer. The square bulge in your pocket may also remind you that you have something worth reading at odd times while waiting for the next move in your program.

Finally, while talking to a patient, you may remember a helpful thought that came in last Monday's reading, and that you marked to show to a patient on just such an occasion as this.

Paul Brand

JANUARY

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me, and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord ... Jeremiah 29: 11–14.

Jesus replied, ‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.’ Matthew 14: 16

What happened inside the disciples? They were aware of the needs of the crowd but they came to the wrong conclusion and asked the Lord to send the people away to buy food for themselves. What was the Lord waiting for? He was waiting for the disciples to give him what they had, even though in their eyes it was far from enough. The Lord used this very little and the crowd was satisfied. All the disciples had to do was to pick up the leftovers in order to experience the glory of God, and then to tell others and remind themselves that he is an omnipotent and loving God. This miracle is recorded in all four Gospels.

We had a similar experience with the 1991 Balatonaliga Conference in Hungary. It was a time of very great political changes and very few resources. We were faced with severe illnesses, death, and unavailability of the leaders we had counted on. Then the Gulf War broke out! We feared no one would come. In all this, we were made to realise that we could only count on our Lord.

Result – we were more than satisfied! Over 500 attended, including 150 from former communist countries for whom we were able to provide free hospitality. Out of the financial ‘leftovers’ we were able to begin to publish our Hungarian CMF journal.

Prayer: Lord, help us to see the needs of our fellowmen and help us not to fall into doubting you. Open our spiritual eyes, so that we may see against our own insignificance your power and love, and that you satisfy those who are in need. Saviour, help us never to forget what you did for us, and Holy Spirit, help us to tell others faithfully about Jesus Christ and about the love of God.

Read: Matthew 14: 13–21; Mark 8: 14–21.

Wait for the Lord ... Psalm 27: 14

‘Take the waiting out of wanting.’ This slogan typifies the so-called developed world, with its haste, impatience and intolerance. The developing world has much to teach the rest of us about patience. Yet this quality should be evident worldwide in every Christian, being one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. (Galatians 5: 22) Perhaps it is to strengthen patience that God gives us so many exercises in waiting.

Many Bible characters were kept waiting. Abraham and Sarah waited many years for God to give them their promised son. Joseph endured years of frustration before seeing God’s purpose finally achieved. Moses spent forty years – *forty years!* – in the desert before being called to take the Israelites through another desert – for a further forty years! Our few hours tied to the operating room whilst other calls pile up, or longer periods spent waiting for results, or a partner, or a more secure job, should all take on a different perspective. From beginning to end, the Bible illustrates, or calls for, patience.

Patience is not resignation, but active trust in God. We wait on him, either for a call to action or, should he prefer to keep us immobile, learning to rest in his loving, all-knowing care. The psalmist compares this to a servant with eyes on the master, ready for the next order but meantime, it seems, just waiting. (Psalm 123: 2) We are to wait trustfully on *God*, not merely for something to happen. The next step is up to him. Sometimes he seems to keep us in the dark until we have learned this lesson. The fruit of the Spirit is ... patience.

*Leave to his sovereign sway
To choose and to command;
So shalt thou, wondering, own His sway,
How wise, how strong His hand ...*

*Paulus Gerhardt (1607–76),
tr. by John Wesley (1703–91)*

Read: Genesis 7: 11; 8: 1, 13–14; Isaiah 30: 18; Revelation 3: 10.

JGo

'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands for ever.' 1 Peter 1: 24; Isaiah 40: 6, 8

When the New Testament repeats an Old Testament message, we do well to pay close attention. Here we have one of Scripture's grand themes: the littleness of time compared with the vastness of eternity. What a valuable perspective.

Matters of disease and health continue to be of intense general interest. Health workers, impelled by a well-informed public, can strive hard to achieve distinction. Whether contributing to better health care, missionary service or academic and scientific advance, seeking to achieve can be entirely proper for Christians who are 'working for the Lord, not for men'. (Colossians 3: 23) Some major advances have resulted from Christian faith working through honest minds, accepting our place in God's creation. Both medieval and twentieth-century hospices had an intrinsically Christian ethos.

Yet it is easy to be overtaken by naked ambition and aim to attain personal goals, be these for fame, influence, power, money or simply intellectual and scientific satisfaction. Fashions change, and today's professional wisdom is often tomorrow's foolishness. In any case, career fulfilment cannot satisfy eternally and we are frail and finite. A glowing obituary is still an obituary. What price then our successes?

In contrast, God does not change. His word is timeless. His purposes are eternal. Our hope lies in him.

*Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show,
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

John Newton

*Prayer: May the favour of the Lord our God rest upon us;
establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work
of our hands. Psalm 90: 17*

Read: Psalm 90.

DEBP

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.' Psalm 23: 1

King David, the one-time shepherd boy, perhaps wrote this psalm after he had fled Jerusalem in the face of his rebellious son Absalom, and had trekked some 70 km across Jordan and up the narrow treacherous gorge of the Jabbok river to Mahanaim. There, people other than his own had provided all that he and his followers had needed in the way of bedding and food. Today, few of us know what traditional shepherding entails; the only sheep we see is that served on a plate! It is helpful therefore to relate our Lord's care for us within our own life styles and language idioms.

From industrialised Japan comes the paraphrase – ‘The Lord is my Pace-setter, I shall not rush; He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals ... Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day, I will not fret, for his presence is near. His timelessness, his all-importance, will keep me in balance. He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activity by anointing my mind with his oil of tranquillity.’ An American Indian’s interpretation reads – ‘The Great Spirit above is a Shepherd Chief, I am his, and with him I want not. Sometime ... he will draw me into a narrow place between the mountains. It is dark there but I will not turn back ... for it is there between the mountains that the Shepherd Chief will meet me. What I tell you is true.’

(From translations by Toki Miyashina and Cynthia Pearl Maus, ICMDA News, Praise, Prayer.)

It is a wonderful fact of life that as we trust the Lord Jesus he relates to us in the ways we need him most. But, what about those who do not have or do not know of the Pace-setter for life nor the Shepherd Chief? How do they cope?

Read: 2 Samuel 17: 27–29; Psalm 23.

RKMS

Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Mark 16: 15

Apartments shook and collapsed. Over 2,000 died in the earthquake that left parts of central Taiwan devastated. I watched on television and wondered about my friends, the young missionary couple with their new baby, or the girl I went to China with. At least eternity held no fear for them, but what of the others? Having lived without Christ must they face eternity without him too? Could I have been more directly involved in mission? Could I have introduced some of these people to Jesus?

Like others, I have reasons for not being more involved. I am an untrained, unpaid medical student with a full and busy life. But are these valid reasons or are they inadequate excuses, preventing me from being involved in mission now? Although I cannot move overseas, I can reach out locally and further afield during holidays and electives. Letters and e-mails open the whole world to me. Again, is my ‘poor student’ status a sufficient excuse for not giving? European countries spend billions each year on luxuries! It has been said that living and spending mindless of the poor is being mindless of God. Perhaps a more simple life would enable me to give more towards mission? Finally, though busy, I could pray more. ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’ (Matthew 9: 38)

God’s heart is for mission – to reach everyone in every part of his world. No matter how confined or poor or busy, we can find means of being part of mission. God has a role for each one of us that stretches beyond home, classroom and hospital walls. There are excuses and obstacles, but the Bible tells us to go! Let us do something about it today.

Read: Acts 1: 8; Matthew 28: 18–20.

SLa

'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.'
Luke 10: 41–42

The Martha syndrome is not described in any textbook and yet it is easily recognisable in our patients, our families and friends, and in ourselves. It has two diagnostic features – the need to be continually busy, and anxiety about getting everything done.

In the story of Martha and Mary we are reminded to get our priorities right. Jesus chastised Martha for her anxious concern for the practical physical things of life, whereas Mary was content to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to what he was saying. Jesus himself took time out from the demands of his ministry, to draw aside to be with God and to encourage his disciples to do the same. We need to ensure that we make time to just 'be', to sit with God and hear what he has to say to us, to hear things we cannot hear if we are always 'doing'.

To be properly able to care for our patients, we need to care for ourselves. To show patience, reassurance, hope and confidence and to equip our patients with the skills to go on with life, even in the face of illness and despair, we must ourselves be calm, unrushed, attentive. We need to be able to emphasise the important features of health and wholeness, that we can relate to the Creator through Christ, even when the physical body is suffering.

Prayer: 'God of peace, you taught that in returning and in rest we shall be saved, in quietness and in confidence shall be our strength: by the power of your Spirit lift us to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God.' (1)

*May the peace of God my Father
Rule my life in everything,
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing. (2)*

Read: Luke 10: 36–42; John 14: 25–27.

HM

1. Prayer Book for Australia. 2. Kate Barclay Wilkenson.

Jesus said to Simon, ‘Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so I will let down the nets.’ So, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break.

Luke 5: 4

The lack of opportunity to address the spiritual needs of patients can be very disappointing for a Christian doctor. There are a number of reasons for this, including lack of time and trying to care for more patients with less resources. It is not always seen as a priority by those in more senior positions. Our bio-psycho-social model of medicine moves faith in God to the fringes. It is challenging trying to show colleagues that Christianity has an effect on how we practise medicine. The relevance of Christianity to health care raises lots of questions, the answers to which are not always apparent. On the surface there may seem to be little place for spiritual values in today’s professionalism.

The disciples may well have thought the same about their job, when Jesus told them to cast out their nets again after a hard night’s fishing with no success. One can hear Peter saying: ‘It’s okay for you, Lord, to use the boat as a platform for speeches – but don’t tell us how to fish! That is our area of expertise.’ However, the disciples obey Jesus and cast out their nets – which become engorged with fish. Peter falls at Jesus’ knees ... seeing the power of God.

Are we willing to metaphorically cast out our nets in the health care professions for God? Do we have the eyes and vision to see the consequences of introducing our patients to the Healer? Do we respond to this like Peter did ... bowing before him admitting all of our shortcomings?

Read: Luke 5: 1–11.

AHe

'... keep your gifts ... and give your rewards to someone else.' Daniel 5: 17

Which of us does not appreciate recognition? It gives satisfaction when we are praised or rewarded, and it would be an odd person who found no pleasure in promotion! Whether as nurses, doctors or administrators, our health systems encourage efforts to ascend the professional ladder. A competitive attitude is often evident in church circles, too. The Bible encourages Christians to be zealous; to work hard; to aim for the prize and win the race. It is possible to focus on these passages rather than on those which call us to humility in waiting on God for direction.

Pressure to compromise will come to us all in one guise or other. It may be the temptation to go with the tide over ethical issues, or to assert professional rights instead of patient welfare. If we stand alone against a majority view, tangible rewards, as well as popularity, may be lost. Daniel, however, refused to be seduced by pride or promises. Some would have jumped at the chance to be made rich by Belshazzar, but Daniel could not be bought. He did translate the mysterious writing on the wall, but refused to make capital from it. His eventual promotion came as a gift from God.

To aim solely for professional prominence will threaten family relationships and church involvement. We must learn to say, 'Give your rewards to another.' Jesus resisted the devil's offers of great prominence and worldly splendour by finding wisdom and strength in the word of God. (Matthew 4: 1–11) If he had faltered, we would today have no hope or true happiness. As it is, 'You know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.' (Colossians 3: 24)

Read: Daniel 5: 16–31.

DEPB

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11: 6

In 1966, Anne, our two children and I moved from the large well-equipped mission hospital in Manorom in Thailand to a small wooden clinic in a remote town. Each time a patient arrived who needed emergency surgery I discovered my own pulse rate rose considerably. Often I was faced with someone who had multiple abdominal gunshot wounds. While preparations were made for surgery, I eagerly read Hamilton Bailey's *Textbook of Emergency Surgery*, the opening page of which had a quotation by Samuel J Mixter: 'A true surgeon is never fearless. He fears for his patients, he fears for his shortcomings, his own mistakes, but he never fears for himself or his professional reputation.'

I thought 'That's me: I'm not fearless. In fact I am afraid. What if I fail to examine every inch of the intestine and miss one of the bullet holes? What if ...?' But I took my fears to God and, together, he and I approached the operating table. I believed that he existed and rewarded anyone who diligently sought him. This did not excuse me from doing the best surgery I could. At each step I found myself offering back to him the limited knowledge and experience I had. The whole task was 'ordinary' surgery, but it carried for me a spiritual dimension.

Faith in God is not only pleasing to him but is essential for our own growth. Not only in one's professional life, but in the quieter, more ordinary events of our life we can develop the habit of seeking him out, sharing things with him and depending on him.

Read: Hebrews 11: 1–16.

JT

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and gave orders to kill. Matthew 2: 18

I wonder if the Magi ever knew that their famous journey to Bethlehem was indirectly responsible for the slaughter of hundreds of innocent children? And if they did, how did they cope with that knowledge afterwards? Like the wise men, we as Christians are called to make a journey of faith, the purpose of which is to bring worship to Jesus. Sometimes there are painful consequences, which were quite unforeseen at the first step. I think of the missionary family boarding the flight to take them to Canada unaware that their aircraft would explode over the sea with the loss of all on board. Or the Bible teacher who, setting out for a conference, was involved in a horrific accident which left him paralysed from a broken neck.

We know of many similar stories. So how do we maintain our faith in the light of such painful realities? We must recognise that nowhere in the Scriptures does God promise us a charmed life. Becoming a Christian and being filled with the Holy Spirit do not exempt us from the harsher brutalities of life. God does not say that he will always spare us the flood and the fire; what he does say, though, is that when they come he will be there with us, ‘For I am the Lord your God ... your Saviour.’ (Isaiah 43: 2–3) We also have to accept that a sovereign God is not bound to explain everything for us, and that in the face of many frightening things including danger, violence and death, he nevertheless loves us irrevocably. None of these unforeseen circumstances need separate us from his love.

Read: Romans 8: 28–38.

TS

... Christ lives in me. Galatians 2: 20

Demanding patients and other stresses of professional life can sap our vitality and threaten inner poise, but Christians do not have to cope alone. Our Lord lives within us. (John 14: 23) In John 15, Jesus compares himself to the vine with believers as branches, nourished by the flow of his life in them. Just as pruning encourages fruit formation, so the Father has to prune or purify our lives to produce in us a Christlike character.

Roots need water. In Africa, I've seen brown and barren sun-scorched land, yet in the distance a flourishing green tree. What was its secret? It was planted by a river. Jeremiah compares this to the trustful believer who stays fresh when the heat is on by being rooted in the love and power of God. (Jeremiah 17: 8) As the Spirit of God lives within us and flows through us, we become effective witnesses, with lives bearing fruit to his glory.

Yet we can easily become 'scorched by the sun', with so many clamouring patients, bad news to give, failed therapy – and more. We desperately need to keep a quiet time each day, when we wait upon the Lord to renew our strength and find him to be the water of life. To quote Billy Graham, 'If you are too busy to spend a little time with God each day, in personal prayer and reading his word, then you are busier than God intends you to be.' Beware of the barrenness of a busy life!

For all of us there are times of drought. Sundays on call prevent worship with other Christians. Sudden accident or illness, or breakdown in relationships, weaken us physically and emotionally. At such times, as we cast ourselves upon our God, 'the fountain of living waters', we prove his faithfulness to nourish our souls. The leaf stays green!

Read: Jeremiah 17: 1–10; Psalm 1; John 15: 1–17.

AV

The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow. Psalm 146: 9

Walking into the room I saw her lying alone in the middle of a large bed. Her breathing was harsh and there was a white coating on her tongue. As I held her, looking into her eyes, two little brown ones met mine; I tried to control my tears which were wanting to spill over. The following day it was decided that I should devote my time to this little baby who had been abandoned by her parents. We named her Precious. For the week that followed I cared for her – very quickly she took a big place in my heart.

I was on my elective. I wondered at God's economy in sending me so far to take care of an abandoned child for such a short period. It showed me something of how much God cares. I felt very inadequate as a second year student, unable to communicate or help, as I accompanied Precious to various hospitals. Time to leave came quickly. Precious was still in hospital. The scripture God gave me that morning was, 'Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob. ... The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow.' (Psalm 146: 5, 9) I was reminded that God had entrusted her to me for that short time and that I was placing her back into his arms.

From this experience I realised how much God cares for individuals. I find it easy to get in the numbers game, feeling I am only effective if reaching numerous people. Yet how often Jesus spent time with just one. Each patient, each colleague, an individual that God cares for and has gone to enormous lengths to reach. May he reach them through me.

Read: Psalms 145 and 146; Isaiah 61: 1–3.

SLa

Has his unfailing love vanished for ever? Psalm 77: 8

Little Precious is dead, after a short and less than sweet life. What was God thinking of? I had previously believed in a God of love, but the death of this little baby, and the resultant questions about God's justice and mercy, threw my life into a downward spin. How could a good God allow such suffering? Starting work on the wards and meeting people facing different crises made matters worse. Gradually, I seemed to be further from God and closer to not believing in him at all. My faith was dying and I was miserable.

A quieter stage in my studies gave time to reconsider the basic evidence for Christian faith, despite still being angry with God and struggling to believe in his goodness. Yet he lovingly provided friends to stand by me, including one who came regularly to listen and pray, giving me hope that I would regain confidence in him and his word. There are no easy answers to suffering, but it helped to recall that it first came into the world through human choices. (Genesis 3) Much of it still does. Then, though he still felt distant, looking again at the cross made it hard to accuse God of being unloving. Head knowledge had not reached my heart.

The time came to let go of anger and disappointment and trust him as much as I could. Then God met me, reminding me that, as heavenly father of little Precious, he knew best. If I loved her, how much more did he. His love never fails.

Prayer: Dear God, please help me to let go of the things that keep me from you and give me the faith to see your goodness in the midst of the darkness. Amen.

Read: Psalm 13: 1–6; Isaiah 54: 10.

SLa

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. 1 Peter 4: 10

All of us in the healing professions have been imbued with the ideal of service, an ideal that has motivated us and led us. But sometimes that ideal wears thin as we struggle to get through a day filled with the stresses of practice. Our resources sometimes seem on the edge of running out. It is at such times that the word of God speaks to us in the form of a challenge, reminding us that we are where God has placed us to use our gifts and so be channels of his grace in situations that can seem terribly ungracious.

He has given us reasons to do so:

First, it is God's grace that has saved us, not what we have done to merit salvation. (Ephesians 2: 8)

Second, St Paul reminds us (Titus 2: 11) that it is the grace of God that brings salvation to others. To the extent that we minister God's grace in their lives we help to bring salvation to those who are in need of God's saving grace. Which one of us has not disarmed a disgruntled patient with a smile, a touch and 'the soft answer that turns away wrath'?

Finally, when our own aggressiveness – our own reaction to the circumstances of a trying day – is dissipated, the grace of God can flow through us to bring blessing and healing to those in need, those whom we have desired to serve and are blessed to serve.

Prayer: 'Lord, fill me. Make me an instrument of your grace today so that by your Spirit I can turn even provocation into an opportunity to minister your grace and salvation to someone in need.'

Read: 1 Corinthians 12: 1–11; 1 Peter 4: 7–11.

DT

When I am afraid, I will trust in you. Psalm 56: 3

Most of us at times have pangs of fear. One new graduate was panic-stricken even to think about her first day on call. Many of our fears are fancies, anticipating what may never happen, but those of an anxious disposition can suffer badly and medical practice gives ample scope for anxiety. Failure with the first venepuncture paralyses ability for the second, and scornful comments from a senior fill the next wardround with dread. We may fear for some patients' lives, or the likely reprisals should they die. Additional concern about post-graduate examinations, or major family problems, and fear of cracking up can loom large.

I love the storm passages in the Bible. Mark tells of one in which the terrified disciples cried out to Jesus to save them. As soon as he came aboard, the storm ceased. (Mark 6: 51) Luke reports another storm, when Jesus was fast asleep despite the wind and waves. The frightened disciples woke him up, and again his word brought calm. (Luke 8: 24) Experience is a great teacher. It is as our SOS prayers are answered that we realise help is always at hand to keep us calm in a crisis.

We are not intended to stay at crisis point. One of Jesus' sailing trips with the disciples was with the idea of giving them a day off, although it ended with a much bigger picnic than expected. He had said, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' (Mark 6: 31) Perhaps to someone who cannot yet do that, and is dreading today, he is ready to come aboard saying, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' Trust him, and obey.

Read: Mark 6: 30–52; Luke 8: 22–25.

JGo

In God I trust; I will not be afraid. Psalm 56:4

It is normal to have a rush of adrenaline when under threat, and even before a case presentation. This is a God-given mechanism for boosting our performance and without it we would often be in a bad way. At the same time, it is possible to know an inner peace which, as Paul tells us, ‘transcends all understanding’. (Philippians 4: 7)

Paul spoke from experience. Acts 27 tells how he endured the full force of a tempest at sea which would end in shipwreck. At its height he received a personal message from the Lord telling him not to be afraid, despite the danger, as all the lives in the company would be saved. His spirit was strengthened, even though the storm kept up its fury. More than that, he shared encouragement with those around him. Holding on to God’s promise kept him calm.

Do we realise that the Lord Jesus is with us in the treatment room and on the ward round? Do we ask for his help when we seem to be in deeper turbulence than ever before? Do we ask for his peace to clear our minds as we study, and to calm our nerves when tests or testings crop up? If we do, others are bound to notice, and may be calmed themselves as we encourage them. Our Lord Jesus is always watching over us and is never asleep, even when the worst storms threaten. His word stands firm: ‘Do not be afraid.’ (Acts 27: 24) This is a reassurance and also a command.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I thank you that you are there whenever I cry ‘Help!’ May I learn not to panic, but to know your peace, even at the heart of a storm. Amen.

Read: Acts 27.

JGo

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Isaiah 53: 3

Sensitivity to the feelings, pains and sufferings of others has never come naturally to me. My professional life has involved binding people's physical wounds, but it's been harder to recognise and attend to social and spiritual wounds. One of the best ways to become sensitive to the needs of others is to suffer a similar problem. A recent shoulder injury left me unable to dress myself, reminding me how my grandfather had experienced similar problems after losing his left hand. I also thought of a friend who had recently experienced a stroke. In a small way I now understand some of their problems.

Isaiah, in prophesying about the coming of Jesus, indicated that the depth of his experience with mankind would be deep and complete, not merely designed to rescue us from our sinful state and return to the comforts of heaven. Rather, he chose to suffer. In that suffering he identified with us as we meet earth's difficulties, pain and suffering. As a man of sorrows he became familiar with our suffering. The ability to empathise with and extend comfort to others is often related to a shared experience. In speaking of God's comfort to us, Paul explains that it is 'so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.' (2 Corinthians 1: 4)

Could it be that different circumstances are good for us? We all experience them. Do they cause anger or bitterness, or an increased identity with Jesus and sensitivity for others? As followers of Christ, we are called to bring love, comfort and relief to others, having a different level of sensitivity because of his example.

Read: 2 Corinthians 1: 3–11.

RDS

For the word of God ... judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Hebrews 4: 12

Familiar with confession of sin ‘in thought, word and deed’, people may not clearly distinguish between feelings and thoughts and be left feeling guilty about their feelings. Yet it is normal to have feelings, and by themselves they do not carry right or wrong implications. They are, though, necessary signals, given to alert us. To understand the difference between a feeling and a thought, substitute ‘plan’ for ‘thought’. If a thought could also be described as a plan, this is more what Jesus was talking about when he said that to look on someone lustfully is equal to committing adultery in the heart. (Matthew 5: 28) This is what a man is doing if he has thoughts (plans) of acting lustfully with a woman. If he simply notices that she is attractive, he has experienced a feeling, and no sin is involved, provided he neither plans nor acts on that feeling.

Noticing a feeling may be an important part of being protected against sinning. If David had stopped to think where his feelings for Bathsheba would take him, he could have avoided the sinful plans he went on to make. (2 Samuel 11) It is extremely important to recognise our feelings, to analyse what they mean and face what implications they have – as well as to send up an SOS prayer for strength to resist temptation. Failure to do all this is the reason why many fall into sin.

We also run the risk of yielding to temptation if we ignore or suppress our feelings. We have not then prepared an effective, biblically appropriate strategy to deal with the situation our feelings should have warned us about. Acting in anger could kill: first tracing its cause can instead bring repentance, forgiveness, and a clean heart.

Read: Mark 7: 14–23; Psalm 51: 10.

PO'B

'If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.' Luke 17: 3

Jesus is clearly saying here that repentance should bring forgiveness. Yet people can say 'Sorry' without real repentance, for this involves an acknowledgement of the hurt caused and the intention to try not to hurt again. A genuine change of heart is expressed in practical terms by a change of actions. Thus, before considering any suggestion that a battered wife should return to her abusing husband, proof of his repentance needs to be seen in the form of major and significant change. The risk of danger persists in any situation where repentance is in words alone and not shown by deeds.

Forgiveness is a two-way process. At the time of his crucifixion, our Lord's executioners were clearly unrepentant. Yet Jesus prayed for their forgiveness. (Luke 23: 34) He left the door open for their possible change of heart. Though his sacrifice was to give us all the opportunity of forgiveness, he could not (and does not) give it to those rejecting it. Yet the offer was there, even for those who were actually killing him, should they (and others) later repent.

One of the thieves crucified with him, whilst he was dying, repented and turned in faith to Jesus. He received forgiveness, whereas the other criminal, hurling insults at Jesus, was dying whilst still unrepentant. (Luke 23: 39) The offer of forgiveness was there for him too, but evidently there was not the repentance with which to embrace it. God's love is unconditional, but his forgiveness patiently invites our response. Acknowledgement of sin and true repentance for it are both needed in order to bring home the forgiveness which Jesus died to give.

Read: Luke 23: 39–43; Acts 2: 36–39.

PO'B

Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. Romans 1: 5

Health care is a service industry in which the patient is, or should be, king. This principle is enshrined in patients' charters and, certainly, the Bible is on the side of the oppressed. It provides no excuse for exploitation of the weak.

The question is how far can Christian health carers go in seeking their own rights? It is one thing to champion the cause of the downtrodden, needy and untreated, but it is another to argue selfishly for one's own interests. The answer is found in the Bible for, by contrast with human charters, its main thrust has to do with God's requirement that his people are set apart for his service, to live lives pleasing to him: 'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6: 8)

So, for the Christian health carer, the answer is quite simple. God's requirements are pre-eminent. In acting justly and loving mercy, it is likely that patients' interests will come before our own. This is a viewpoint that may not always endear us to our colleagues but it is in accordance with the highest principles of professionalism. We can only act this way if we are truly holy; holiness based on a personal relationship with Jesus, who died for us, who rose from the dead and who for ever lives as our representative, so that God sees us in Christ. How often have we seen radiant holiness and divine power in individuals who yielded their lives to God and who, even in their darkest moments, were ablaze for God? Another day we will look at holiness but for today as you wonder about your rights remember that the Christian seeks first to fulfil God's requirements.

Read: Romans 8: 1-17.

DEBP

'Be holy, because I am holy'. 1 Peter 1: 16

But am I holy and how can I be sure? For some people, holiness is a theoretical concept and they follow one of many 'holiness teachings'. Others see it as a practical issue and seek it in living good, self-denying lives. There are those who look for holiness ecclesiastically, in church ritual and ceremony. One may, I suppose, have studied 'holiness', but the real question is, is one personally holy? Essentially, people seeking holiness find 'it' in knowing 'him'.

Isobel Kuhn yielded to God when affected by the radiant holiness of a woman who lost her missionary husband whilst in her twenties. 'I saw a human life ablaze with God. I felt a power divine, as through an empty vessel of frail clay I saw God's glory shine! Then woke I from a dream and cried aloud "My Father, give to me the blessing of a life consumed with God, that I may live for thee".'

Holiness involves experience of, and relationship with, the living Christ. The dominant note in both the letters to the Ephesians and 1 Peter is that Christians have been redeemed for a purpose, 'to the praise of his glory'. (Ephesians 1: 14) Outwardly this is expressed in all life's relationships but inwardly in knowing Christ, the Christ who died for us, who rose from the dead and who ever lives as our high priestly mediator; so that God sees us as 'in Christ', covered by his grace and love. What greater spur to holy living? But the question remains. Am I holy? While it is an intensely personal issue, the test is holy living, and this has to do with action rather than inaction. In today's reading do not miss the injunctions to work, live and love, within the framework of holiness and to his glory.

Read: 1 Peter 1: 13–2: 3.

DEBP

January 22 Lessons from the operating room

You were taught ... to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ... and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4: 22–23

The mysterious world of the operating room is daunting to students, but the basic rule is to maintain sterility. As a special concession I was once allowed to watch a well respected plastic surgeon at work. As he demonstrated the lesion, all ready for excision, he stepped back and brushed my arm. I will never forget his, ‘Did you touch me?’ I just nodded, wishing I was somewhere else, as he told the scrub nurse, ‘I’ve been desterilised.’

When Jesus Christ came to earth, he was completely blameless, pure and ‘sterile’, so able to bring healing to our sick, contaminated world. I like to think of his presence here as a kind of back-to-front operating room. Whatever he touched became clean. When he chose to die for the sins of the world, he ‘desterilised’ himself, for the first time experiencing what it was to be dirty. His agony and humiliation is beyond imagination. For the first time, he was not allowed near his Father, kept away from those he loved because defiled by our sins. Yet God the Father was able, by his awesome power, to restore his son to ‘sterility’. Now, through Jesus, we can all be clothed with ‘sterile drapes’, the garments of salvation. (Isaiah 61: 10) These are essential before we can confidently approach God.

On entering the operating room in our natural state we are unsterile and are barred from the surgical field until thoroughly washed and gowned. Just so, we cannot approach God on the basis of our own merits. Only his grace can make and keep us clean.

Read: Revelation 7: 9–17.

NR

'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.' Jeremiah 29: 13

Each of us knows special times when Christ's availability becomes very real. In the midst of our purpose-filled lives, what an assurance it is that he is there, continually directing our paths. Yet a shift of the eye away from him brings uncertainty, discouragement and insecurity. Just as the blind spot in the human retina is close to the area of most acute vision, so we need to fix our eyes on Jesus, keeping spiritual eye contact with him, if our vision is to stay clear. Only in this way will we not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12: 2–3)

If our image of Christ is becoming hazy, let us first remember his promise that when we truly seek him we shall surely find him. Jeremiah tells us how God plans for each of us a future and a hope and how we will find him when we seek him with all our heart. (Jeremiah 29: 11–13) Jesus himself said, 'Seek and you will find.' (Matthew 7: 7) As we daily remain focussed on Christ, seeking him through prayer, his word and fellowship in the Spirit, we recognise that he is always on call for us and ready to receive our thanks. Do remember to praise him!

We all know how reassuring it is to have a senior colleague's wisdom available to us in a tough clinical situation. So Christ is always on call to support us. As we remain in his service, he is our security and stability for the future, come what may. (Matthew 28: 20)

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are never off-duty. At any time we can look up to you, restoring our proper focus and finding that our problems are smaller than they seem, because you are always there to help us with them. Amen.

Read: passages cited, and their context.

DH

'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Matthew 25: 40

Adoption brings relationship to people of widely varying backgrounds and ethnic heritage. It is a joy to see the blending of a new person into a family. The same joy can be ours as Christians as we individually become adopted into the family of God.

Recently, reading this familiar verse has caused me to re-think how I can possibly identify my brothers and sisters in Christ. In this parable, the King in glory says the faithful ones gave food to him, drink to him, clothing to him, looked after him when sick and visited him in jail. Perplexed, the faithful ones ask when did they do all this? But Jesus was speaking of those he called 'brothers of mine'. Now my prayer has become, 'Please show me your brothers and sisters to whom I can minister today in your name'. One of the major lessons I am learning is the importance of treating all mankind as if each were a relative of the King. For the relatives of the King may come disguised as a drunk, a mean boss or even as a hurtful spouse. I learned this lesson the hard way.

Late one night a drunk was brought into the emergency department for me to suture. I had seen many similar patients that night and was tired and stressed and so treated him condescendingly. He then revealed with much embarrassment that he was the husband of a nurse colleague. I apologised for my mean spiritedness. At that point I realised that I could never know the relatives of all the people I met. Nor could I know all the relatives of the King.

Let us regard and treat all those whom God brings our way with kindness, dignity and respect.

Read: Matthew 25: 31–46.

RDS

Let us ... extol him with music and song. Psalm 95: 2

Benjie, aged three, struggled hard to regain his toy, wedged under the piano. Finally, I bent down to help and, with some effort, retrieved it. Looking into my face, eyes full of grateful admiration, he exclaimed, ‘Well *done!*’ – and I felt ten feet tall. Praise warms the heart. Reflecting Benjie’s pleasure reminded me how important it is to show appreciation for the efforts of others. Some express criticism more readily than praise, but an occasional complimentary comment, as well as regular expressions of thanks, can do wonders for the morale of sweepers and superintendents alike.

Benjie’s delight over my small achievement was also a reminder of a much more important response, owed by us all, for the greatest act of kindness ever done for humanity. Someone came right down to our level, and went through great pain, to regain that which we had lost, our love-relationship with God. The heartfelt gratitude of one small boy provides only a tiny image of the outpouring of our own hearts which is due to our dear Lord Jesus, who laid down his life for us. As we look up into his face, praise and adoration should take priority over any requests we want to make.

Lastly, just as the child’s response affected me, so we are told that our praise brings pleasure to God. (Psalm 69: 30–31) The Bible very often associates praise with making music to the Lord. (Judges 5: 2–3; Psalms 27: 6; 57: 7–10) As we rejoice in him, how wonderful to read that he responds in the same way, for: ‘... he will rejoice over you with singing.’ (Zephaniah 3: 17)

*O for a thousand tongues to sing
My dear Redeemer’s praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!
Charles Wesley (1707–88)*

Read: Psalm 150; Ephesians 1: 3–14.

JGo

Come, let us bow down in worship ... Psalm 95: 6

A Ugandan child, cured of meningitis and prompted by her grandmother, embarrassingly knelt at my feet. People often knelt, bowed or threw themselves down before Jesus, sometimes in expectation or gratitude, usually in worship. (Matthew 15: 25; 2: 11; 28: 9) In the Old Testament, too, worshippers bowed down in awe to God. (Genesis 24: 26; Exodus 4: 31; Psalm 99: 5)

Whereas Scripture often links praise to God with joyful music and singing, worship is rarely mentioned in this context. It usually indicates reverence and submission (hence bowing down) and is first mentioned by Abraham, when on his way to offer up Isaac. (Genesis 22: 5) Paul also urges us ‘to offer your bodies as living sacrifices’, defining this as ‘your spiritual act of worship’. (Romans 12: 1) The Greek words for worship and service have the same root, so that true worshippers are faithful servants of God, whatever the cost involved, and not always to the sound of music.

After our fervent songs of praise as part of Sunday service, what happens on Monday? We may not feel so inspired when the clinic runs on past mealtime, or when everyone else disappears and leaves us to cope alone, or when a patient dies and the relatives want to see us. Even so, we can offer all these (and sterner) trials up to God. He knows how hard it can be to keep going, but his self-giving love will encourage and enable our self-giving in return. This does not exclude a song of praise, even when we don’t really feel like it. (Acts 16: 25) It is, though, our day-to-day service, submitted to God, which recalls to him the ‘aroma of Christ’ – and *that* came from his personal sacrifice for us. (2 Corinthians 2: 15; Ephesians 5: 2)

A wholehearted ‘time of worship’ should last a lifetime! – and our Lord’s final ‘Well done ...!’ will make it all worthwhile. (Matthew 25: 19–21)

Read: the passages cited.

JGo

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.' Matthew 4: 10

As a medical missionary in Burundi, Central Africa, I regularly walked to a dispensary across forest-covered mountains which formed the watershed between the Congo and the Nile. I remember the shadowy place, deep in the forest, where we cooled our feet in one source of the Nile, trickling across the path between a few stones. In Burundi, I also saw the small pyramid which marks the most southerly source of the Nile. These two places are comparable to two sources of worship. One is like the pyramid on the hilltop, the other well hidden and quiet.

The first source of worship springs out of adoration of our creator as we marvel over the wonders of life, the immense variety of natural beauty and the great complexities of his creation, including ourselves. (Psalm 139: 14) Looking in more detail, we find ever more delicate structures and interactions – and God has called us to be his co-workers in this remarkable world! No wonder that we find here a source of worship. Our non-Christian colleagues, too, may experience awe and excitement.

The other source of worship is just as real, though hidden. We find it when the way is difficult or life's problems become too great. At the end of our tether, we realise the need to yield to a power outside ourselves, bigger than we can imagine. Then we are right at the source of worship, calling on the Mighty One and trusting in his strength. Heartfelt praise springs up, acting like the cool water of refreshment on tired feet.

Let us give room for worship.

Lord:

The small mirrors of diamond

Embrace in tender longing

All the colours of light.

My love

For your earth

Finds room for a single word:

– YOU! –

Read: Psalm 8; 114.

TR

'Give careful thought to your ways.' Haggai 1: 5

After the exiles' return to Israel from Babylon, Ezra and Haggai tell us how they eventually started to rebuild the temple. They then came under attack from the heathen people around them, and gave up the work. (Ezra 4: 24) Do we, too, lose courage when we meet resistance? The Israelites excused themselves by saying that the time had not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord. (Haggai 1: 2) However, the word of the Lord came to them through Haggai: 'Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin? Give careful thought to your ways.' He went on to point out that they were still short of food and drink, clothing and cash – all a direct result of their unfaithfulness. (Haggai 1: 3–5, 9)

Does the Lord blame people for living in nicely built and well furnished houses? I don't think so. He is saying, 'If you can afford to live in such houses, you can afford to build my house.' In its widest sense, the Lord's house today is his church. We should make a priority of support for missionary and evangelistic work, which spread the gospel and help the poor.

Is this how I spend my time, my education and skill, my money? Is there a disproportion between what I spend on myself and the 'temple'? Do I spend all my time making money and neglect my family, or fail to enjoy the fellowship of other Christians in the local church? When the Israelites obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, his Spirit remained with them and they were blessed. (Haggai 2: 5) May we have the same experience as we sort out our priorities.

Read: Ezra 5: 1–5; 7: 27–28; Matthew 6: 25–34.

EAJ

A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction. Proverbs 16: 5

The nurse said, 'ET is in bed five', and a ripple of laughter went round the nursing office. I didn't join in. ET was a strange-looking but lovable alien in a recent film of that name. We knew that this was not the occupant of bed five but a frail elderly Asian lady. I said she was unwell, probably scared, and could not talk to us, but no-one paid much attention to this.

We say a lot of things in a day. We have numerous patients to see on the ward, plenty in clinic, and many colleagues to talk to for business or pleasure. And we don't necessarily think much about it. We have so many words we don't appreciate their value. Every time we open our mouths we communicate our ideals and attitudes. Derisive sniggers or appreciative remarks are of few words and happen without thought, yet say much. What we say reflects what we are, and if we profess to be Christians it reflects on Christ. We cannot claim to love God who loves people if we put others down at every opportunity. There seems to be a culture of gossip, crudeness and 'talking people down' in many hospitals. This is so insidious, and we give so little thought to what we say, it is easy to speak like everyone else. We must keep a tight rein on our tongues so as not to deceive ourselves and let our religion become worthless. (James 1: 26)

Philippians 2: 3 and 4: 8 tell us to adopt Christ's attitude, and what we should be thinking about. We can dedicate each day by prayer:

'May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.'
(Psalm 19: 14)

Read: James 3: 1-12.

MSa

'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?' Luke 13: 2

‘She is a lovely lady and deserves better than that,’ I overheard Sister saying to a colleague as I brushed past in the corridor. They had been discussing a well-liked patient who had been diagnosed with cancer. I stopped briefly to remark, ‘Wouldn’t it be easy to be godly, though, if the only ones who got cancer were the ones who obviously deserved it?’ ‘Well, I guess you are right there,’ said Sister as I moved on.

Paradoxically, the deep sense of injustice that most people – atheists and agnostics included – feel when bad things happen to good people, in itself speaks of the existence of God. If we are all just random products of chance and necessity, why is it unjust? If we are merely driven by evolutionary forces, then it is surely nonsense to speak of people deserving better. Unless there is some compelling reason to think otherwise, disaster and disease generally should not be interpreted as ‘acts of God’, and their victims should not be regarded as especially bad people who have been specifically punished by him.

It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that disasters happen because of the way the world is. The world is, firstly, one in which cause and effect are at work. And, secondly, it is a world in disarray because of human rebellion against the Creator. Having given man free will he allows the world we corrupted to function in this way. Disasters do not have a moral origin, but Jesus shows their moral function. Whilst the victims of disease and disaster are not especially under divine judgement, Jesus reminds us that all of us will be judged, and unless we repent we will face ultimate disaster and perish.

Read: Luke 13: 1–5; Psalm 73; Habakkuk 1: 12–17.

TS

'... we have no power to face this vast army ...' 2 Chronicles 20: 12

The story behind this verse is of a small nation, faced by overwhelming odds, and experiencing the frustration and fear also felt by so many today. Even in professional life, we face vast problems. Yet we have a choice as to how we react: do we panic, or pray? Prayer helps us to find proper perspective.

God's power is great. He has proved himself sovereign and faithful in the past and the same is true of him now as it was then. (Hebrews 13: 8) He is completely trustworthy and we can rely on his promises. 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's.' (2 Chronicles 20: 15) At times of crisis we are not to run anywhere but to him. (2 Chronicles 6: 15–17) If the crisis is of our own making, we need to turn in repentance (vv 24–25) but then can rely on his mercy. The focus is not to be so much on the problem itself as on God's ability to resolve it.

We gradually learn to understand that following God's direction and leading does not mean leading a problem-free life. It can be the opposite. Yet through his death and resurrection, our Lord Jesus invites us to share in his victory. (1 John 5: 5) We may also share some of his suffering, in a world so much at odds with him. (Philippians 3: 10) Recognising our own inadequacy demands humility, best found in reflection on his great might and everlasting love.

*'We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling,
And needing more each day Thy grace to know:
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing;
We rest on Thee and in Thy name we go.'*

Edith Gilling Cherry (d. 1897)

Read: 2 Chronicles 20: 1–17.

IS

FEBRUARY

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Romans 8: 31–32.

'I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?' Jeremiah 32: 27

The rhetorical question, 'Is anything too hard for God?' is often raised. Abraham wondered and Sarah laughed at the biological improbability of giving birth in her old age. (Genesis 18: 14) Jeremiah affirms that God's creation of the heaven and earth proves that nothing is too hard for him (Jeremiah 32: 17), but wonders how his land can be saved in the face of surrounding enemy nations. Today's text was the answer then, as it is for today.

This realisation that nothing is too hard for God came to me with fresh impact recently when my wife and I were returning home from a clinical project in Central Asia. As we were about to check in for our flight we found that our tickets and passports were suddenly missing – stolen by pickpockets. At 6.30 on a Sunday morning in a mass of humanity in a foreign setting to whom could we turn for help? Pressing our foreheads together in that crowded and noisy environment, we prayed for help to the God whom we were serving. In an amazing turn of events during the next half hour, security personnel found the culprit and we were on that 8.00 flight with tickets and passports in hand – a clear reply to our prayer. Is there anything too hard for God?

Perhaps you are facing an especially difficult decision to make regarding patient care, or have a pressing family matter. Is there anything too hard for God? He loves us and asks us to trust him, no matter how big or small may be the matter we have to deal with. We can trust him; we must trust him. 'Nothing is too hard for me,' says the Lord.

Read: Jeremiah 32: 1–9, 38–44.

RT

'I am the only one left ...' I Kings 19: 10, 14

A young doctor, towards the end of her first house-job, told me that apart from the workload, the hardest thing on qualification had been to lose the fun and fellowship of student life. Her big fear had been that she would slip back in her spiritual life. She had neither met any Christians in the workplace nor been able to join a local church. Only days before that, I had met another house officer who had seen her around the hospital for months without realising that she was a Christian. He himself had been needing fellowship, but now she was just leaving. Each had thought there was no other Christian around. CMF office had linked me with one and a local church member with another – both excellent ways of making contacts, but coming too late for them.

First, let's remember that our Lord has promised that we will never be alone, even in those countries where they may truly be no other believer close by. (Hebrews 13: 5) Yet any lone Christian can ask God (and sometimes the hospital chaplain) to point out one more, even in a different discipline. To have a prayer partner is so encouraging, and we need to stay alert for give-away signs.

These may be to observe someone's extra courtesy, real care for patients, clean talk, or a Christian line on ethical matters. Clearer clues would be a Christian symbol on a tie or lapel badge, a quietly bowed head before a meal, or mention of church-going. The most direct method would be to put up an invitation in the residency for anyone looking for other Christians to call you, or meet up for fellowship, but this takes courage – and a compatible life-style.

Read: I Kings 19: 9–18; Hebrews 10: 19–25.

JGo

'... no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.'
John 10: 29

Daniel, aged two and a half, was going to church with Dad and had important things to talk about on the way. Dad, usually rushing to attend to the urgent, was not hurrying to pull him along. Walking. Talking. Hand in hand with his father.

Somewhere after the age of two we tend to lose the art of walking and talking. When we are old enough to walk and talk with our heavenly Father we no longer think we need to. We are not free to hold on tightly to his hand because our hands are full of other things – good and valuable things: the control of our own security; the pursuit of happiness; the amassing of wealth; establishing dreams and plans; securing our children's success. It is only when things start to feel empty that we begin to loosen our grip.

In our growing independence, we do not want our Father's hand to lead us. It seldom crosses our mind to talk about important things with him. We pursue our dreams by ourselves. We trip and we begin to fall, but are not accustomed to reaching for his hand. We don't realise that he has slowed down to walk with us, so we bear the brunt of loss and uncertainty alone.

It is remarkable that, though our Father sustains a universe of over 400 billion light years in diameter, he is happy to walk down the path of life with us – loving, leading, listening, comforting. I am fortunate if, as I grow up, I become like a child again and discover this basic reality of the Christian life: Jesus came so that I can walk hand in hand with my Father.

Read: Mark 10: 13–16; Galatians 4: 6.

SLe

'God can testify how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.' Philippians 1: 8

In Spanish the expression ‘affection’ has been translated into words which in English could be explained not just as a ‘deep love’, but a love that comes from the very ‘entrails’ of a person, or as deep as from the bowels of the earth. It is talking about a feeling that comes from the innermost part of a person and which, in a sense, is also physical. It is a ‘visceral love’, a ‘gut’ feeling.

In a world which has become so sophisticated that it tends to hide the ‘visceral’ side of things, the description ‘a visceral love’ is particularly important. Our viscera, our heart and bowels, refer to organs that are undergoing constant movement similar to the waves of the sea and the stars above us. Time and again they express themselves in similar ways but the message is always important, always secure and true. This ‘language’ is articulate within our bodies and it is never reduced to the mere product of our intellect. ‘I love you with a visceral love’ – I love you with all the strength of my arm. I desire you in the crook of my arm where you can hear my heartbeat telling your heart things that cannot be described in words.

Deep visceral love knows of God’s embrace. That embrace which the cross tried to prevent by stretching out our Lord’s arms and nailing them there. But the cross could not cut off God’s embrace for each and every one of us. ‘How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.’ (Matthew 23: 37) May we today love with Jesus Christ’s love.

Read: Ephesians 4: 14–19; John 15: 12–14.

CH

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.
1 Corinthians 13: 13

Jesus is described as ‘the author and perfecter of our faith.’ (Hebrews 12: 2) Faith in him cured people. Yet great faith is valueless without love. (1 Corinthians 13: 2) James says that faith without works is dead, but still uses loving deeds to illustrate his point. (James 2: 14–26) Faith and love are demonstrated together by what we do and how we do it.

Sharing hope, too, spells loving concern for those who are dispirited. Christians, confident of what we hope for (Hebrews 11: 1) should always be ready to give a reason for that hope, though ‘with gentleness and respect.’ (1 Peter 3: 15)

We may, therefore, claim from God faith, hope and love in all our daily work. All three should anoint our therapy, but love should promote and pervade the rest. Paul’s understanding of this trinity of graces runs through all his epistles, as it should run through our lives. His most famous passage of all links love with trust and hope (1 Corinthians 13: 7) and his letter to Rome ends with a loving benediction which we can all pray for each other:

‘May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.’ (Romans 15: 13)

Then, when at last we see our Lord face to face:

*Faith will vanish into sight;
 Hope be emptied in delight;
 Love in heaven will shine more bright;
 Therefore give us love.
 Faith and hope and love we see,
 Joining hand in hand agree;
 But the greatest of the three,
 And the best, is love.*

Christopher Wordsworth (1808–85)

Read: Passages cited with Hebrews 11: 1–40, 12: 1, 2.

HWW

In the time of my favour I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you. Isaiah 49: 8

The following story, from Africa, is a powerful encouragement to all providing health care worldwide, that they should pray without ceasing for their patients.

The physician was very disturbed. Martha had been admitted to his hospital with a very severe haemorrhage. She drifted in and out of consciousness and, although she was being treated successfully and recovering slowly, she would not talk to anyone. The doctor noticed that she wore a wedding ring but all questions were left unanswered. She would not eat, refused to do any exercise and, generally, seemed to have given up on life. But the physician was a Christian. He prayed for Martha, visited her and encouraged her but with no result. On the day before Good Friday, when he prayed again for Martha, God spoke into his heart, assuring him that she would be healed. When he entered the ward next day, he found Martha seated, taking breakfast. She was smiling and God's peace seemed to be surrounding her bed. She greeted him and gave him her complete history.

The Christian physician had not only treated Martha but he stood before God on her behalf. In the time of Ezekiel, God looked for a man who would stand before him in the gap on behalf of the land (Ezekiel 22: 30) but he could not find one, and in his anger he determined to destroy the people. God is calling on us to stand before him on behalf of our patients, praying for them even when we do not know or understand their problems. Let him not be disappointed in us. He is able to do more than we can ever think! He will answer.

Lord, remind me to bring the needs of my patients before you in prayer, daily.

Read: Isaiah 49: 8–13.

GMw

(Adapted from *Patterns for Life* 1996)

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. Proverbs 16: 3

How often, when we set off on a long journey on a road that we do not know, do we depend on road signs? We watch for them carefully and follow their different instructions, ‘Beware of the bend’, ‘Reduce speed’, and ‘Dangerous bridge’. But we are likely to meet other drivers, who may be in a great hurry or just careless. Perhaps they want to arrive on time for some meeting, which in their eyes is very important. They either ignore road signs or do not even look at them. Then, they miss a bend and there is an accident. They disobeyed the road signs and did not trust the people who placed them there and, because of this, they suffer injury and perhaps harm others. How sad, because they do not even arrive for the meeting they thought so important!

Unfortunately, many Christians are like these foolish drivers. They think they know what they are doing and have decided their own priorities. They behave as though they do not need God or his words for guidance. Their work minus God equals zero. Often, they do not achieve their objectives and may harm others in their thoughtless progress. When we remove God from our clinical practice, we face failure and disappointment. The warnings are clear!

Dear friends, as Christians we travel a very long road. There are many obstacles. Are we trusting wholly in our sovereign Lord, who has promised to direct our steps with clear instructions, or are we ignoring the road signs? Depending on God and trusting his word give us success and joy in our work and in our lives. So let us ask God for a faith that looks to him for his guidance and direction, day by day, as we travel through life.

Read: Psalms 37: 3–7; 37–40.

RA

(Adapted from *Patterns for Life* 1996)

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the very nature of God, ... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, Philippians 2: 5–11

In 1982, the Australian pathologists Dr Robin Warren and Dr Barry Marshall identified *Helicobacter pylori* as causing gastritis and gastric ulcers. How they confirmed that the organism was the cause of suffering for millions worldwide, is an example of how we can relate as Christians to healthcare and life.

Firstly, Dr Warren did not take things at face value, nor did he accept the teaching of his predecessors as written in stone. He raised new hypotheses to explain what he was observing. As Christians we need to be prepared to practise from a new paradigm, a paradigm which places importance on faith and prayer in a world where Jesus Christ reigns as Lord. We need to try and incorporate what we observe into our Christian world view of medicine.

Secondly, Dr Marshall, by ingesting the bacteria, committed himself to becoming an infected patient from whom biopsies were taken and the pathogens re-isolated. He took on the condition he was trying to cure. As a result of this, a cure for the disease was found. This is a mild reflection of the fact that our God was prepared to become a human in the form of Jesus Christ. He took on our human condition and experienced grief, temptation and pain. However, as a result of his perfect life of obedience and death on the cross, a cure for the world's most serious ailment, SIN, was achieved.

Dr Marshall's gastritis settled in 10–14 days. In contrast, Jesus endured the ultimate in human suffering some 2000 years ago. Yes, he died, but rose again and is alive today. What is more, Jesus is alive in us now as we trust and believe him. With him we live lives which can resist sin.

Read: Philippians 2: 5–11; John 17: 20–23; Romans 6: 1–14.

AHe

If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God ... and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom. Deuteronomy 28: 13

What we may regard as a mark of success may be seen in a very different light by other people as well as by God. With reference to success in the Old Testament we read of such as Joseph, David and Uzziah to whom God gave success; we discover people like Abraham's servant and Nehemiah praying to God for success in specific tasks they were given to carry out. A recurrent theme in the Old Testament, such as today's reading, is that if God's people will obey his commands and follow him, he will give them success and prosperity. However, we do not read of individuals praying for success in itself but only in relation to fulfilling God's will.

A career in medicine of over twenty years has brought me things that many would regard as markers of success. A good income, two published books and dozens of articles, many TV and radio appearances etc. Flattering and exciting though these things may be at first, from the scriptural standpoint they are illusory as markers of significant achievement. God first and foremost calls us to faithfulness – not success.

Note how the apostle Paul lists his successes, phrased in a pattern as a conquering emperor would have eulogised himself. Regarding family and academic status he was at the top, and no one had done more as a Christian than he. Yet he lists, not his successes, but the sufferings he endured for his faithfulness to Christ. How well are you and I doing when we use this as a criterion for measuring how well we are doing, from God's perspective?

Read: Deuteronomy 28: 1–14; 2 Corinthians 11: 22–29; Philippians 3: 4–14.

TS

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect ... 1 Peter 3: 15

Many Christian health workers would admit that they fail to speak of Christ when at work. Yet confession ‘with the mouth’ is part of our job description. (Romans 10: 9) As few of our colleagues attend church they may never hear anyone else give testimony to God. Peter urges us, though, to be prepared to speak to those who question us, not to pounce on unsuspecting victims. Such questioners may have worked with us or watched us, perhaps mystified by our attitudes or actions. Finally they are driven to ask us, ‘What makes you tick?’

To speak for God, we must first have heard him speak to us. Peter had already urged his readers to prepare their minds for action. (1 Peter 1: 13) This involves personal meditation on God’s word and prayer about those with whom he wants us to share it. Especially when dealing with vulnerable people, we must remember that the best of Christians cannot save anyone. Yet our gentleness and respect can become channels through which God reaches them. In countries where Christian work is forbidden, Christian workers can still bear witness, simply by being there.

Peter was writing to scattered believers in diverse circumstances. He did not minimise the importance of confession with the lips, but emphasised sensitivity. Christian lives should bear such distinctive and consistent witness to Christ’s presence within, that others will request an introduction. This is when words are needed.

*For me 'twas not the truth you taught
To you so clear, to me so dim;
But when you came to me you brought
A sense of Him.*

A.S. Wilson

Read: 1 Peter 3: 1–18.

DEBP

But my righteous one will live by faith. Hebrews 10: 38

Faith and the whole process of living by faith appears very vague and uncertain to the unbeliever. Yet it is God's ordained way for us. Many people, and perhaps even believers, insist on living by something more concrete. One day, as I bowed my head to pray in my office, the Lord reminded me of the words from Hebrews 10, quoted above. He went on to say, it seemed to me, that the Christian does not live by sense!

The mystery of faith is its illogicality. If we can figure it out it is no longer faith. If we wait to understand, it is no longer faith. There is a tendency for the new Christian to want to re-establish a life independent of God. Such living is not by faith. The Galatian believers fell into this trap and were described as foolish. Having started by faith, they later wanted to live by sense, or by the law. The temptation is very real, for society reinforces our own inclination to be sure before we step out.

A young lady felt strongly convinced that God was calling her to a new ministry. But she wanted to know all the details of her terms and conditions and her salary and benefits, before making a move. When the details were not forthcoming right away, she refused to move. Her decision was rational. It is what many of us would have done. But her decision was not based on faith. Did she miss God's call? Abraham never received terms and conditions, but simply an order and a promise. He was told to go, and promised that God would be with him and would bless him. Are you walking by faith? Are you willing to go when God commands, or will you want first to know his terms of service?

Read: Galatians 3: 1–14; Hebrews 11: 1–3, 11–19.

TA

(Adapted from *Patterns for Life* 1996)

They said, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One’. Luke 23: 35

What a cruel taunt! Was Jesus' death not enough for our salvation? Why did he also suffer scorn, as he died slowly in excruciating pain? Can anyone, even God, find a meaning for such human suffering?

We choose to ignore these deep questions as we face the daily task of treating the sick and injured, and maybe we could not work if we constantly pondered the meaning of the pain our patients suffer. Then one day we doctors become patients and suffer irritating remarks. ‘You had all the cures! Now look, here you are in bed.’ Inevitably, we review our symptoms, dispute diagnoses, think of possible complications, and suggest alternative treatments. Distressingly slowly, it seems, we are restored to strength. The WHY questions have become irritatingly personal. What was the purpose of our suffering? Had it any purpose?

Here are a few thoughts for a sick doctor. Only through suffering could Jesus truly share our human condition. Had you forgotten what it feels like to be on the receiving end of medical care? Now, after you have shared your patients' pain and discomfort, you will have more sympathy, insight and understanding. Again, at crucial times God calls us to re-evaluate our objectives, our activities, and our strategy. Are there things we should do differently when we regain strength? In a busy life, we give time to God very grudgingly. Was God imposing a period of inactivity to re-awaken the delight of time spent in his presence?

So let us remember when we are ill that God cares. He is always working out his purposes. Perhaps we have something to learn. Perhaps we will thank God for this time of enforced separation from the daily task! Above all, let us reflect on Jesus' suffering on the cross and its meaning.

Read: Psalms 116; 103: 1–5.

KML

(Adapted from *Patterns for Life* 1996)

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Psalm 1: 3

What gives a tree sustenance and resilience in times of drought? How can a tree be productive in such adversity? The secret is in its taproot, which accesses hidden pools of water. So trees flourish even during drought. For us, the taproot is the word of God and it accesses the water of life. Delighting in and meditating on the word of God is spiritual food and drink, giving the believer depth, fruitfulness and stability. Believers should talk about God's word at all times, in all places, bind it to their hearts, and teach it to their children. (Deuteronomy 6: 7) This word-dependent resilience to spiritual drought is contrasted to the worldly chaff consumed by those who 'walk in the counsel of the wicked', 'stand in the way of sinners', and 'sit in the seat of mockers'. (Psalm 1: 1)

Those who rely on the word of God avoid moulding by the crowd, even if supposedly righteous. They are spiritually strong and capable of withstanding adversity. Their secret is a hidden personal walk with God. (Matthew 6: 6) For such a person the word of God is not just studied, or known, or quoted, but delighted in and meditated on day and night. It is sustenance, companion, inspiration and joy, moulding minds and hearts. Such meditation does not involve emptying the mind but relies on the word of God, stimulating the imagination and motivating action pleasing to God. It visualises the magnitude and vastness of God, which is beyond our understanding. We are not dominated in Christian meditation, but submit to the spiritual world centred on Jesus.

It follows that health workers who feed from the word of God and meditate on it, behave justly and work to benefit their patients and communities. They are part of the assembly of the righteous. The world needs such people!

Read: Deuteronomy 6: 1–9; Psalm 1: 1–6; Revelation 22: 1–6.

AG

Have no fear of sudden disaster ... for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared.
Proverbs 3: 25–26

My first reaction was not anxiety but fear. I was walking down a dark alley to a reception in the city. A shadowy figure appeared at the end of the alley. My heart raced. Was this my time to be mugged? I immediately retraced my steps and walked to the reception along a well lighted street. I will never know if my fears were justified, but I changed my path because of those fears.

Fear can be ignited by anxieties both real and imagined. The causes of fear are endless. They include flying, the dark, poor health, lack of acceptance by people, financial insecurity, etc. These fears motivate many different types of responses. Real fear is, indeed, a good emotion. John Eddison in *The Troubled Mind* writes, ‘Fear is a God-implanted instinct for self preservation. It serves the same purpose in emotional make up as pain does in the physical. It warns us of danger.’ One cannot speak of ‘fear’ without considering the awe of God. It is the ultimate protective fear. Fear of God drives us to the truth. Fear of God releases us from bondage to the opinions of others. Fear of God releases us from those lesser terrors that would keep us from doing what is right. As we fear God we are released from other fears. We can then understand and respond to Jesus’ words, ‘Don’t be afraid.’ The love and fear of God is the foundation of living in freedom from our fears of daily living. As the hymn by Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady acclaims:

*'Fear Him ye saints and you will then have nothing
else to fear;
Make you His service your delight, your wants shall
be His care.'*

Read: 1 John 4: 7–21; Proverbs 2: 1–8.

RDS

'I the Lord do not change.' Malachi 3: 6

On-the-job training usually involves many changes, perhaps with different hospitals, chiefs, specialties or even dialects, all particularly trying for those from other cultures. Senior staff, too, may decide to move overseas to an unfamiliar area. For everyone, adaptation can be an uneasy process. Depending on temperament, some delight in new challenges whilst others dread them and, if suffering other concurrent stresses or losses, can become depressed. Years ago, after sequentially failing a higher exam and crashing my car, I temporarily longed to leave medical work. Others today are saying the same thing for other reasons. A Christian colleague helped me through that transient phase.

Circumstances and feelings may change, but our Lord continues to care for us. (1 Peter 5: 7) He often channels his care through others, and as his people we should be sympathetic towards any experiencing upheaval, including our patients and new team members alike. Instead, we sometimes forget to encourage rather than moaning with (or about!) our colleagues. A young woman doctor signalled her distress at feeling an outsider by trying to buy friendship. Her shocked colleagues realised this only in retrospect, when she took her own life.

In time, we should learn to know and prepare for our own reactions to change. Whether we swing high or low, we need the secure anchorage to be found not only in human companionship, but in the words and person of the Lord Jesus. His coming here from glory was the greatest change anyone could ever make. As he was leaving his disciples, well aware of their future needs, he assured them that his presence would be with them always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28: 20) As this finale has not yet arrived, he can be relied upon to be with us still.

Read: 1 Peter 5: 6–11.

JGo

'... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant ...' Matthew 20: 26

A sign about stricter opening hours went up on our mission hospital's office door, where I work with two others around my clinical duties. So many pressing tasks, so few people to do them! The new sign indicated that important matters would be neglected if people kept interrupting us. One day there came an insistent knock at the office door. 'Can't they read the sign?' I thought. 'The office is closed.' 'It's probably that drunk man,' called the cashier. 'He came earlier with a question about the death certificate.' A little girl had died on the malnutrition ward, but with 150 inpatients and only two doctors I could not identify her. Collecting my disgruntled thoughts I opened the door to the man and was pleased to be speaking so patiently.

'Better come back and discuss your daughter's death certificate when you're not drunk,' I ventured. 'You've had too much to drink today.' My visitor paused and looked at me. 'It's not easy when your daughter dies, you know, doctor.' His words jarred me like cold water before he walked away, leaving me to the business which no longer seemed quite so important.

Afterwards I soberly reflected on how we confuse busy-ness, beauty, fame or wealth with importance. This girl had none of these things. She was important to her father simply because she was his daughter. Jesus comments on the two signs of our importance in his eyes: We are made in the image of our Father and we are loved by him. There are times when no one will appear to notice us – except our Father, because he loves us. These are the real signs of importance.

Read: Matthew 10: 29–33, 42.

SLe

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, ‘Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west’. Genesis 13: 14

It has been a difficult week. We all have them and the reasons for yours will be different from mine. Perhaps a usually routine operation has gone badly wrong. Or maybe that lady with longstanding depression, who seemed to be improving, suddenly committed suicide. It may be you received a letter threatening legal action. Or one of your own medical team has been diagnosed with serious illness, or you have just discovered your teenager is taking drugs. Whatever the issue, when such pressures come God can seem very remote.

Abram had had a bad week too. Since obeying God and leaving his home, he had been moving from place to place with his nephew Lot, but now quarrelling over the lack of resources had led to conflict and resentment. Lot had taken what was apparently the best on offer, leaving Abram with a very uncertain future. Then God told him to look around, for wherever he looked God’s promise was still on the horizon. The future remained certain, because God was always God.

Where we look for help when in difficulty is important in determining the outcome. In the well known, yet much misunderstood first verse of Psalm 121, the psalmist first looked to the hills for help. Yet help came not from the hills, possibly the high places of idol-worship in Old Testament times, but from the Lord, as the next verse made clear. When we find ourselves overcome by circumstances it is essential that we look to God. This is not easy and sometimes we will need the support of Christian friends in sharing, praying and searching the scriptures. Like Peter, we must look to Jesus and not at the waves if we want to avoid sinking!

Read: Genesis 13: 5–18; Psalm 123; Matthew 14: 25–33.

TS

The Lord said to him, ‘What is that in your hand?’ ‘A staff,’ he replied. Exodus 4: 2

When God asked Moses ‘What is in your hand?’ you can almost hear the discouragement in his reply. A rod! Just a walking stick! He used it to shepherd, he used it to walk, it was natural. We too, like Moses, looking at the resources available can think, ‘O Lord, what can I do with just this?’ If only I had more – time, money, equipment. Can you hear God whispering into your ear today, ‘My son, my daughter, what is that in your hand?’ Remember Moses! If God could use a rod to separate the waters of the Red Sea, he can certainly use what is natural, in *your* hand, to do miracles in your life!

The secret is – put what we have got into his hands. We have to make all we have available to him. For the Almighty God it does not matter what we have got. What does really matter is our trust in him. God is more interested in our availability than he is in our ability. When Samson faced 1000 Philistines, he had nothing to fight with but the jawbone of a donkey. It was enough!

Many times in my life I have had to remind myself of this truth, because if you only put your trust in things, soon you will discover that there is always some better machine, new antibiotic ...! Yet, if our God is the God of Moses, the living and unchanging God, he can do *anything*. Whilst we may have our own plans he may have something else in mind. Let us give him that which is in our hands and see him dividing the waters of the sea of our boundaries and limitations. Relax in him and let God be God.

Read: Judges 15: 13–20; Ephesians 2: 4–10 and 3: 20–21.

JGrz

It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. 3 John 3

As Christian health care workers we need to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth; avoiding bluntness and callousness but speaking carefully, lovingly and sensitively. Our ‘Yea’ should be ‘Yea’, and our ‘Nay’, ‘Nay’. Sometimes, in difficult cases, we are tempted to lie about the diagnosis to soften the blow for patients and relatives. Eventually, we are caught out as the correct diagnosis becomes evident – and trust has been broken. Nevertheless, it may help to paint the picture gradually over time so that the hearer may be more able to accept the truth, putting all the pieces together and coming to a full understanding of the situation.

Many marriages have been spoiled by one or both partners hiding some or all of the truth, not only about spectacular sins like infidelity but also subtly in little white lies, distortions and purposefully incomplete stories which over time erode trust. In the same way we may lose the confidence of our children or other family members.

Speaking the truth is not always easy. When Christ said that those who hold to his teaching will know the truth (John 8: 31–32), he was challenged by Jewish scholars and had to slip away. Peter, who bitterly regretted his quick tongue, nevertheless told Christians to be prepared to give an explanation to anyone questioning the hope we have, but to do this gently and respectfully. (1 Peter 3: 15–16) When fellow Christians sin against us we need to ‘speak the truth in love’. (Matthew 18: 15) Conversely when we are at fault, we need to accept admonition and live in harmony. ‘Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man’s rebuke to a listening ear.’ (Proverbs 25: 12)

Read: 1 Peter 2: 1–3; John 8: 31–59.

ROS

There was given me a thorn in my flesh ... Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you ...’ 2 Corinthians 12: 7–9

‘My thorn in the flesh – is it my husband or my alcoholism?’ My patient, an alcoholic, was trying to deal with her addiction spiritually. She was discovering that God accepts her unconditionally, while she is still a sinner, giving her the power to become good. Like her, we can hate and love ourselves at the same time, and desire good and evil simultaneously. Why are we so flawed?

Paul was given a ‘thorn in the flesh’. What was it? Was it a bodily ailment, or was it one of sinful nature’s lusts and desires? Some have thought the ‘thorn’ might have been some ophthalmic condition, such as trachoma, or another disease like chronic malaria or epilepsy. Some have opted for spiritual temptations or even continued opposition to the gospel. The truth is that we do not know! My patient, in a wonderful flash of insight, leapt on this ambiguity. The uncertainty allows each person to interpret the ‘thorn’ as whatever there is within that person, which is an unwanted obstacle to serving God effectively and freely.

The point of Paul’s experience is that God works despite, or more accurately through, our ‘thorns’. God’s grace is sufficient in every circumstance. His power is shown in our weakness. God uses us despite our flaws. This of course is not to accept that anything goes. We must not continue in sin in order to receive more and more grace. No indeed, we struggle against the sin within us, asking God to heal us, confident that his grace is sufficient to fit us for the life he has planned for us.

But there is one final uncomfortable thought. If God treats us with such grace and accepts us as we are, why have we not done likewise with others? Why are we so unforgiving?

Read: 2 Corinthians 12: 1–10; Galatians 5: 16–26.

AG

'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' Mark 6: 31

How often we are so busy, ‘coming and going’, that we do not have enough time to eat, to have a quiet time morning and evening or spend quality time with the family. So we miss his call ‘Come with me’. It is recorded so many times that ‘going apart’ to be with his Father – our Father too – must have been of major importance to our Lord, each day it seems, and sometimes all night. Can it be less for us?

Our Lord recognises the busyness of our lives, but also sees the need for time out (the Fourth Commandment), and sometimes he wants us to ‘go with him’ for rest. So the disciples went away with him – but a crowd finds them. Similarly, how often have we just sat down to the evening meal, late again, with our family, but then the telephone rings! Or arranged an evening or day out or even a holiday, then something crops up and we decide it is in the line of professional responsibility to respond. Sometimes we don’t even check to see where the priority lies in relation to our home and family, or to our personal and spiritual health. All too often we rush off without praying about it and seeking guidance in our decision making.

Is it just that we ‘have compassion’ on the crowd, our patients, that determines our decision? Or is it that we are so busy working out our ministry of care that we forget, displace or, worse, replace our family, our Lord, our God, with the altar of work? Is there no reason why we cannot switch off the telephone, or arrange cover for the evening, for time with the family, for time with Jesus?

Read: Mark 6: 30–44; Exodus 20: 8–11.

AJR

'Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?' John 6: 9

What would prompt a boy to offer his picnic lunch when he just happened to overhear Jesus asking what was available to feed five thousand? In the world's eyes it was a truly senseless offer; 'how far will they go among so many?' But Jesus 'already had in mind what he was going to do.' So often we hear on one side people say 'What a waste' when someone is led to do a task in response to the leading of the Spirit. On the other hand we can refuse to follow the Lord's prompting by saying, 'I couldn't possibly do that'.

Our service for God is not what we choose to do but what he can do with what he has given us, when we give it back to him. Imagine that boy as he saw what happened to his offering. He simply was so in tune with Christ that he spontaneously gave what he had when the Spirit moved him. Imagine the awe of his mother when he got home and told her what had happened to the lunch she had given him!

It is not for most of us ever to know what fruit will come from the words we say or the deeds we do, when we are attuned to God's will. Our task is simply to empty ourselves of ourselves with his Spirit dwelling in us, so that, as Oswald Chambers puts it, 'He can help himself to our lives' whenever he chooses, and adds, 'The mature nature is the life of a child ... where all consciousness of ourselves and of what God is doing through us is eliminated. A saint is never consciously a saint; a saint is consciously dependent on God.'

Read: John 6: 1–13.

AJR

Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ.
Philippians 2: 5

It is a challenging and encouraging privilege to take as an example the life of someone you know who has lived for Christ. Pause for a moment to identify one or two now, and thank God for them. If this be true of the influence of fellow-Christians on our lives, how much greater must be the experience of knowing the indwelling Christ by his Spirit. In Paul's letters, the phrase 'in Christ' appears some 158 times. With the apostle we can say, 'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.' (Galatians 2: 20)

It is Christ whom we are called to imitate. His life within us begins to change and transform us more and more into his likeness. Let us then have this mind which was in Jesus Christ. 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' How all-embracing is this transformation when by and through it we are able to know the will of God '– his good, pleasing and perfect will.' (Romans 12: 1–2) We look to Christ so that our lives may so reflect his presence that, in the same attitude of humility that he showed (Philippians 2: 7) we will be used for special purposes. (2 Timothy 2: 21)

As we seek to be dedicated and useful to the Master, let us take careful note how we should live, wherever we are and whatever we do. Let us make it a daily prayer that the beauty, life, peace, joy and love of Jesus will be seen in us – not to elevate ourselves, but to honour him.

Read: Galatians 2: 20; 2 Timothy 2: 14–26; Philippians 2: 1–11.

DH

Jesus said, ‘Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything.’ Luke 5: 4–5

What is to be learned in failure and defeat? Failure is a terrible curse that is to be avoided at all costs – or is it? An Arabic proverb states, ‘Endless sunshine gives birth to a desert’ – and football coaches say, ‘We learn almost nothing in victory but we have much to learn in defeat.’

A friend in Latvia shared with me three lessons he has learned in failure.

1. Teaching – Failure teaches us lessons we could not otherwise learn. It was during the disciples’ failures, such as their failure to catch fish, or heal the epileptic (Mark 9: 28), or Peter’s betrayal, that Jesus was able to teach them some of his greatest lessons.

2. Humility – Failure makes us humble. This is, indeed, important since it is only through humility that God’s grace flows to us. The Lord says he resists the proud. Failure has a wonderful way of knocking out the pride that hinders the receiving of God’s grace.

3. Testing – Failure enables God to test our faithfulness even when circumstances don’t work out just right.

Failure may not be so negative after all. Many studies suggest that it is in the difficult times, the times of failure, that we are the most teachable. The necessity to look honestly at ourselves is frequently absent in success. What may appear as failure can be truly turned to success if we can learn from it and change. With the Lord’s help we can!

Read: Luke 5: 1–11; Mark 9: 14–32; James 1: 2–12.

RDS

'Is there anyone ... to whom I can show kindness ...?'
2 Samuel 9: 1

One Sunday, as I was preparing my mind for the communion service, my thoughts went to the lovely story of King David's kindness to Mephibosheth. It wonderfully portrays God's kindness to us, and reminds us to show God's kindness to others.

After years as a fugitive from the jealousy of King Saul, David had at length become established on the throne of Israel. 'God has been kind to me,' he argued, 'cannot I pass that kindness on to another?' Unlike the common practice of rulers at that time, which was to kill any and all who were related to the supplanted king, David thought of Mephibosheth, the crippled son of his great friend Jonathan. (He had died in battle helping his father, Saul, to defend the land.) Not surprisingly, Mephibosheth was scared when he received David's invitation to live with the royal household; but David won his trust and restored his land, providing plenty of servants and a suite in the royal palace.

I ask myself the same question: is there anyone to whom I can show God's kindness – today? God has been kind to me. He has blessed me materially, and in so many other ways. Above all, he has made me his child and – amazing thought – his heir, with the prospect of living forever in his palace. His kindness to me was costly (John 3: 16), and given to me while I was against him. (Romans 5: 8) God has been kind to us all; do we accept it without any thought of passing it on to others? (1 John 3: 16) Now I have added another motto to my desk diary: 'Is there anyone to whom I can show God's kindness today?'

Read: 1 Samuel 20: 11–17, 42; Ephesians 4: 28–32.

DSh

Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ...’ John 11: 25

Surgical colleagues referred to me, a resident psychiatrist, a 17 year old lad terminally ill with a rare myosarcoma. They wanted to operate on him for the third time – but he had gone into depression after overhearing their bedside discussion about his prognosis. His parents wanted him home. I softly called his name, Lazarus, as I approached him, and introduced myself as another doctor, concerned about his personal feelings. He gave no response. I felt like a failure.

‘Lazarus,’ I persevered, ‘I know of someone called by your name. The man lived many years ago. He was sick and died. But his friend, Jesus Christ, prayed – and Lazarus came out of the grave again.’ I spoke the Bible words above (John 11: 25). Lazarus seemed to strain his ears intently to catch my words. I prayed inwardly, then gently asked if he wanted this life with Jesus, and to be with him in heaven for ever – and he nodded his head. I inched closer to his face and prayed with him, confessing our sins, acknowledging Christ as the Lord and Saviour, and inviting him to enter Lazarus’s life. His eyes were closed as he followed the prayer sincerely. Before I left I assured him that Jesus would take care of him always.

I spoke with his parents. Then I wrote in my referral answer, ‘No need to prolong the agony; let him go home, and die in peace and dignity.’ A month later his grieving parents wrote to me, saying that he had seemed wonderfully changed and content; they had read the Bible to him, and he had died with great peace.

Read: John 11: 1–44.

MCE-B

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. Psalm 23: 4

During the past year I have twice been given a diagnosis of cancer. First, an astrocytoma of the brain, and then an adenocarcinoma of the rectum. Both times the diagnosis led to deep anxiety for my family and myself, and we were led into deep and lasting consideration of God's goodness, wisdom and guidance in times of darkness and problems. A word was put up on the wall in our kitchen, that we could often look at, 'My Father, I do not understand you, but I trust you.'

Our son sent us some words of Luther, which have been of great help and consolation to us: 'A person in great temptations and suffering should not rely on himself but trust in the words which are given in God's name. Do not think that you are the only one to have such temptations. Many more suffer in the same way. (1 Peter 5: 9) Do not primarily desire to be saved from your sufferings. But say to HIM, "Thy will, not mine be done, dear Father, even if I have to empty this cup." ' There is no stronger or better medicine in a situation like this, than to praise the Lord. For the evil of depression cannot be cast away with sadness, lamentations and grief, but by praising the Lord!

We did not get an answer to the problem of suffering and evil, but received a kind of insight as to how the frailty of life and the nearness of death can bring a new dimension to living. Death, sorrow, and suffering are not the final result; they are only temporary truths.

Read: Psalm 139: 11–16; 1 Peter 1: 3–9.

(The author died while this book was going to press.)

SHN

'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.' Malachi 3: 10

This verse follows the Lord's accusation against his people, that they had turned from him. They asked, 'How are we to return?' His answer went to the point. 'Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, "How do we rob you?" In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse ... because you are robbing me.' (Malachi 3: 7–9)

Israel's history at that time tells us that you cannot just live as you like and still expect God's blessing. Their conditions improved when they followed God's commandments, but got worse when they turned away to worship idols. This lack of commitment was shown by their failure to tithe, and was why he said they were accursed. The solution was to bring him his full dues.

Today some people find tithing natural to them, even the minimum to aim at, whilst others claim that it was for Old Testament times only. Doesn't that suggest that God's promise to those who give is not valid today? If you are not experiencing God's blessing on your life, consider whether, like Israel, you have forgotten to give God the things that are God's.

Jesus once watched rich people putting large sums of money into the treasury. A poor widow gave two copper coins and he commented to his disciples that she had put in more than anyone else. 'They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all that she had to live on.' (Mark 12: 43–44) God does not look at the size of the gift, but at the heart. A right relationship with him, and the right attitude as we give, will lead us to experience his blessing.

Read: Matthew 22: 18–23; 2 Corinthians 8: 1–15.

EAJ

Then he blessed him there. Genesis 32: 29

We can experience God's blessing in a practical context in our professional lives. Success or failure is not solely dependent on our own efforts, competence and commitment. We cannot bring about success by force. Whether or not my work succeeds is the outworking of God's blessing (1 Corinthians 3: 6) – blessing which he offers me and which I can ask for in prayer. This is something I constantly experienced during my surgical career. Although I always did everything in my power to ensure that the operations I performed were carried out with maximum professional competence, whether or not the wound healed without complications was ultimately beyond my power. That it healed I saw as a sign of God's power.

In our personal lives we can also experience God's blessing, as did Jacob. He had prospered as a result of deceit, yet experienced God's inward blessing at the Jabbok river, although his hip was dislocated and he became a cripple.

Today we, too, can experience situations which suddenly confront us with personal limitations, our personal Jabbok. With Jacob, the crippling stroke turns an impersonal God into a personal one. In the course of a dialogue, during which he is unaware that it is God who is speaking to him, Jacob's mind is no longer filled with reproach but the desire to be blessed – 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' At this point Jacob was no longer content with the blessings of the past, with affluence, pleasures and power. All he wanted to do was to rediscover the reality of God. Perhaps we, too, are (thankfully) marked by an incident which revealed the closeness of God, his guidance and his blessing. May we not forget to thank him for it!

Read: Genesis 32: 22–31.

KL

MARCH

Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing. Psalm 34: 8–9.

At once they left their nets and followed him. Matthew 4: 20

What is your pain score on a range of 1–10? How often have we heard nurses in hospitals ask this question? The priest and Levite on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho didn't even come close enough to ask it of the man who had fallen among thieves. The Samaritan didn't take time to ask it for he, moved with pity, just acted. (Luke 10: 25–37) He acted not out of any sense of duty but, in reflecting God's love, he perfectly illustrated the meaning of neighbourliness. Jesus also, on a great many occasions, acted quickly, effectively and with little enquiry. As, for example, when he met the woman at Nain on her way to bury her son. (Luke 7: 11–17) Immediately he was moved with compassion and just acted.

How often do we act spontaneously, just because we are there and see a need? God knows we will usually act out of a sense of duty – that's one of the reasons we entered health care. But God wants more. He wants spontaneous acts of compassion and love that are signs of his indwelling Spirit; good works that come entirely naturally to the Spirit-filled Christian. How do we react to the repeat drunk, the drug addict, the offensively smelling person in need, or do we avoid such people? Do we show extravagant mercy and compassion, going the extra mile, giving the coat we are wearing, the last money from our pockets? It is not that there are degrees of goodness in action, with some greater than others, but that our actions should come naturally out of Christ-like and Spirit-filled new creature natures.

Finally, how do we react to God's call? Do we, having counted the cost, decline his invitation or do we just go?

*Come down, O Love Divine,
Seek Thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with Thine own ardour glowing;*
Bianco da Sienna (1350–1434),
tr. by R. F. Littledale (1833–90)

Read: Matthew 4: 18–22; Luke 9: 57–62.

AJR

Get rid of all bitterness ... Ephesians 4: 31

Whoever started it, holding grudges creates barriers which, within the workplace, affect atmosphere, distort communication and damage efficiency. Sick people involved with such a system will suffer. There is grit in the machinery, but a Christian on the team could become God's oilcan. Getting rid of bitterness will be achieved neither by taking sides nor by keeping quiet. It needs a response, not a reaction. We should pray for an opportunity, humbly and gently, to pour in the oil. A heated exchange can cause conflagration more than contrition, especially if the fault in the works is our own. Circumstances will guide us as to whether a team meeting is preferable to an individual encounter.

The doctor in charge of the duty rota realised that one of the team was openly avoiding her, so she prayed about it. Soon afterwards, when approaching a revolving door, the object of her prayers was doing so too, from the other side. They could pass each other with a glass sheet between them, or she could wait for him to emerge. An SOS prayer for grace, and they met. Using his name, with a concerned, 'What's the trouble?' eased out the 'grit', which was a grudge about the rota's alleged unfairness. Once expressed, release brought mutual apologies and improved relations.

Why should we, already busy, trouble with such exercises? There is an even deeper reason than improved efficiency. We should care about getting rid of destructive attitudes, including our own, because God has cared so much about repairing our broken relationship with him. It is because of God's love that Paul urges us to repel bitterness by being 'kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.' (Ephesians 4: 32)

Read: Titus 3: 1–8.

JGo

'Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.' Matthew 18: 14

Often, ordinarily speaking, the word ‘precious’ is used ironically, implying affectation and fastidiousness. Not so God’s regard for us, where even in death we are precious to him. (e.g. Psalm 16: 15) This is, of course, a comfort to ourselves, but Jesus makes us think in terms of how our preciousness in God’s sight should affect our thinking about others.

There is no evidence of Jesus being unrealistic or sentimental in his assessment of childhood. We can be sure he upheld the idea that children should be subject to their parents and honour them, as he did. (Luke 2: 51) He recognised that they often show contrariness and quarrel. (Matthew 11: 17) Nevertheless, he made it clear that they hold a very special place in the heart of God, who has an immediate and sure knowledge of their circumstances. As Christ said, ‘I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.’ (Matthew 18: 10)

Jesus once allowed a very adult discussion to be interrupted by accepting children brought to him. He countered the disciples’ annoyance of this interruption by saying ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such.’ (Matthew 19: 14) He then blessed the children.

If you are dealing with any ‘little ones’ today, remember their value to God in whose presence they are always represented. Commit each to him and treat them as Jesus would do.

Read: Matthew 18: 10–14.

RC

'If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned.' Matthew 18: 6

How dangerous we can be for the immature, those not yet able to judge right or wrong for themselves! How do children see us? The world encourages us to be spontaneous and ‘natural’ if we are to be fulfilled, but how does our behaviour impact on children? For the Christian, true freedom and fullness of life is really wholesome. The more we trust Christ we are being made new in the attitude of our minds, in the putting on of a ‘new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.’ (Ephesians 4: 24) This is an incredible fact within the purpose of Christ coming into this world. (John 17: 11)

Jesus speaks of the awful consequences of spoiling the ‘innocence’ of childhood. What if anything we do or say teaches an impressionable young person behaviour patterns that are less than the best? Rather than risking causing harm we may need to cut off or gouge out (unpleasant metaphors, but Jesus’ words) some things from our own lives or practice; we may need to check our behaviour, our reactions, our words.

In restraining ourselves are we then losers after all? No! We shall receive many times as much as we may think we have given up – and eternal life with it! Keep looking to Christ and be ‘transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.’ (2 Corinthians 3: 18)

Read: Matthew 18: 1–9.

RC

The disciples asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ Jesus called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’ Matthew 18: 1–3

Not even enter, far less be the greatest! But Jesus went on to say, ‘Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’ But surely, the inquisitive child, peeping round the doorway of the room where Jesus and his disciples were, was he not, like all children, immature, weak and ignorant? If it is humbleness that Jesus is trying to illustrate, why choose a child? Children are self-centred, self-assertive and demanding. We confuse humility with denial of worth. We make a mistake in thinking that being humble means we are of no worth. Jesus shows us that to be humble is to recognise our dependence on God whatever our own worth. Children are utterly dependent for food, warmth, protection – everything. They have to trust someone else for the necessities of life.

How hard it is for the doctor to enter the Kingdom! All my qualifications, hard work, skills and reliability trap me into thinking I have all that I need, or need to be.

We are utterly dependent on the Creator, whether we acknowledge him or not. It is how we regard him and use his creation which is crucial. Like little children, we must put aside the make-believe, the fantasy of our self-confidence, stop playing games, and come daily to Jesus, who alone can provide what we and the world need – forgiveness, with power to grow in grace, in love and in service.

Read: Matthew 18: 1–14.

RC

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. 1 Timothy 2: 8

The primitive notion of justice was to get even. You took an eye, you lost an eye. Today, we are back at that level, as the popular press presents every disaster as someone's fault and demands retribution. The instinctive desire for revenge has a price; it cripples the vengeful with bitterness and hate. How many patients, returning regularly with headaches, backaches and insomnia, are paying for an unforgiving spirit? They could be cured, without money but above price. For with Christ came a healthy option. The paralytic, lowered through a roof to the Lord's feet, needed his sins forgiven before his body was made whole. (Matthew 9: 1-8) Peace with God meant health and wholeness, and is still on offer.

Jesus told his questioning disciples that they should repeatedly forgive their brothers' offences. (Matthew 18: 22) He said that the extent of God's forgiveness of our debts to him mirrors how we ourselves should deal with those in debt to us. (Matthew 6: 12) To the end of his life he demonstrated the kind of spirit he referred to, even asking his Father to forgive those who were crucifying him. (Luke 23: 34) Forgiveness brings great deliverance. It is something many of our patients need to hear about.

*Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt him,
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain;
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him,
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.*

...

*Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us,
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne;
past put behind us, for the future take us,
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.*

Timothy Dudley-Smith (© 1967. Used with permission.

Read: Romans 12: 19-21; Matthew 18: 21-35.

HWW

'You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch in me can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.' John 15: 3–4

As in God's garden trees are meant to be fruitful, so in our profession we are meant to be his useful instruments. Our own tools include so many 'scopes', from ophthalmoscopes to proctoscopes, and more. Each has several working parts, but remains without power and light, and so useless, unless connected to a continuous power source. So, in our daily lives, we need the continuous power of Jesus Christ to make us useful to him.

Remember, the lens magnifies the visual field and identifies the problem, but both must be kept clean to avoid a misleading picture. The word of God is already pure (Proverbs 30: 5), but when directed on our hearts makes us aware of our own need of cleansing. (Psalm 19: 9–12) God's word also gives us a clearer picture of our Lord and of the world. Just as a 'scope' must be directed and focussed for us to see the working field and solve the problem, so we need to focus each day on the tasks which God shows are ours.

So, then, I need to remain connected to the power source, Jesus Christ. My heart must be kept clean for his lens to show me the world and its needs as he sees them. The Holy Spirit may lead me to focus on one person's care at a time, but always helps me to maintain clear vision. As we stay connected, remaining or abiding in Christ, we need to pray daily to continue as his useful tools, for his glory.

Read: John 15: 1–16; 1 John 1: 5, 6.

DMB

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. Galatians 6: 2

It is amazing how many people don't talk about their problems. Physical and mental suffering become much worse if we try to cope on our own. Relief can come by sharing the trouble with someone we trust. A young man was bedridden with severe pain, but his family was withholding from him the true diagnosis. His first question to the visiting doctor was, 'Have I got cancer?' Cautiously he replied, 'What do you think?' 'Well,' answered the young man, 'I think I must have, because I'm not getting any better and all they are giving me are painkillers.' Honesty, hard as it may be, is best on these occasions, otherwise barriers build up between patient, doctor and family at a time when they most need each other's support. There is also great richness to be gained by going through such experiences together.

The next question the young man asked was whether his condition was catching. He had been afraid to kiss his wife and child lest he infected them, but was causing distress by his apparent aloofness. With the relief brought by the truth, he began to get up and live with the family, in very little pain. He died quite suddenly, during a family teaparty.

Speaking the truth in love is a Christ-like activity. (Ephesians 4: 15) It excludes blurting out a diagnosis and walking away. Instead it means imagining what it must be like to be hearing for the first time what has to be said, so that in the telling we aim to love our neighbour as we ourselves would hope to be loved in this situation. It is never easy, yet it can bring ease.

Read: 2 Corinthians 1: 3–7.

FAMMCA

(Adapted from *For God's sake, Doctor!* 1984)

*You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast,
because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord for ever ... Isaiah
26: 3–4*

As we seek to help people, all the demands of professional life can easily sap our vitality. Patients may be nervy, demanding or uncooperative, and long working hours add to the pressure, physically and emotionally. Exposure to human suffering may drain us, leading to anxiety symptoms such as migraine, sleep loss, stomach ulcers and even to suicide. Added pressure comes if our treatment is less successful than we'd hoped, or relationships break down with colleagues and staff. Life can become a constant battleground. Anger, envy and bitterness can start to fester, or imagination takes over with its 'What if ...?' Ninety-nine per cent of our worries never happen!

There are practical steps we can take to overcome daily strain, such as whenever possible getting more sleep and exercise. On the job, seniors should learn the art of delegation, first teaching how the jobs should be done before allotting them. However, the important factor in determining our feelings is not our circumstances themselves but the way we react to them.

Speculating on what might have been is futile and self-defeating. We may worry about mistakes in the past, reliving things which we wish we'd done differently. 'If only ...' cannot alter things as they are. For Christians, the wonderful good news is that God is willing to forgive the guilty past, give us strength for the stressful present and give us peace for the uncertain future.

*God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*

Reinhold Niebuhr

Read: 2 Corinthians 11: 23–28; 1 Peter 5: 7.

AV

'... you will find rest for your souls.' Matthew 11: 29

The Bible has a lot to teach us on how to have a mind at ease, an inner experience that overcomes tension and strain. Our Lord taught, 'Do not worry about your life ...'. Instead he told us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. (Matthew 6: 25, 33) To read of his own breathtaking activities in Mark 1 is to realise that he knew what he was talking about!

Seeking first God's kingdom is not confined to our work, but includes seeking him first thing in the day, trusting in his power and presence to see us through all that it holds. He has promised that coming to him will be to find rest. (Matthew 11: 29) Let us therefore cast all our anxiety on him, assured that he cares for us. (1 Peter 5: 7)

Where does our trust lie? Oswald Sanders wrote, 'Nothing less than a rediscovery of God will meet the deepest need of our complex personality. God himself is the answer and he will grant us a fresh revelation of himself, the El Shaddai. God all sufficient. He is immeasurably greater than our conscious inadequacy.'

A biblical example of someone over-anxious and consciously inadequate was Martha, so keen to do the right thing in welcoming her Lord to her home. Her overactivity led to fretfulness and a critical outburst. (Luke 10: 40) Jesus pointed out that a better priority would have been to wait and listen to him. May we, too, make this a priority as we prayerfully read the Bible, listening to his voice.

*... Take from our souls the strain and stress
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace ...*

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–92)

Read: Philippians 4: 1–9; 1 Peter 5: 5–11.

AV

'... I have led a blameless life;' Psalm 26: 1

So much of contemporary life seems to involve compromise or pretence, along with the temptation to be agreeable. Yet social white lies and official ‘economy with the truth’ are both expressions of falsehood. This affects us all. Are we always truthful in our professional lives and honest with colleagues and patients? Are our personal lives completely transparent? The bedrock of married life and stable homes is not sentimental or sensual love, but truth and fidelity.

One of Jesus’ central claims is that he is not *a* truth, or *the* truth, but *Truth* personified. In Christ we find single-mindedness, transparency and total lack of guile. He cannot deceive. He has no hidden agenda. He confronts us personally, aiming for us to become one with him. (John 17: 21) How then could sinners like David and Job claim integrity? (Psalm 41: 12; Job 2: 3) They were not blameless, but their relationship with God allowed them to be open with him, and they knew that repentance brought forgiveness. (Psalm 51) With no secret rooms barred to him, he has communion with each of us, unqualified trust keeping us together.

Christ’s perfect character reveals God to us. By his Spirit he longs to transform all our other relationships and activities. It should therefore be known that Christians do not dissemble or misrepresent – characteristics likely to be prized more than ever in a hedonistic and utilitarian society. The exposure of scientific fraud reminds us, too, that work which is lastingly good or great must also be fundamentally honest.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to be true to you and to each other, so that we glorify you in all things and need not be ashamed before you at your coming. Amen.

Read: Psalm 26.

DEBP

'Give us today our daily bread.' Matthew 6:11

In our busy days, food may not be a priority and we often snatch a hurried snack on the run. There may be even less time to feed the soul through word and sacrament, prayer and Bible study and the fellowship of other Christians. Jesus did not ignore the physical needs of his disciples and others who came to him. He gave them food for the body (Mark 6: 41) as well as feeding their souls with his teaching. He offered living water (John 7: 38) and spoke of himself as the bread of life. (John 6: 48) Those who receive him will no longer be hungry or thirsty, but will have eternal life.

We should be caring for every aspect of our patients' wellbeing. As we explain about a cholesterol free diet we should also remember the patient's need for the bread of life. We provide food for the soul by the manner of our care and compassion and in the time spent listening to people's stories. Sometimes we can be more direct.

To be able to nurture others in body, mind and spirit, we ourselves need to be nourished by the bread and water of which Jesus spoke. This will mean drawing aside from our busy lives to take in a spiritual diet which sustains us and provides for all our needs. As well as trying to stay physically healthy, we also need to grow and thrive through the experience of God's love for us. In the psalms, we are invited to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. (Psalm 34: 8) Such satisfaction is not found in achievements measurable by worldly standards. It comes from being filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3: 19) We are to feed on him in our hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Read: Matthew 4: 4; John 6: 26–35.

HM

March 13 Responding with Christ's compassion

'Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.' John 15: 13

God is love. It's so easy to take this for granted and overlook the response then called for in us. Love caused God to give. It is incredible that he came here as a weak, vulnerable and dependent baby. Jesus Christ, living in our world, revealed the Father's character and love. We, too, are called to share in other people's lives, despite often feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable. Even such costly giving is made possible by love.

Love caused God to listen. The Bible tells us how he listened to the cry of the poor, needy, alien or outcast, and still hears our cries. We, too, are called to listen and respond to the cries around us. Love caused God to be obedient. Jesus, as God made man, was perfectly obedient to his Father. We, too, need to be wholly obedient to him, only made possible through the Holy Spirit's help and teaching. Love caused God to cross barriers. Jesus crossed just about every social barrier of his day, associating with women, Samaritans, tax collectors and lepers. He was a friend of outcasts and sinners. We, too, are called to cross barriers, despite any prejudice we may feel towards addicted or unpleasant patients.

It is not always easy, but we are called to follow Christ's example and to do it. We cannot give what we do not have. Only as we receive and know Christ's love and mercy for ourselves can we pass it on to others.

Prayer: Father, your love isn't natural to us except by your Spirit. Please grow more in us so that we can respond with your love and mercy for those around us. Amen.

Read: Philippians 2: 5–11; John 15: 9–17.

SLa

Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Psalm 141: 3

Like measles, certain phrases are contagious. A doctor friend became known as ‘Corks’, as this was his only expletive, counteracting abuse of his Lord’s name when others swore. A gentle enquiry, ‘Was that a prayer or a swear?’ can also reduce that particular offence. Our mouths need also to be guarded against breaking confidentiality, whether professionally, in public prayer or by gossip. Hasty words of criticism and irritation easily arise, too, and even if held back, our manner often speaks them for us. How far removed this is from our Lord, whose words were remarkable for their graciousness. (Luke 4: 22)

As a cup overflows with what is in it, so the overflow of the heart comes out of the mouth. (Matthew 12: 34) Boastfulness betrays a proud heart, irritability a tense (perhaps exhausted) heart, and belittling of others a spiteful heart. Paul reminds us that we should aim for words filled with grace (Colossians 4: 6) although practical James admits that all of us are at times likely to stumble. (James 3: 2)

We need to pray for garrisoned hearts as well as mouths, and for the Holy Spirit to be evident as they overflow together. Part of the evidence will be a spirit of humility when hasty words have escaped the guard. The fault must be put right with our Lord, and probably also with others. A night sister once woke me to see to something I considered trivial. Still smarting from my hasty words, after I’d gone she said, ‘That’s what you can expect from these Bible bashers.’ I was glad that before being told this, the Holy Spirit had prompted me to go back to apologise before she went off duty. The memory of that embarrassment later helped to leave other hasty words unspoken!

Read: Ephesians 3: 14–21.

JGo

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me ... Psalm 23: 4

The colonel's order came for me to go to Sarajevo. I was to set up and run a surgical theatre there. The journey was difficult and dangerous and Sarajevo was under daily artillery attack. The Olympic stadium had become a cemetery with several burials daily, of children as well as of adults.

After a stressful few days, our company commander arranged a party. It was a wonderful evening – until we had a mortar attack and I had to operate on the casualties. A good French friend, another army doctor, was mortally wounded and died that night. I later joined the guard of honour at Sarajevo airport and heard his chaplain speak on the text, ‘In my Father’s house are many rooms.’ (John 14: 1) With so few rooms in Sarajevo still intact, this brought home in a new way the meaning of this verse.

Then came the bombing of the United Nations headquarters. All those not on duty were evacuated to our shelter and our Danish chaplain held an international service. Brown, black, yellow and white men, representing the whole world, sat and listened as he spoke about the army officer who requested healing for his sick servant by one word of command from Jesus. (Matthew 8: 5–13) The discipline of the man evidently impressed Jesus, giving us an example of a faith still expectant, even under trial.

Wherever we go and whatever the danger, whether in life or in death, we can practise the presence of Christ and so share in the confidence expressed by the psalmist: ‘You are with me.’

Read: Joshua 1: 9; Psalm 46.

AS

... I will trust and not be afraid. Isaiah 12: 2

She was a pale, skinny eight year old, brought to me by her father because of persistent abdominal pain. ‘Something has got to be done,’ he said. As hospital studies had already proved negative, I asked to speak to Mary on her own. ‘Why do you think you get tummy-ache?’ I asked. ‘Because I’m always scared,’ she replied. ‘What are you scared of?’ – ‘Almost everything. I imagine horrid things hiding behind the door, or witches looking through my window. Children’s television is scary, too.’

I asked if she ever said her prayers. She had learned to do so at Brownies, though unsure that her parents prayed. ‘You know,’ she added, ‘I often wish God would speak to me, because he did in the Old Testament. But if he did – what would happen?’ I told her that God does speak if we listen. ‘He puts thoughts in your mind. You can think of him as Jesus, and Jesus isn’t frightening, is he?’ She agreed. ‘Think of him as your best friend, who is always with you, looking after you and telling you what to do. You need never be scared again.’ At this, she brightened up and her father came back. As he was obviously expecting a prescription, I’m afraid I weakened and ordered a good vitamin syrup. It would do no harm and might improve her appetite.

When I next saw her I asked, ‘Any more tummy-aches?’ ‘No.’ ‘Any more scary things?’ ‘No,’ this with a serene smile. I don’t think that even the best of vitamin syrups could have achieved that!

Read: 1 Samuel 3: 1–10.

FAMMcA

(Adapted from *For God’s sake, Doctor!* 1984)

... in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3: 6

Have you ever been unacknowledged? Maybe your name was overlooked amongst those being introduced or thanked, or your part in a major project was not recognised. Recognition is important to us and basic for our interactions. In our profession, much of the ethical turmoil pivots on whether or when to acknowledge the humanity of others. So what do we make of, ‘In all your ways acknowledge him’? The impact is so often lost between the commands ‘lean *not* on your own understanding’, and ‘*do not* be wise in your own eyes.’ The direct command to ‘acknowledge’ God is easily overlooked.

Acknowledgement is one of the smallest acts of civility we exchange, even with strangers. A handshake, a ‘pardon me’, or eye contact, are all part of our basic interaction with those around us. So a command to ‘acknowledge’ God seems almost petty compared with other admonitions, for example to ‘glorify’ him. Yet ‘acknowledging’ God means recognising him, looking for him, greeting him, taking time to make eye contact with him, and this ‘*in all my ways*’, not just on Sunday morning. The Hebrew word for *way* is a road, a journey of life and also a conversation, custom or manner. My dinner conversation, my walking-down-the-street attitude, even the way I enter the office, is to ‘acknowledge’ God.

How can I acknowledge him in *all* my ways today? When I imagine meeting him in the break room or the grocery store I realise how seldom I simply recognise his presence. Instead, I should want to introduce him, bring up our relationship in conversation and make eye contact with him. Then, our verse tells us, God will make right my ‘path’ – including my manner.

Read: Psalm 139.

MW

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Matthew 4: 1

The usual wording of the Lord's prayer for us recommends that we ask our heavenly Father that we be not led into temptation, while a contemporary version asks that we be saved 'from the time of trial'. The temptations that Jesus experienced were certainly those such as come in every way to ordinary men and women – the use of power, attracting others by our performance or knowledge, or by doing the right thing for the wrong reason. Satan will use any opportunity to assail us whenever we are off-guard, that is, when we are not clad with the whole armour of God. (Ephesians 6: 10–18) Also, as we see in this incident in Jesus' life, the devil will attack even if we are fully prepared.

The period before Easter (Lent) is used by many Christians to examine themselves before God, seeking the direction of the Holy Spirit to reveal those things in their lives which keep us from getting close to him, whose temple our bodies are. Our heavenly Father may indeed use times of trial and hardships to test us. But 'God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted he will also provide a way out, so that you can stand up under it.' (1 Corinthians 10: 13). Lent is an opportunity to spend more time in contemplation of God's word and determining his will for us.

Nevertheless, let us not forget that even though we may have 'overcome' any particular temptation, the tempter will try again to undermine our objective, as he did with Jesus. It is surely comforting that it is likely that 'angels will come and minister' to us, as they did to Jesus, after any such struggle.

Read: Luke 4: 1–12; Hebrews 4: 14–16.

AJR

He ate nothing during those (forty) days, and at the end of them he was hungry. Luke 4: 2

Many enhance their contemplation by fasting. Having to discipline the body's desire for food is a practical way of being reminded of the purpose for which one is fasting. At times, doing without what one normally regards as necessary can be a practical way of bearing in mind, throughout the day, what our Saviour suffered on our behalf.

A 'fast' does not necessarily apply just to food and drink. Some choose to do something extra, in addition to, or rather than, fasting. But whatever it might be, it is done 'unto the Lord'. Jesus goes further and exhorts us to carry out our fast joyfully and, as he did, away from the gaze and impressions of others. At the same time, no matter how great the effect of the fast is on ourselves, we should prayerfully consider if our fast might adversely affect others. One wife implored her husband, 'Don't go off your food this year. You become so cranky and impossible to live with'. (1 Corinthians 8: 9)

It is hardly surprising that as we attempt to draw closer to God, Satan will try to deflect our thoughts and resolutions away from him, and this may be easier as the period of a true fast draws on. It seems that Satan waited until towards the end of our Lord's forty days in the wilderness before tempting him, when physical and bodily needs were at their most demanding. He was 'tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.' (Hebrews 4: 15) So with us, whatever we put aside for the Lord, let us be confident that we will not be tempted beyond what we are able to bear. (1 Corinthians 10: 13)

Read: Matthew 4: 1–11; 1 Corinthians 10: 1–13.

AJR

'... Jerusalem lies in ruins ... Come, let us rebuild the wall ...' They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding.' Nehemiah 2: 17, 18

Wherever we look, progress seems to be the overall theme of our age. Yet, as in Nehemiah's Jerusalem, standards and values are also under threat. Whether disguised as an individual's right or economic benefit, egotism leaves patients at risk and professionals so frustrated that some outstanding colleagues have resigned their posts.

'Let us start rebuilding.' Nehemiah began by an inspection of the wall. We, too, need inspect the personal wall of our Christian integrity to see where it needs repair. It can be broken down by taking risky short cuts in examination or treatment, by making allowances for other people's moral standards but undermining our own, by thinking more about the economic cost than of the patient, by letting personal ambition leave little time for the family, and so on. Having examined your personal wall, you may find it necessary to rebuild it if you are to avoid disgrace, both to yourself and to our God. As you do so, you will find, with Nehemiah, 'the gracious hand of my God upon me'. (Nehemiah 2: 18)

Yet when they began this good work, the people were mocked and ridiculed. We may expect a similar reaction, and hostility may increase. Nehemiah's builders were forced to carry arms as they worked. We, too, need to be equipped with the whole armour of God, ever alert and prayerful. (Ephesians 6: 18)

Despite all the opposition, Nehemiah's project ended with his people's rediscovery of God's law. Joy and peace followed as they found his purpose in life. The whole story is one to encourage us today. Read it when you can!

Read: Philippians 2: 12–13; Nehemiah 1–13.

TR

One of these must become a witness with us of the resurrection. Acts 1: 22

Luke emphasises Jesus' relationships *with* his disciples, not just about Jesus *and* his disciples. Luke sees people as within groups, in families. This capacity enables him to describe a biology that implies going much further than a narrative of events taken from an isolated standpoint. Luke, the doctor, has a way of describing the phenomenon of the resurrection which is very striking. He describes it with the clinical observation of a GP. Luke describes 'The Biology of the Resurrection' in two books.

First, in Luke's gospel, he analyses the power of personhood. The biology that Luke studied at medical school always ended up in a necropsy, and his medical practice consisted of trying to avoid or delay death. But since medical school, Luke had an encounter with a person who was life itself (John 14: 6), which meant that his entire learning process had needed to change. His understanding of life and death was transformed, a new biology! A biology in which life emerges from death, where life is more powerful than death, and where life integrates with, embraces and transforms death. Incredible! This was something totally unheard of. Life did not just end up in a necropsy!

Second, in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke devoted himself to narrating the resurrection as a new biological phenomenon. A phenomenon that establishes a totally new reality in the cosmos. A new biology in the lives of those who believe in Jesus Christ, demonstrating the power of the resurrection operating in their own bodies.

Prayer: 'Dear Father, thank you for having sent your Son, not only to give his life, but to take it back again. His resurrection inspires us with the hope of our own resurrection.'

Read: Luke 24: 1–8, 36–49; 1 Corinthians 15: 12–20.

CH

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures. Psalm 23: 1–2*

When we speak – are we understood? The good news of Jesus Christ must be expressed simply and clearly, and in the cultural context of the listener. During our mission training my wife and I spent time with Wycliffe Bible translators. Their guiding principle is that every person in the world has the right to read the Bible in their own language, in their mother tongue. Their own language will better touch hearts and minds.

Translators working in the far north of Canada faced particular difficulties in translating Psalm 23 into the local language. How could locals understand ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ when they had never seen a sheep, and ‘green pastures’ when they had never seen grass? Walruses and snow they had in plenty but no sheep and very little grass! Eventually, and after careful thought, discussion and prayer, they translated the opening sentence as ‘The Lord is my walrus keeper’.

It made sense, and it makes us smile, but it was a very bold step. Was it right to alter scriptural vocabulary like that? Was it flying in the face of Biblical inspiration? The translators had concluded that instead of translating word by word from the oldest Hebrew and Greek biblical manuscripts they should preserve the meaning of the psalm in the reader’s mother tongue and cultural understanding. In the far north, ‘The Lord is my walrus keeper’ is equivalent to ‘The Lord is my shepherd’.

Each day we need to use meaningful language as we share our love for Christ and our knowledge that he loves and forgives us. The quality of our clinical work and personal contacts underpins our witness, but when we speak we need to speak clearly, bridging gaps in language and culture, and always seeking to present God’s message of salvation appropriately to others.

Read: Psalm 23.

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?’ Matthew 25: 37

One day in India we received a letter. The writer felt we would not know him, although he had been the executive director of a missionary fellowship. But of course we knew him! Three years before my wife and I had had a life changing interview with him, in our car at his mission's annual prayer conference. He had crammed us into a busy schedule to discuss our ideas for working overseas. We had shared our desires, our failures, and our knock-backs and criticisms, and he had encouraged us, prayed with us and answered our questions honestly. We were elated but he, having faithfully counselled yet another couple, was not to know the impact he was to have on our lives.

Later, as a consultant, I told one of my enthusiastic registrars that it does not cost anything to make a person feel like a million dollars. Ten years later and when an up and coming researcher – she reminded me of my words. I had forgotten the incident!

The passage in Matthew describes such events. The righteous had no idea they had helped anyone. We can interpret the passage in various ways but, today, let us remember how surprised the righteous were when reminded of their good actions, which they had been doing unconsciously! I suspect heaven will be like that. Having been loved by Christ, we pass his love on indiscriminately, not realising the impact of our actions. They will be evaluated in heaven by the one who judges justly. There will be a celebration and reminder of those rich forgotten moments when we unconsciously showed his love in some tangible way because we were his disciples. So let us, each day, do the good things God has prepared for us to do (Ephesians 2: 10) for thereby we lay the ground for some delightful surprises in heaven.

Read: Matthew 25: 31–46.

AG

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.
1 John 4: 7

Usually, I have a waking thought. ‘Oh dear, I must finish that piece of work, left over from yesterday.’ Or ‘Last night’s psychiatric patient from New York, was it possible to phone her parents?’ And so on.

Sometimes my waking thoughts are about God. Frequently, I remember that he really loves me, wonderfully and truly beyond the imagination. Yet the thought is not always comfortable. Some years ago I wrote from Thailand to a diabetic friend, still in the prime of life but whose eyesight was failing, reassuring him of God’s love. His reply surprised me. ‘Sometimes I wish that God would not love me so much and that he would just leave me alone for a while.’ At that stage I had not experienced close bereavement or suffering and his reply left me at a loss. God’s love may be uncomfortable?

First, because in his love God pursues us, each day coming closer. His interventions may conflict with our wish to be in firm control of our own lives. His goodness and holiness may feel smothering but, irritatingly, he will neither force us to get closer to him nor will he tamper with our free will. The choice is always ours, increasing feelings of guilt as we recognise our disobedience. Second, God promises to be with us always, taking us through the difficult times of suffering and of pain; a promise that is uncomfortable because we would rather be excused such times! So we try to escape from God, which is impossible. We need to listen to God in silence, re-opening our lives to the adventure of travelling with him, holding on tightly when the going is rough. And we need to listen to and truly love each other. This is his will, and proof that we are his children.

Read: 1 John 4: 7–21.

JT

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. 2 Chronicles 7: 14

My happiest memory of growing up is the freedom I had to roam and explore. I sought adventure in acres of moorland near my home and one abiding memory is of a startled duck rising from its nest on the edge of a small lake as I approached, opening to a small boy the excitement of nature in all its beauty and fullness. Today, by comparison, my nine-year-old grandson cannot walk safely, alone, to school! Like many others, his freedom is greatly compromised in a society which, supposedly, values freedom!

Surely, one would have thought, improvements in health, education, housing and standard of living would have brought happiness, security and contentment. Yet bullying, racism, sexism, violence, molestation and suchlike are commonplace. War, civil commotion, oppression, deprivation and greed are probably greater threats to well-being than the diseases that affect individuals. So our society is said to be sick and it struggles in vain, it seems, to control the symptoms, signs and effects of its sickness.

People tend to attribute problems in society to poverty, poor education, lack of family control and similar, and seek solutions in political action. By contrast, the Bible says that when a society rejects God it becomes sick! Of course, everyone in health care is concerned with social well-being. Jesus was supremely concerned. He is the good shepherd who seeks the welfare of all people. The gospels recount his love and care for everyone, how he healed the sick and cared for all. So today, let us in humility and acknowledging the love we receive in Christ, reflect the goodness of God in our society. We seek that day when every person, regardless of age, sex, or ethnicity will be truly free to enjoy life in all its fullness.

Read: John 10: 1–21.

JHJ

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 1 Corinthians 15: 26

Quite often we read on Christian Aid posters – ‘We believe in life before death’. Very true, for a great many people live in misery and much aid is needed to comfort and relieve those suffering poverty, injustice and loss. The Bible leaves us in no doubt that Christians have a duty to help in bringing aid to such people. But will the needy, and those who should or do help, know ‘life after death’?

The Bible makes it clear that heaven is the home of the redeemed after death. God is there and Jesus, having done everything necessary for our salvation, sits at his right hand, interceding for us. Our longings to be in God’s presence and to see Jesus will be fulfilled. But, sadly, Jesus made it clear that not everyone will reach heaven. The entrance is narrow and many will not get through. (Luke 13: 24) Only those whose trust is in Jesus and who follow his way of love will be admitted. On the way, they need to be prepared to do good works and to tell others about the hope and joy they have.

So both slogans are simultaneously true. Everyone should enjoy a full life before death, but also a glorious life after death in God’s presence.

‘At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of the morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.’ (C.S. Lewis)

Read: 1 Peter 1: 3–9; 1 Corinthians 15: 20–28.

JT

I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 121: 1–2

As a missionary in Nigeria I travelled a lot. The roads were often in poor shape, as were many of the vehicles. Accidents and breakdowns were common and armed robberies occurred. Inspired by Nigerian friends, we always committed ourselves into God's hands before starting out, asking for his guidance and protection throughout the trip. Back in Denmark we continued this practice, though we tended to take it for granted that we would arrive safely!

As a child I had a minor accident and needed surgery. I remember the surgeon in the mission hospital beginning by asking God's guidance during the operation and for his healing afterwards. This made a great impression on me. Many years later, as a missionary, I supervised the church's clinics. At the beginning of each day staff and patients joined in devotions. At the end of the day, I would meet with the staff, discuss my observations on the day's work and sometimes suggest changes. A wise colleague taught me to open these sessions with prayer, asking for wisdom to say the necessary things in the right way so that we could move forwards.

Today, in my professional life and recognising my own limitations, I still always ask for God's guidance and help through the day with difficult cases and with patients seeking meaning in life. I have never been disappointed, although often surprised by God's provision. I remember Paul's words 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.' (Philippians 4: 6) God always listens and answers in his way, in his time, and meeting our need more precisely and imaginatively than we might ever have predicted! Do cast your cares on God today, then your hearts and minds will be guarded by 'the peace of God which transcends all understanding'. (Philippians 4: 7)

Read: Matthew 6: 5–15; Philippians 4: 4–7.

SH

The righteous will ... grow like a cedar of Lebanon ... They will still bear fruit in old age ... Psalm 92: 12–14

The beautiful Cedarberg range is named after one of South Africa's best-known trees. Though not the same as the cedar of Lebanon, it is similar in many ways. It grows indigenously only in the Cedarberg mountains, at a height of about 1000 to 1500 metres above sea level, above the snow line, and exposed to extremes of wind and weather. It is as though a place was prepared for this tree to grow – not an easy place, not in a mild climate, not in soft soil, but in a special place – its place, where it reaches majestic proportions.

Years ago there was a young doctor in a famous department of surgery in London. He had done well and his chief, impressed with his work, thought of recommending him for training as a surgeon. But he felt called to go to the Congo as a medical missionary. His chief thought him a fool, but this young doctor not only contributed very greatly to medical science but also to the extension of the Kingdom of God, in the Congo and throughout the world. He had chosen the place that God had set aside for him and he, like the trees of the Cedarberg, blossomed.

God has a place for each one of us. But so often we want to go where we please. We can find ourselves saying 'Lord, the green pastures and quiet waters of Psalm 23 will suit me fine, but not the Cedarberg, with its exposed rock faces, unabating wind, and intolerable heat in summer and snow in winter. No thank you Lord!' But the only place for each person, where he or she will be fulfilled is the place God has prepared, and there the obedient person will witness effectively and professionally, as a healthy part of the church body.

Read: Psalm 25.

PBre

The righteous ... will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.
Psalm 92: 12

How often does God remind us of great truths as we observe nature? Take the cedar. Other trees grow quickly and may be attractive, but not so the cedar. Hundred-year-old trees are really nothing much to look at, not in size, nor in appearance. But thousand-year-olds are majestic and beautiful giants. So it can be with Christians. Spectacular progress may be temporary, but steady growth is often lasting in building an effective Christian life. Slow sustained growth is the characteristic enabling the cedar to become a mighty immovable giant. Ever green, year in and year out, its foliage remains green in summer heat and in winter snow. So the Christian should reflect God's love constantly, throughout the changing circumstances of life, when the going is easy and when it is tough.

Although cedar wood is comparatively soft, it is not easily worked. The grain is not constant. Mechanical planes cannot be used and each plank has to be planed carefully by hand. How like cedar wood we are! Each one of us differs from the next and it is only the Carpenter of Nazareth who knows each one sufficiently intimately to shape perfectly. Furniture cannot return to the tree but the Christian can look to Jesus and be renewed. Cedar wood also has a particular camphorous odour which helps preserve woollen blankets when they are stored in cedarwood chests. Christians spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ (2 Corinthians 2: 14) with the potential to preserve life in all its fullness. But this fragrance can be lost (Matthew 5: 13) as in old, highly polished cedarwood furniture. Christians can be changed (polished) by situations, to the extent that they lose their unique Christian fragrance and fail to spread the saving knowledge of Christ.

Next time you study God's creation, meditate on the deep truths of life as you remember the Creator, returning to Jesus for renewal.

Read: Psalm 92.

PBre

'The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.' Judges 6: 12

Most doctors will agree that medicine is in a mess. Many countries lack the financial resources and manpower to give their people even a basic level of health care. The sick must bribe doctors and officials to gain access to hospitals and treatments. In other nations, dissatisfaction builds as health care rationing keeps patients waiting many months for surgery. Add today's raging ethical battles to the turmoil. The grim reaping machine of abortion-on-demand travels to new countries. The new ethical battleground is euthanasia, claiming to ensure a dignified death. One elderly South African voted for legislation saying, 'I can't get the health care I need from our state system and I don't want to suffer. Euthanasia is my only insurance policy against suffering.'

What are Christian doctors to do when, overwhelmed, we find it increasingly difficult to practise medicine in a Christ-like manner? Already caught in the undertow of a dysfunctional health system, more ethical tidal waves threaten us with the development of cloning, designer babies and embryo research. But don't despair! God is not depressed. He is still in control and I believe he is looking for some reluctant heroes like Gideon. Do you remember the story? In 1200 BC the Israelites had turned their back on God. They were pushed off their land by raiding Bedouins who overtook their homes and camped in them, waiting to steal the coming harvest. The Israelites hid in caves like animals. God brought his people low so that they would cry out to him.

This is the first step before God intervenes in human affairs. If we doctors sought God's help as often as we complain, I don't believe that his intervention would be very far away.

Read: Judges 6.

DSt

'... why has all this happened to us?' Judges 6: 13

As we face the insurmountable odds of modern medicine, we can learn much from Gideon's story. First, he saw the spiritual root of the problem. He told the visiting angel, 'The Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian.' (Judges 6: 13) He could have complained that he didn't have enough warriors, their weapons were inferior or they needed camels to ride (or, as we might say, there was a shortage of staff, equipment and ambulances). These facts were not the cause of the pathology; they were mere symptoms of the disease. The root of the pathology in our own lives and profession is not outside circumstances, lack of power or adequate finances. The core issue is most often sin; and sin requires spiritual remedies.

Having recognised the spiritual root of the problem, Gideon next understood his own inadequacy for dealing with it. He told the angel, 'My clan is the weakest ... and I am the least in my family.' (Judges 6: 15) As doctors, our greatest assets – our talents and intelligence – are also our greatest liabilities. We often think, 'If I just work harder, smarter and longer I can conquer this problem!' God says, 'You are weak, but I am strong.'

'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him.' (1 Corinthians 1: 27–29)

Like Paul, we must accept that concept before we can tap into God's power.

Read: 1 Corinthians 1: 18–2: 5.

DSt

EASTER

When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said,

'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' Luke 23: 33–34.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ... But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God ...?' he said. 'We are punished justly ... But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him,

'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.' Luke 23: 39–43.

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing near by, he said to his mother,

'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, ***'Here is your mother.'*** John 19: 25–27.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice,

'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' – which means, ***'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*** Matthew 27: 45–46.

*Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ***'I am thirsty.'****

A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. John 19: 28–29.

When he had received the drink, Jesus said,

'It is finished.' John 19: 30.

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice,

'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23: 45–46.

Read the passages cited, in context.

Easter Saturday

Father, forgive!

'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' Luke 23: 34

Jesus, dying painfully on the cross, saw the problem very clearly. Those who had crucified him did not know what they were doing! It was a very precise diagnosis. The only effective treatment was forgiveness.

At an everyday level people, quite often, do not have any idea of the pain they cause nor of the harm they are doing. Countless marriages are killed by a thousand small cuts and omissions. Parents may exasperate a teenage child, the beginning of some downward spiral. Christians criticise and fail to work as a body to the extent that they destroy a church, so that many souls in a local community are lost. So often, it seems we do not know what we are doing and Jesus on the cross asks God to forgive *us*. The many who condemned Jesus believed they were acting correctly. They saw themselves as good and right, pillars of society and religious. The thief being crucified alongside Jesus had no illusions, he did know what he had done and was immediately promised eternal life.

Humankind was killing God's son, but his death in reality paid for their sin, should they only recognise and accept it. The cross is the ultimate enigma, foolishness to those who imagine themselves wise and good, and the door to life to those who will understand.

How do we see ourselves? Like the prodigal son who came to his senses? (Luke 15: 17) Like the publican who went home justified before God? (Luke 18: 14) Like the criminal beside Jesus who found salvation? Or like those who did not know what they were doing? Perhaps, today we need to stand before the cross again, in humility and, refreshed by the fullness of his grace, go forward joyfully in his strength to do his will.

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy Cross I cling;*

...

Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

A. M. Toplady (1740–78)

Read: Luke 23: 26–43.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ... ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’

... but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been ... They asked her, ‘Woman why are you crying?’

‘They have taken my Lord away,’ she said ‘and I don’t know where they have put him.’ At this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus.

‘Woman,’ he said ‘why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’

She ... cried out ... ‘Rabboni!’ (which means Teacher).

Jesus said, ‘Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” ’

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’

The readings are from John 20. Do take time to read them in context.

APRIL

In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and he answered by setting me free. The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper.
Psalm 118: 5–7.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12: 10

Gideon had been created and equipped by God to serve him in his people's desperate situation. He was told, 'Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?' (Judges 6: 14) Gideon did not respond immediately. In fact, he tested and retested God before he put his life on the line. God reiterated his call to Gideon, as he still moves in our hearts today.

What was the next step in our reluctant hero's mission? The Lord tested and purified Gideon by telling him to tear down his father's altars to Baal. (Judges 6: 25) This was viewed as a crime and carried the death penalty. God wanted to see whether Gideon was truly loyal to his command, valuing his direction more than family loyalty, community approval, or even his own security. Perhaps we don't see God working in our profession or our families because we don't place our loyalty to him above all else. Yet Gideon kept returning to God, seeking divine guidance and strengthening his faith.

God did not make it easy for Gideon, so that the power would be shown to be his, not man's. Gideon began with 32,000 men to fight 132,000 Midianites. God pared that down to 300, creating impossible odds. He set apart the men whose hearts were unafraid, adaptable to new forms of warfare and willing to serve despite those odds. There was then such a demonstration of God's power that the hostile army fled. (Judges 8: 10–12)

I cannot know what battle you may be facing today in your life. There is probably at least one problem that seems insurmountable. But I have good news! God is still looking for reluctant heroes, willing to follow the principles he showed Gideon. He still desires to demonstrate his power – and specialises in your 'impossible' situations.

Read: Judges 7; Psalm 37.

DSt

... what I want to do I do not do ... Romans 7: 15

As I was settling down to write this piece, there was a power failure. Lights went off, candles came in, and I could not do what I'd wanted to do. Instead, I sat by the fireside of rarely seen friends. The evening was blessed rather than spoiled as we spoke of how God can bring good out of bad.

The power cut had been caused by a huge, uncontrolled surge of electricity which wrecked all kinds of equipment, causing widespread havoc, and all because the wrong level of power had taken over. In an era of advancing technology, there is a temptation for experts in health care to say, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' (Deuteronomy 8: 17) Yet God-given power is given with love and self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1: 7) Personal as well as professional failures arise when self-love (not love of God) and self-reliance (not self-discipline) disconnect us from the Head. (Colossians 2: 19) Such power-cuts can only be mended by admission of the fault and asking for restoration. Renewed energy and wisdom then follow.

Western culture today, accustomed to medical successes, sees death as a power failure. Of course, we can fight to save life when we can, yet godly power would not keep up a fight already lost. If love and self-discipline are neglected, the ceaseless struggle to cure can wreck the patient's last days and a family's final memories. Paul agonised about such competing powers within himself, asking, 'Who will rescue me?' (Romans 7: 24) Later, he gave a decisive answer. Neither a power surge nor a power failure can possibly cut us off when we are linked to and transformed by the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 38–39)

Read: Romans 8: 28–39.

JGo

Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. Psalms 27: 14

A lawyer had been under my care for HIV-related complications. The nurses had used barrier nursing and on leaving the hospital he sued me. He claimed that I had instructed them to do this. This, according to him, had told the whole world that he had AIDS and, therefore, made him an outcast. As a result, the rumour had spread all over the town causing him untold trauma before the so-called right-thinking members of society. Now he was bankrupt. His clients had vanished. His family had deserted him. I was to blame. So he sued me for a substantial amount. The judge agreed and awarded him damages. My lawyers immediately filed an appeal.

On that day, I felt like quitting medicine. I had behaved impeccably and had suffered thereby! I had been wronged. I complained bitterly to God. But God spoke to me. ‘Be still and wait upon me.’ I prayed and confessed my impatience. Sometimes God appears very slow in his dealings, but he is never late. He reminded me of my calling, of the open doors to share my faith, and of the several patients who had come to know the Lord through my ministry. I abandoned myself into his care. ‘God, whether I win or not is immaterial. I have no kingdom to build except yours. I will wait on you. You are always right. Let me be faithful to you even as I wait.’ So David’s words became my guide and comfort. (Psalm 27: 14) We need to confess that at times it is very hard to wait, and to ask that even when there are more questions than answers, God will teach us to wait patiently for his action, all the while being strong and courageous.

Editors’ note – we are not told the outcome, but does it matter?

Read: Psalms 25: 1–15; 37: 34–36.

PW

(Adapted from *Patterns for Life* 1996)

'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.
Ephesians 4: 26–27

The following situation is not uncommon. An argument flared over some trivial matter. Suddenly there was hatred in the air and the two, ostensibly longstanding friends, glared angrily at each other. Both had quick tempers and, reacting disproportionately, spoke thoughtlessly. A blessed moment was spoilt. Unfortunately the flare up was the tip of slow insidious anger that had smouldered over many years, a poison that had destroyed the work they might have done together and the friendship that seemed to have existed from childhood.

Living as Christ would have us live is not easy. Inevitably there are ups and downs and ‘friends’ can wound deeply. We may have every reason to be angry, particularly if a hurt is repeated again and again. Is that what God wants? Christians are called to be children of light, reflecting God’s love into turbulent situations and bringing peace where there is discord. We should be neither bitter nor resentful but kind, forgiving and compassionate. Too often this is not the case and many are tempted to sin in their anger. Walk away or have a coffee until, in calmer mode, the situation that might have sparked anger can be confronted constructively. Healing of deep and longstanding hurts and unforgiving attitudes comes from God, in answer to prayer, prayer that may be solitary or within the church.

Surprisingly we are often so caught up in our own anger that we ignore God’s wrath that is being revealed against all godlessness and wickedness. (Romans 1: 18) But someone may say, godlessness and wickedness have earned God’s wrath and it is not so with me! The Bible makes it clear that no one is excused. (Romans 2: 1) God’s anger, so vividly portrayed in the early chapters of Romans, is to be feared. Christians only avoid it, if they reflect Jesus in all situations, perhaps in building true friendship where only a sham had existed.

Read: Ephesians 4: 17–32.

JHJ

April 5 Are you an outer court Christian?

My prayer is ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. John 17: 21

The temple in Jerusalem had three sections. First came an outer court where the Gentiles as well as believers could gather and where much of the business and activity of the day went on. Second came the inner court within which was the Holy of Holies, where the Lord's special Presence was found. Here only the High Priest could enter, and then only once a year. Today many people, when challenged, are happy to be counted as being in the 'outer court'. Others openly express their allegiance by regular communal plus private worship, and by public and private involvement in good works. But how many of us seek to enter the Holy of Holies which is now open to us, since the 'curtain of the temple' was 'torn in two from top to bottom' by the Christ of the cross? (Mark 15: 38)

This is what is unique about the Christian religion, this 'at-one-ment' relationship with God the Father and Son. This is the ultimate blasphemy to the Muslims – that anyone should contemplate such a relationship with God. Yet, it is there in the Holy of Holies that we can find the Father heart of God, bottomless in his love for each and every one of us – regardless of gender, race or colour.

Do others see in us that shared love with God the Father and God the Son, breathed into us by God the Holy Spirit, so that they may believe that our heavenly Father sent his Son to restore our relationship with him? Who wants to linger in the outer court when more, so much more, awaits within?

Read: John 17: 20–26.

AJR

'... open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.' John 4: 35

Throughout the world, many churches, both young and established, are waking up to new and exciting spiritual experiences. Yet is this being matched by a corresponding growth in missionary enterprises, both at home and abroad?

A friend of mine, after many tough years as a missionary surgeon in Africa, returned home to be married. Now a widow in her late sixties, she has gone back to her old mission hospital, commenting that the comforts of home, however enjoyable, were 'not essential'. Her recent prayer letter speaks of a workload made increasingly heavy as other staff leave. She mentions dealing with e-mails, the payroll, a thief and a court case (called – and lost – by ex-staff over a pay deal.) In addition, her Bible studies and teaching probably fit more comfortably with our image of 'missionary'.

She goes on: 'In the next few weeks we shall have lost one doctor out of two, and one registered nurse out of three.' (Another missionary was due to leave, but later returned.) 'So, from the four couples, nine children and eight single women here when I arrived we shall be down to one couple and six women! The Lord has in the past moved in such circumstances to lighten the load, but we always wonder ... whether this is his way of showing us the beginning of the end. However, Psalm 25: 12 has been a comfort to me this week: Who, then, is the man that fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him.'

Many dream of working overseas but never get there, whilst others struggle to fulfil our Lord's Great Commission. The reality can be tough – so who will go? Could it be you?

Read: Matthew 28: 16–20.

JGo

***The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?
Psalm 27: 1***

Psalm 27 is born out of the trials of David's early years of harassment and pursuit by Saul and his soldiers. David speaks of evil men (v 2), a whole army surrounding him (vv 3, 6). Sometimes life as a junior in hospital can seem like that. There are seniors whose only purpose seems to be to make as much money as possible for as little effort as possible; sometimes it seems as though the whole system itself is organised in such a way as to frustrate my attempts to live a godly life. Yet such times are needful for us as they were for David, to purge our motives, toughen our resolve and focus our whole being on God himself.

David speaks of false witnesses (v 12). This can be a painful experience in association with those who, from a misguided 'compassion', advocate liberal abortion laws or euthanasia, but can be sharply critical of a principled stand against their views. This is particularly difficult when they are seniors whom in other ways we respect and honour. Yet this conflict is necessary for our maturity; it teaches us to set our hope in God alone (v 5). David's life also raised problems with his parents (v 10) who must have grumbled at his fugitive state. It drove David to pray (v 11), and so must we when the family cannot understand our position, or perhaps object to our giving up a good post to serve Christ, in poverty or overseas.

So what should be our response? These things drove David to seek the Lord (vv 4, 8) and to pray earnestly from the heart (vv 7, 9). There is no other way, and God is training us for victory. The outcome is a sturdy faith to share with others (vv 13, 14).

Read: Psalm 27; 1 Peter 4: 12–19.

BDS

April 8 Your work: walking on holy ground

'... whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.' John 1: 27

It was the feet that did it and to this day I still wonder why. As usual in the Emergency Room at the hospital in Nazareth, the day was busy, hot and long. I was tired and my meagre Arabic was straining me to the limit. There was a growing temptation to treat patients like lumps of meat. Perhaps that's why I only saw the feet. They were like thousands of others I'd seen: olive coloured skin inside leather sandals and caked all over with white dust. Vacantly I looked at the jeans covered in sawdust and cement; just another builder, or perhaps a carpenter. I was aware that he held up an injured hand, and as he awaited my full attention, one foot shifted; the leather strap moved slightly to reveal a paler skin that the sun had missed and sweat had washed.

That did it and I sat back astonished to look at the whole man. What left me speechless was that this black-haired local in his thirties, looking like thousands of others, could have been Christ – and I hadn't bothered to look him in the eye. There were no more lumps of meat that day, only people. Damaged masterpieces, made like the Master and deserving the highest honour and care. That Master once left heaven to wear our shoes in the real world. He has been both hard-pressed doctor and waiting patient.

Going to work today? Step softly, for you are walking on holy ground. Search each face and you will find something of the face of Christ. Treat each one as if you are treating him, and you will receive strength to do your finest work, in his name.

Read: Exodus 3: 5; Matthew 25: 40.

MH

Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part in me.’ John 13: 8

To serve God as a Christian physician! What an opportunity, a unique role, many times a big challenge! We made a decision to serve him to the end, with heart, time and money. I am sure God is satisfied with us! Satisfied until ... ‘He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus replied, “You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” “No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part in me.” ’

Are we ready to be served? It is so easy to be busy. And we are sorry that we cannot find time for the Lord himself, we have so many things to do for him. But Jesus looked Peter in the eye and told him clearly, ‘If you do not let me serve you, you have no part with me.’ Listen friends – No part! If we can’t find time to spend with him, to listen and learn from him, to let him serve our souls – is that a problem? It is more than a problem; this is a question of life or death. ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part in me.’ Jesus showed us how to accept service when he accepted Mary’s anointing him with perfume.

Our Lord is willing to serve us. He died on the cross to serve. Are you ready to be served? Do you separate a time for your dear Lord to wash your feet? Or are you still running with the feeling that you are serving him, while actually losing fellowship with him, and his life?

Read: John 13: 1–17; Colossians 3: 16.

RS

And there, where they were living, I sat among them seven days – overwhelmed. Ezekiel 3: 15

Before preaching to the captives in Babylon, Ezekiel developed sympathetic understanding by putting himself in their place. This is at the heart of any good relationship. How would I like to be one of my own patients? Jesus told us: ‘Do to others what you would have them do to you ...’ (Matthew 7: 12) We need compassion for people, meaning ‘suffering with’ them, as he did. (Matthew 15: 32) To experience ourselves all that we impose on others would make us more understanding, perhaps even more competent, practitioners.

Job’s friends are notorious for their insensitivity to his suffering. ‘I also could speak like you, if you were in my place,’ he protested. ‘But ... comfort from my lips would bring you relief.’ (Job 16: 4, 5) Unselfish thoughtfulness brings encouragement to those facing crisis. Beware the sin of self-centredness! One Christian has a reminder on his desk, simply saying, ‘Others.’

A new and nervous patient feels much as we did as students before an oral examination! We need to have the serenity that inspires trust. A friendly rapport with patients tells them that we are on their side, as we carefully explain procedures, or the pros and cons of treatment. There are many temptations in a working life to be irritable, or critical of others. To bear fruit for him, we need to live each day in close communion with Christ. (John 15: 5) His fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5: 22–23) Like us, fruit takes time to mature! – but our lives will say more than our lips are often free to do.

Christians have no monopoly of loving care, or of high ethical standards, but we do have the resource of a relationship with God. He offers his grace in our constant stresses and strains. The power of prayer is available to us all day.

Read: Colossians 3: 1–17.

AV

Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you.
Colossians 4: 14 (Revised Standard version)

Luke appears in the New Testament as the author of the third gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles. Both the construction and style of writing (especially of his gospel) give evidence of his being a person who had received a good education. They also give evidence of his high esteem for the perfection of Christ's character.

Luke was Paul's companion in several of his missionary activities. Luke's presence is indicated for the first time on Paul's second missionary journey to the Gentiles. (Acts 16:10) As well as being a good writer, Luke was a doctor. But his most outstanding quality was a personal one. It was described by Paul when he mentioned his profession. Not only was he Paul's companion on his journey but he was 'the beloved physician'. We don't have any description, in the Bible, of his medical practice, but we do know that he was truly loved by Paul, and so we may deduce that he was loved by all who knew him.

Meditating today on this very significant quality in Luke's life should lead us to think about our own life and professional practice. We should ask ourselves, 'Are we similarly loved as people and physicians as Luke was? Do we possess the qualities that are needed to be loved by those who know us?'

Prayer: May we, today, live out our Christian life and professional practice in such a way that those who surround us may call us 'beloved physicians'. May this not be for our personal benefit or praise but for God's glory. May he be uplifted and exalted through our daily life and profession. Amen.

Read: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13.

JP

The Sovereign Lord ... awakens my ear to listen like one being taught. Isaiah 50: 4

Knowing how to listen is an art. It was once said that you need a great man if you want to find a good listener. How true this is. It seems so hard to find a good listener in our times. We tend to interrupt each other, we are impatient or want to monopolise the conversation. As doctors we are aware of the enormous importance of patients listening carefully to our words, so that they can correctly understand the diagnosis and the treatment for their physical problems. It is also true that our patients have a tremendous need of being listened to by us.

As we reflect on the importance the Bible gives to listening, we can ask ourselves the following questions: Are we in a process of developing the skill of listening? Do we pay adequate attention to our patients? Are we able to detect their emotions as they speak? Are we really interested in them, and as a consequence, willing to hear them?

Here are some suggestions that may help us learn the art of listening – Get rid of the ego. Get rid of defence mechanisms. Value the person's feelings even though we may disagree with what he or she says. Pay auditory attention and control our body language. Accept the person as he or she is. Listen without being judgmental. And then we can pray for a desire to be wise as we listen, to listen like one being taught, so that our Lord can improve our Christian service and practice.

Let us make King Solomon's prayer our own: '*So give your servant a discerning heart ... to distinguish between right and wrong.*' (*1 Kings 3: 9*)

Read: Isaiah 50: 4–10; James 1: 19–27.

JP

'Now remain in my love.' John 15: 9

After a month back in hospital, the pressures are building up again: study, exams, ward rounds, inter-personal relationships. Many days start with an early ward round, then theatre, outpatients, lectures, a late tutorial and home for food, study and bed with only a few minutes left to read the Bible before falling asleep. Where does God fit in to this? Is the idea of abiding in Christ totally unrealistic? I do try, but seem to fail miserably.

Psalm 139 encourages us that, wherever we are, God is there. We could not get away from him even if we wanted to. The New Testament is also full of encouragement. Not only is God with us but, by his Holy Spirit, he dwells within us. Just try rushing from the house and forgetting your liver! It can't be done, because it stays safely inside you. So, through Christ, the Holy Spirit is inside us and we cannot forget to take him with us.

As he is so close, why does God frequently seem so distant? Could it be that the day passes without our speaking to him? My worst postings as a student have been when the team has totally ignored me. Yet that is sometimes exactly what we do with God, forcing him to wait for a time that is more convenient for us. The problem is not on God's side. He sticks with us and is more than willing to communicate. Busyness needn't be a contraindication to intimacy with God. Our schedules may need to change, which will require humility, obedience and perseverance, but to walk and talk with him as we go through each day is the calling and delight of all his children.

Read: Luke 10: 38–42; John 14: 15–23; Philippians 3: 7–14.

SLa

The Lord will guide you always ... Isaiah 58: 11

All of us have to make choices. Whereas some turn to star-charts, believers refer to God's word. Here are principles and promises to guide and assure us. What are these principles? First, we must be willing to do what God says is right. Talking and praying things over with a more mature Christian can help. Commonsense (including assessing pros and cons) or a combination of circumstances may alert us to a particular possibility, then the Holy Spirit, perhaps through our daily Bible reading, gives another nudge in that direction. There comes a time to try the door, trusting that it will stay closed if not right or, should it open on to a disappointing scenario, that God will use this for good, both spiritually and professionally, for us and for others.

There may well be times when we think that we've made a mistake (or that God has done so). Yet once our lives have been given into God's care, the rock beneath is to trust that he will work in everything for good. (Romans 8: 28) His ways are not our ways. (Isaiah 55: 8) He looks for our faithfulness more than our fame.

Joseph could scarcely have thought that being assaulted, sold into exile and slavery, falsely accused, and then for years forgotten in prison, was 'being guided'. No doubt some of the things that were done to him were contrary to God's will, yet he wonderfully sustained Joseph and overruled in his affairs to appoint him as saviour of Israel – and also as Prime Minister of Egypt. Looking back, and addressing the very men who had precipitated this trail of apparent disaster, Joseph said, 'God intended it for good.' (Genesis 50: 20) However rough their road, many others of God's children (including the writer!) have also been led to that conclusion.

Read: Psalm 37: 5; Genesis 37: 16–28; 45: 1–11.

JGo

'I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you.' Ephesians 1: 18

The perspective, vision or view from the deck of a ship is very different from that seen from the mast of the same ship. Without the big picture it is easy to lose our way. I realised this after I had been on my own at home for several days. I had become immersed in the business of my immediate circumstances, with little recognition of the bigger domestic and social picture. I had lost perspective.

When perspective is lost, crisis always seems imminent. Life quickly becomes devoid of humour and joy. At these times, it is necessary to step back and realise what truly matters, to get a view from the mast. Common consequences of this lost perspective are that I don't see the needs of others around me, and I don't see God working in my life.

As followers of Jesus we should be seeking God's perspective. When we see life through the grid of God's amazing love and his wonderful plan, we understand what really matters. Paul prayed for this kind of perspective for the Ephesians when he wrote, 'I ask – ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the glory of God – to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing Him personally, your eyes focussed and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is He is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for Christians, oh, the utter extravagance of His work in us who trust Him – endless energy, boundless strength.' (Ephesians 1: 18–19 *The Message*) Let us climb the mast of the ship of faith, to see life from God's perspective!

Read: Ephesians 1: 3–22.

RDS

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ ... Mark 1: 1

Mark was probably the son of a widowed mother when he became involved with Jesus. When Jesus was arrested, it is possible that it was Mark who escaped capture but lost his cloak and had to run away naked. (Mark 14: 51) Later, he was taken by his influential uncle Barnabas, with Paul, on an important preaching tour. Some weeks into the journey, Mark left them for some reason and returned to Jerusalem. When planning the next tour, Paul disagreed with Barnabas over taking Mark. This difference of opinion resulted in the two great leaders going their separate ways.

If you were on a selection board looking at Mark's *curriculum vitae*, would you have given him a second chance after such failure, or would you focus on the negative and play safe? Paul was later to write to the church in Philippi of his confidence 'that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.' (Philippians 1: 6) He must have seen this truth being slowly worked out in Mark's life, as towards the end of his life, when a prisoner in Rome, Paul wrote to Timothy, 'Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is helpful to me in my ministry.' (2 Timothy 4: 11) Mark went on to record the teachings of the Lord Jesus as passed on by the apostle Peter. This turned out to be the first of the gospel narratives, resulting in a cascade of blessing to innumerable people.

Even severe failure does not need to be permanent. God's grace is infinitely greater than our inadequacies, as Paul himself was told by Christ: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' (2 Corinthians 12: 9)

Read: Acts 15: 36–51; 1 John 1:–2: 2.

JD

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you and watch over you. Psalm 32: 8*

As doctors and students we know well how important it is for excellence in our education and subsequent practice, to follow some good example, a tutor, someone who can mentor us. Even as experienced practitioners we long for someone we can trust in sharing our inner conflicts and dilemmas. There are times in our daily practice when we feel so desperately alone, facing problems which call for prompt response. What makes us feel alone and abandoned, however, is not the fact of being left alone and abandoned. It is rather the reluctance to believe the fact of being constantly in the very focus of God's love and attention.

I love God's ophthalmology! 'I will watch over you', or, as the Polish translation puts it, 'My eye will rest upon you'. I like that. When God says he 'will', he really does mean what he says. He will focus and fix his eye, his macula upon you. You are the central point of his attention. Everything around you is for him less important than you are. And this applies to every child of God, as he can focus his eye upon every one of us simultaneously.

So, if in the middle of your trials and problems you believe your God cannot lie, put your trust in Psalm 32: 8. If you doubt he is with you with his very own eye upon you, doubt your doubts and believe the Word of God who cannot lie. He is far more reliable than your doubts. The Lord is with you now wherever you are. He is there to embrace you. He is there to love, instruct, teach and counsel you and show you the way ahead. He is the 'Wonderful Counsellor'.

Read: Deuteronomy 32: 10; Isaiah 9: 6; Luke 6: 38.

JGrz

My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. Psalm 38: 7

The pain was intense. As yet another wave of it convulsed my body, I hammered my fists into the pillow and cried out ‘What more do you want from me?’ It had not been a good week. At a clinical meeting we had discussed removing a patient from our care because he had assaulted one of my colleagues. The patient had come to me claiming a degree of provocation, and when the matter was later discussed I mentioned the patient’s plea. The decision, with which I agreed having heard the whole story, was that he be removed. End of story – or so I thought.

However, my colleague and at least one other person at the meeting had thought that in siding with the patient I was implying my colleague was lying! Quite correctly, he faced me about it swiftly but I was feeling pretty bruised by it all, and angry! I was not in a good spiritual state to face an acute illness. The physical pain reduced me to a crumpled heap but, as I waited for the ambulance, it was the pain of misunderstanding and unresolved conflict with a valued friend and colleague that really made me shout to God as I did.

Gradually I became aware that, in the agony of physical pain, God was enabling me to release the emotional hurt of the incident I have described, and others, that had been adversely affecting my Christian witness for months. Psalm 38 reminds us of the link between physical and spiritual pain. The psalmist, too, had to face up to his sin and his need for God’s help. Pain can be God’s means of rousing us from spiritual torpor. As I began to recover, I felt God answer my desperate cry of ‘What more ...?’ with one challenging word ‘Everything’!

Read: Psalm 38.

TS

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. Genesis 50: 20

The story of Joseph shows God over-ruling the evil intent of humankind, and bringing about his good purpose in history. What must it have been like for Joseph? Sold as a slave to Egypt, rising to responsibility in Potiphar's house, disgraced because he refused to be sexually compromised, wrongfully imprisoned for two years, and then forgotten by Pharaoh's wine taster! It was a roller-coaster of failure and success. What was God doing? In the event the survival of his whole family and the nation of Israel hinged on his experiences.

The cross and resurrection expand this theme wonderfully. The whole force of malevolence was concentrated on Jesus. Crucifixion followed betrayal, denial, a false trial and flogging. Even God, it appeared, had forsaken him. Evil seemingly triumphed and his followers were shattered and scattered, their hopes destroyed, until the third day, when God showed that good overcomes. Humankind was saved by what seemed a ghastly mistake.

To this very day evil continues to challenge God, and down through the years countless martyrs and heroes of the faith have suffered or died at the hands of unbelievers. Many Christian communities have been destroyed. For some, God seems far away, having forgotten them. But the resurrection of Christ points beyond this life, full of riddles and seeming failures, to the next. We live for that great day when God's purposes will be fulfilled, when he will come to judge the nations. On that day we will be so lost in the wonder of his love that our present trials will seem as nothing. On that day good will triumph over evil. On that day we will join peoples from every tribe and tongue, singing of his salvation with joy and praise. In the meantime God is working out his purposes even when things go wrong for us. He does not make mistakes!

Read: Romans 8: 18–27; Revelation 7: 9–17.

AG

Therefore encourage each other with these words.
1 Thessalonians 4: 18

Sometimes, one pauses to reflect when confronted by death, what may it be like for me? From one point of view, we have passed this way before. Physical life began at conception, and for about 40 weeks in the uterus there was a formative period before further physical, and possibly spiritual, change during about 75 years in the world. We do not remember life in the womb!

Spiritual birth occurred when the Holy Spirit regenerated us. We acquired spiritual eyes to clearly see God and this world as he sees it – beautiful, material, passing, sinful. And we were given spiritual ears to hear the Spirit and the voice of Jesus speaking into our souls. We knew when God was near, recognising his presence and, with this understanding and insight given to us, we came to know the mind of Christ, doing those things pleasing to him. But, the possibility for spiritual maturation in the world ends in death, when those who walk with Jesus pass to a new place prepared for them – heaven! Just as when we were in the uterus we had no idea of what life in the world would be like, so now we have little idea of what heaven will be like.

But pushing the idea a little further, there's another way of being born – by Caesarian Section, when the baby is suddenly taken from the womb. So perhaps during our time on earth the Lord will return. 'After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.' (1 Thessalonians 4: 17)

As we meditate today, let us see life on earth as a prelude to something marvellous in heaven, as life in the womb was a prelude to life on earth.

Read: 1 Corinthians 15: 35–58.

ROS

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy.
Philippians 1: 4

To pray with joy implies two actions, to pray and to feel joy. To pray with joy describes a situation where these two actions come together and form an inspiring experience. This is the way in which a man or a woman unfolds and has an encounter with God with unforeseeable consequences.

When I pray I am looking for something beyond everything I know. I penetrate mystery with my thoughts. When I pray, my own human thoughts come to a halt in my conscious mind because my conscious mind depends on my senses. When I pray I go beyond the senses and I penetrate the essence of all things ... the very essence of life itself. I am in contact with God's power of creation. At that point unpredictable things start to happen in me because God the Creator indwells me and as a result the Holy Spirit works in my whole being.

When I pray with joy a feeling of optimism permeates my whole being. I experience a feeling that nothing physical can stop me. This happiness expands all my possibilities and it awakens all my innermost capacity to enjoy life. To pray with joy is to experience a measure of transformation into that disturbing and indescribable image of God that dwells in me. When I pray with joy I become one with the Almighty and his creation. I become part of a wonderful dance or celebration of God's grace and the marvel of being part of his family. I respond to his saying, 'Ask, and it will be given you.'

(Matthew 7: 7) As William Cowper wrote:

*'Here may we prove the power of prayer,
To strengthen faith and sweeten care,
To teach our faint desires to rise,
And bring all heaven before our eyes.'*

'Thank you, Lord, for prayer.'

Read: 2 Corinthians 5: 7–19; Ephesians 1: 15–23.

CH

'I have told you many things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.' John 16: 3

'Shalom' was the word with which the people of Israel greeted each other. It was much more than a word of greeting. Shalom included the desire for a blessing from God – giving peace, well-being, integrity, healing and security. Shalom was associated with the Jewish concept of health, the health of the whole being of a person. To be healthy was to be able to enjoy God's favour with a feeling of abundance and fullness that 'overflows'. (Psalm 23: 5) It is that feeling of completeness or accomplishment that we experience on occasions. In the New Testament, Jesus preaches to all mankind the Gospel of Shalom – salvation, healing and eternal life.

I often ask myself if we, as doctors, can share with our patients the shalom we ourselves receive from God. I believe it is possible and that we can do it by sharing our personal experience with Jesus Christ, and allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us. We can also impart the blessing of shalom as we relate to our patients with deep respect and consideration, sensitive to their pain. Such an attitude will enable us to transmit the truth that there is a Great Physician who can not only give healing to the sick, but can also transform life and lives through his peace, his shalom. (Luke 1: 79)

Prayer: 'Dear Father, teach us how to live out the practice of our profession in such a way that we may not only bring relief and healing to our patients but also transmit that there is a much deeper and transcendent healing to be found, shalom, of which Jesus is the source. In his name. Amen.'

Read: Proverbs 3: 13–17; Luke 1: 69–79.

RZ

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name ... so that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me ... to let the world know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17: 11, 22, 23

Most of us think we are pretty good at serving. At the 1998 ICMDA Congress in Durban, the Holy Spirit asked us through a medical student, ‘Yes, I know that you will serve me, but do you really love me?’ My mind went back to our Lord’s three-fold question to Peter, ‘Do you love me?’ Our Lord did not question Peter’s belief in him, nor that of the others. What Jesus was concerned about was their love-relationship with him, not what they would or would not do for him.

For doctors and dentists, there is usually more than a little pride in our devotion to our work, a devotion in which Christ may be excluded, or at least not be paramount. There has to be something about the quality of our work, and how we do it, which draws out appreciation of Christ, away from us. (Matthew 5: 16)

Perhaps one reason for any less-than-desirable standard of love is, as missionary doctor Tracy Goen from Nigeria put it, ‘An ischaemia of time with the Lord – a few missed minutes of prayer or quiet times turn into a few hours that turn into a few days. Before it is realised, there has been an insidious deficiency of spiritual nourishment – an ischaemia of the life-giving relationship with God.’ Can we go for days without speaking to our spouse or children whom we love?

Prayer: ‘Lord of my life, let not my love of life ever exceed my love of you, who so loves me.’

Read: Psalm 63; Lamentations 3: 22–26.

AJR

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him ... Romans 8: 28

The inherent healing processes of the body are designed and given by God to humankind; to the just and the unjust; to those who pray and those who do not. God does not normally micro-manage natural law.

My godly father died when aged 43, in India, where he was a missionary. He died of malaria. I was 15 years old and in England for schooling when the telegram arrived. I was an earnest Christian and had not been troubled by doubt until then. But then my pastor and family tried to comfort me by quoting Romans 8: 28 (from the old King James version) saying that this must be one of 'all things' that work for good to those who love God. God must have wanted my father to die.

I knew that malaria was carried by mosquito bites, but to think that God directed a mosquito to kill my father was more than I could bear. It was dear F. F. Bruce who restored my faith by pointing out that Romans 8: 28 should not be translated with 'All things' as the subject of the verb 'works for good'. 'God' was the subject, and the word 'IN' had to be inserted: 'IN all things [that happen] God works with those who love him, for good.'

Speaking about the tower of Siloam, which fell and killed the eighteen people in its path, Jesus said that people were wrong to look upon those deaths as punishment. God had not pushed that tower over. We might refer to that accident as 'natural law'.

The message was clear. Things happen. God works with us to bring good out of them.

Read: Luke 13: 1–5.

PBra

April 25 The place of prayer in healing (1)

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him ... James 5: 14

There are three areas of law within which we are unavoidably confined on earth – natural law, moral or behavioural law, and spiritual law.

Natural law includes the way in which the body functions and heals itself. This is mostly predictable and is the field of somatic medicine. In India, Public Health was concerned mostly with control of vectors of disease and vaccines. Overwhelmingly it dealt with natural law.

With moral or behavioural law, outcomes are affected by our emotions and our choices. In the USA, Public Health conferences major on alcoholism, drug addiction, obesity, sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS and high stress. Most of these result from personal choices and, for the Christian, prayer is a powerful instrument for health because it encourages moral, healthy choices.

Spiritual law concerns our relationship with God. We are created ‘in his image’ and our physical brain, or mind, is the instrument by which our spirit controls our body. When we pray for healing we may be thinking of physical pains or symptoms. When God hears our prayers, he may look first at some anger or bitterness that is affecting the quality of our life.

The Biblical concept of ‘shalom’ means completeness, soundness and wellbeing – the peace of living in obedience to God. (Isaiah 48: 18–19, 22) This is what leads to balance and inner health.

*Hence, all fears and sadness,
For the Lord of gladness,
Jesus, enters in;
Those who love the Father,
Though the storms may gather,
Still have peace within;
Yes, whate'er I here must bear,
Still in thee lies purest pleasure,
Jesu, priceless treasure.*
*Johann Franck (1618–77),
tr. by Catherine Winkworth (1829–78)*

Read: Mark 6: 1–6.

PBra

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. James 5: 13–16

This passage is often thought of as a prayer for healing, and we think of gallbladder disease or a heart attack. Careful study shows that it is primarily a prayer for the spirit, though recognising the linkage with physical disease.

James 5: 13 gives an appropriate response to trouble and joy – prayer on the one hand and praise on the other. In verse 14, the word used for ‘sick’ is ‘asthenei’, meaning ‘weak’. In verse 15, James uses a different word, ‘kamnonta’ – only found elsewhere in Hebrews 12: 3 where it means ‘weary’ – worn down through overwork or prolonged stress. In verse 14, speaking of ‘anointing with oil’, he uses ‘aleipsantes’, a general word commonly used socially, where the oil is used in welcome to a party, rather than in the sacramental sense of ‘chrio’.

Thus, when James exhorts the sick person to call for the elders of the church to pray over him, he is primarily thinking of prayer as encouragement for those worn down with illness, the gentle touch of ‘healing hands’, the supportive fellowship of the church, the gift of love that comes through touch. Christian doctors are privileged to practise a kind of healing which somatic medicine cannot alone achieve. We thereby attend to the needs of the whole person: spirit, mind and body.

Read: Proverbs 4: 20–27; Jeremiah 17: 14.

PBra

'I am the vine; you are the branches.' John 15: 5

One summer we visited a vineyard and the winegrower explained to us all the ins and outs of viniculture. We realised that not only doctors have long working hours! Not only patients – but also vines can keep you busy! Branches are bent and fixed to long wires so that they stretch out to catch as much sunlight as possible. Leaves and shoots have to be cut at various intervals to encourage fruiting. It is not only the dead branches which are cut away; pruning involves also the cutting away of living twigs and leaves. But it is the fruit that counts. If you just let the vines grow, the fruit would become less and less.

The Lord Jesus compared himself with a vine and us as the branches. We also should bear fruit in our lives, and therefore God prunes us. We probably will agree with the removal of dead branches in our lives, although it is amazing how often we want to keep them. His pruning may also include the cutting of living parts. It may include the cutting away of things which we ourselves do not think are wrong or which, in themselves, may not be wrong. But such pruning is necessary in his eyes because his goal is the fruit. It may hurt. It probably does. We may not understand, but he is not an enemy. An enemy destroys, but he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and knows what he is doing. His purpose is fruit, the love he and Jesus have given to us and the world.

Do we realise that when we pray for spiritual growth and for fruit in our lives this may involve pruning? As in our profession, God's surgery has a purpose.

Read: John 15: 1–17; Galatians 5: 22–26.

RP

*I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corner
I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you
and have not rejected you. Isaiah 41: 9*

As well as using our professional practice for healing, God also wants us to be channels for at least three other aspects of his blessing:

For encouragement. ‘My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love.’ (Colossians 2: 2) A word of encouragement goes far! Yet how slow we often are to give it. Sometimes we allow ourselves to get so wrapped up in reaching our diagnosis that we forget to encourage, and comfort too, those we work with and those we serve.

For God’s word. ‘We own our lips – who is our master?’ (Psalm 12: 4) Have we offered our lips to the Master so that he can fill them with his message of salvation? How often do patients come into contact with us and leave without hearing his voice or word through us?

For joy. ‘I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.’ (John 15: 11) People long to hear the joy of the Lord, a permanent joy, one that results in strength and power. How often we remain silent and keep the joy God gives us to ourselves.

To be good channels we must be clean and willing and we ourselves must be fully satisfied in him. Only then will our function be authentic and God will be able to fully use us.

Prayer: ‘Father, may I not just limit my practice to the scientific field. Purify me, and may a river of living water flow through me, pouring out encouragement, joy, love and your word of salvation.’

Read: John 4: 7–26.

BA

When you pray, go into your room, close the door ... and do not keep on babbling ... Matthew 6: 6–7

The Lord gave us an example of how to pray, which today is known as the Lord's Prayer. And yet, perhaps more than any other prayer, it is the one we are most likely to 'babble', repeating the words automatically. It is not that familiarity breeds contempt here, but rather that familiarity dulls our soul in conversation with our Father. Familiarity with the words – not their meaning, relevance or inherent worth – enables the mind to wander.

The 'wandering mind' syndrome of prayer is a state which I confess that I often find myself in. Usually I trigger the syndrome. Instead of the daily conversation with my heavenly Father being the first and foremost activity of the day, the burdens of the day are that I do just a few little things first – 'wash the breakfast dishes', 'collect the paper', 'check my e-mails' ... Maybe by then it is too late and I must be off. The net result is that before I have spent time with him, my mind is already full of the 'this' and 'that' of the day. Better to seek him first, behind a closed door, and let the rest of the day be directed by him who knows what we need before we ask.

And so I need to pray, 'Free us Lord, in your compassion from whatever cares hinder the worship of you, and teach us to seek the kingdom and its righteousness in accordance with your holy commandments that bring life.' (Syrian Orthodox Daily Office) Then we may adore him, 'That means ... to find peace in the incorruptible, to be absorbed in defined immensity ... and to give one's deepest to that whose depth has no end' (Teilhard de Chardin).

Read: Luke 11: 1–13; Psalm 5: 1–3.

AJR

The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Deuteronomy 31: 8

I did not know how to comfort a family whose newly born baby had a fatal chromosome irregularity. They were a Christian family, but the father never came to church. The sick baby was a deep spiritual challenge for them, but they wanted him to be lovingly cared for by the family, and die at home. I talked with the mother about the meaning of life, and that God has assigned a task for all of us to fulfil. But what was God's mission in life for this innocent baby? I was puzzled, but the words of God strengthened me that he himself would go before me. The father seemed like an outsider, he could not understand God's hand on the baby's condition.

One day, when for the third time the mother's support had kept the baby from dying, she could take no more, and was standing by her nearly-dead loved one in tears. Then the father went down on his knees, and was able to save the baby's life. When I arrived later there was a perceptible happiness and peace in the atmosphere. The father told me he had resuscitated his baby, and this was the first time he had spoken of him as his own child. Then I knew that God would soon take the baby. He had fulfilled his hard mission. The father had found his way to God.

Five days later he died. We spent the night together in prayer, singing and reading from the Bible. I received this wonderful gift from God – that I could be with this family, and encourage them, and tell them that God is with us ... in our distresses too.

Read: Deuteronomy 31: 7–8; John 14: 1–6.

AHe

MAY

For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. 2 Chronicles 16: 9.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.
James 4: 10

John's vision, recorded in Revelation 5, paints a vivid picture of the magnificence, greatness and worthiness of Jesus Christ. There we see him exalted, seated at the right hand of God the Father, where he still bears the unhealed wounds of his crucifixion. Yet it was this same Jesus who completely humbled himself, and made himself of no reputation in the eyes of the world, becoming a slave to men, and dying a criminal's death. (Philippians 2: 7–8)

As members of the healthcare profession society affords us many privileges. We have benefited from educational opportunities; people turn to us in their need and entrust us with the most intimate details of their lives. We are given the knowledge, skill and ability to heal and allay suffering. All this brings us status in the world and enhances our own feelings of self-worth. Yet God expects us to exercise the humility of Christ, our Master.

Self-righteousness in our work, together with pride and ambition, can be tremendous stumbling blocks, and our hearts may be easily hardened by them. We walk a dangerous path. Satan holds up to us worldly success, reputation and comfort, and he often acts in very subtle ways to destroy our relationship with God. If we accept what Satan offers us, we are denying Christ and his perfect example. Righteousness comes from God alone on the basis of faith. (Philippians 3: 9) Only through faith in the living God will we be truly exalted.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for your life and sacrifice. Work in me, Lord, exposing any false pride or self-righteousness to which I may be clinging, and create in me the same humility that you displayed.

Read: Matthew 23: 1–12; Philippians 3: 7–11; Revelation 5.

GBen

(Adapted from *The Doctor's Life Support* 1994)

... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.
Philippians 4: 11

Contentment is not complacency. Paul was writing from prison, scarcely his original plan, but there he had found peace which surpassed all understanding. (Philippians 4: 7) Contentment came not from his circumstances, but from the nearness of the Lord. What about us? Are we content to be given inconvenient extra duties, or to find someone else preferred for promotion? Perhaps the clinic is overbooked, the rush hour terrible and the meal spoilt – and then the phone goes again. Most of us do not radiate contentment at such times. For our comfort, Paul did say that he had *learned* to be content. Another letter lists some of his lessons. (2 Corinthians 4: 8–11) It can be true, even for us lowlier mortals, that the times of greatest pressure are when we learn to lean back on our Lord's purposes and strength. A friend calls this 'relaxing into the disaster', there to find his help, peace and contentment.

One night, a post office was raided by masked men demanding money. As the safe was timed to stay shut until morning, captors and captives waited together all night. Later, I was told by a Christian friend involved how, although shaking with fear, she had experienced the real presence and joy of the Lord. She added, 'I now understand why the martyrs started singing when led out to die. I felt like singing myself.' Most of us have relatively feeble causes for being discontented. We daily need to practise the presence of God, both as the silent witness of our reactions and as the one willing to transform them. Though my friend's exhilaration may not be a universal experience, severe pressure is not incompatible with contentment and even joy. The bonus comes when others ask to be directed to the source.

Read: 1 Timothy 6: 6–16.

JGo

Those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish.
Isaiah 41: 11

A medical missionary, home on furlough, told his home church that while he had been serving in a small field hospital in Africa he was required, every two weeks, to make a two-day trip by bicycle through the jungle to collect money from a bank, and purchase medicine and supplies. On one of these journeys he had seen two men fighting. One was seriously injured. He treated the injured man, witnessing to him about Jesus Christ. He continued on his journey and arrived home without further incident.

Two weeks later, he repeated the journey. On arriving in the city, he saw the same young man he had treated two weeks earlier. The man told him that on the previous occasion he and some friends had followed the missionary back into the jungle, knowing he would camp overnight, and intending to kill him and take his money and drugs. But just as they were about to attack they saw 26 armed guards standing around him. The missionary laughed at the young man for he had been alone in that jungle camp. However, the young man persisted in his story, saying that the guards had also been seen by his five friends and, because of them, they had been afraid to attack.

At this point, one of the men in the church jumped to his feet and interrupted the speaker, telling him that he could give the exact day when these things had happened. He had been about to play golf when he felt the Lord leading him to pray for that particular missionary. The feeling was so strong and so urgent that he had immediately called together 25 men from the church to pray!

Are we always open to God's promptings to pray? Prayer is the slender nerve that can move the muscles of omnipotence.

Read: Isaiah 41: 8–16.

JVM

(Adapted from *Patterns for Life* 1996)

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8: 38–39

I watched mesmerised as the young nurse led her patient to the Lord. I had known the man for a long time and had been rebuffed every time I tried to share the Gospel with him. He had gone down with full-blown AIDS and it was only a matter of time. The health personnel in the high cost hospital had done the best they could for him. Unfortunately he was too far gone to respond to any medical treatment. The nurse had something more to offer. A drug more potent than anything that came out of a medicine bottle, the love she had for the man as she talked to him about the great physician, transmitted itself to his innermost being. He desperately longed for something to hold on to, something that neither AIDS nor death could touch. He found this in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those who had the privilege of being with him when he eventually went home to glory gave a testimony of how peaceful and rested he looked, despite the ravages of his illness. He was healed indeed and he was a powerful witness to the gospel of Christ.

Do you as a health worker or counsellor transmit love that will not let go in the way you care for your patients? His loving kindness is better than life and knowing him is having eternal life. Let us be sure that we show Jesus' love to our patients today, and always, as we care for them.

Read: 1 Corinthians 13.

NK

(Adapted from *Patterns for Life* 1996)

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6: 8

On graduation from medical school, and praying that God would help me to be a good doctor, I found this verse and decided to make it my own. My adopted heart language is Thai, which translates the phrase ‘O man’ with a term of warmth and affection. It speaks of our unique responsibility and privilege, not only in having horizontal relationships with others but in the vertical one with the eternal God, Lord of heaven and earth.

The first two requirements, justice and mercy, concern our horizontal relationships. Like a pair of hands, one speaks of integrity and truthfulness, the other of our heart attitude towards others. ‘To love mercy’ is the Hebrew word most often used when describing God’s own loving kindness. We need this ‘*agape*’ love to sustain relationships with others. Human warmth and goodwill are not always enough. So often we are unbalanced. Sometimes we speak truth without love, or in the name of love fail to confront issues with truth. Only in Jesus Christ, the man filled with both grace and truth, were these two held in perfect balance. (John 1: 14)

The last part of our verse deals with our daily walk with God. In our professional lives, we are encouraged to be self-confident, assertive leaders. God’s way has always been the path of humility. The one he esteems is the one with a humble and contrite spirit, who trembles at his word. (Isaiah 66: 2)

In spite of many failures, I have tried to live my life by Micah 6: 8. Will you, too, take it and run with it, making it your own?

Read: Philippians 2: 1–11; Psalm 15.

RJH

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that sinful nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. Romans 8: 5

What is your world view? How have you arrived at this and how does it reflect the way you live? Does it affect our daily lives as we seek to honour our Lord in our ‘little world’? Does this – or does this not – have anything to do with Christian living and our witness in our world?

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, talks of two world views, two mind sets – the world’s and the Spirit’s. Have you ever asked what does the Spirit desire for us, for you, for me? What does the Spirit desire? The Spirit desires fruit. He desires to see our minds set on these fruits. The Holy Spirit desires to have our minds and hearts focussed on love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self control. If our mind set is on these fruits which the Spirit desperately desires for us, he will find a way to work their wonders in our life to his glory and to Christ’s glory. Remember daily to let this mind of Christ be in you.

Paul writes to many churches these lines: ‘Whatever you do, whether in (thought), word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’ (Colossians 3: 17) And, ‘Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.’ (Philippians 4: 8)

Read: Romans 8: 1–11.

MCo

... you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. 2 Peter 1: 4

Are you nervous when you go to the dentist? I'm sure we all are to some extent! As a dentist, I find that patients divide into three categories. There is the *obstinate*, often a child who refuses to open his mouth, the *ashamed*, conscious of dental neglect, and the *trusting*, relaxed and confident in the dentist and willing to 'open wide'.

As a Christian practitioner, I see how our behaviour as patients parallels our reaction to God. Many people are *obstinate*, wanting to go their own way. 'Why should I give my life to God? Isn't he a kill-joy, ready to make me miserable?' Many are *ashamed*. 'If God said "Open wide" to me, he'd see those things that I prefer to keep hidden. I would have to confess my shortcomings.' The third category is of those willing to put themselves into the hands of God, *trusting* him to work in them to put their lives right.

Peter reminds us that the corruption that is in the world is caused by sinful desires. (2 Peter 1: 4) The Greek word for 'corruption' could be translated 'decay'. Decay in a tooth is like the corrupt society around us – the moral landslide of these days, the breakdown of relationships in the home or workplace, as well as in politics and international affairs.

Self-centredness produces still more sinfulness. How much we need to fix our thoughts on Jesus. (Hebrews 3: 1) He is the only one who can keep us from being infected by the moral decay in the world about us.

*From prayer that asks that I may be
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee,
From fearing when I should aspire,
From faltering when I should climb higher
From silken self, O Captain, free
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.*

Amy Carmichael

Read: Psalm 51: 1–12.

AV

And now dear children continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. 1 John 2: 28

Sometimes, as we eat a sweet, it causes a twinge of toothache and warns us about decay. Similarly when we do a wrong act, we get a twinge of conscience. What should we do? Just as we would make a dental appointment, so we should seek the Lord. God says, ‘Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.’ (Psalm 81: 10) Of course, this does not refer to dentistry! – but God is inviting his people to be open to him so that he can give them blessings to enjoy.

Thus we need to be open to God, confessing our need of him to cleanse away the decay in our lives. He is able to give the amazing gift of forgiveness because Jesus died in our place, bearing the punishment we deserve. Just as the dentist can get rid of the cavity and fill it to become a useful, functioning tooth, so God can make our lives right with him, filled with his grace and useful in his service.

I have a poster that shows the stages in the growth of decay. It is entitled, ‘The danger of neglect – don’t wait until it hurts!’ The Bible gives a similar warning about our urgent spiritual need: ‘How shall we escape, if we ignore such a great salvation?’ (Hebrews 2: 3)

I hope you will open wide to your dentist, but even more importantly that you will open wide to God, receptive to all the loving kindness he longs to give you.

*O Jesus, Thou art standing
Outside a fast closed door.
In lowly patience waiting
To pass the threshold o'er.
Shame on us, Christian brothers,
His name and sign to bear,
O shame, thrice shame, upon us,
To keep Him standing there!*

William W How (1823–97)

Read: Joshua 24: 14–24.

'Could this be the Christ?' John 4: 29

The prophet Elijah is fleeing. (1 Kings 19: 33) He has just been instrumental in drawing out a first clear confession of the uniqueness of the Lord God of Israel from others. Now he has provoked the anger of a powerful, demonic queen who threatens to kill him. In order to call Elijah back on duty, God sends him to Horeb where he speaks to him, not in the storm or earthquake, but in a still, small voice. Elijah must move outside his own cultural and religious circle and speak the words of God.

Once it was only missionaries who had this experience. Now any of us is likely to confront people presenting with health problems, but also some with bewildering ethnic and spiritual differences. In their questioning eyes you may sense a shy, unformed question. Your services to those in need are to be without any prejudice of race, creed or sex, but you may also be forbidden, as a health worker, to further the propagation of your faith. Yet as a Christ-believer, you will at least have a desire to share him with others.

How did Jesus handle such situations? Three are recorded for us; with a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15: 21–28), a religious leader (John 3: 1–21) and a Samaritan woman (John 4: 1–42). How careful he was, yet how clearly he understood their particular needs. We are well advised to listen, to understand and then to speak, carefully and gently, as he did. More questions and answers may follow, and the seed may bear fruit years later. Only God knows.

*Love through me, Love of God,
Make me like Thy clear air
Through which unhindered, colours pass
As though it were not there.*

Amy Carmichael

Read: the passages cited.

JGA

They make ready their tongue like a bow, to shoot lies; it is not by truth that they triumph in the land. Jeremiah 9: 3

A student friend and I were looking for accommodation in London before the start of our second year at university. We planned to do this on a motorbike. My friend had failed his driving test during the summer holidays, but in spite of this, we decided to go ahead. I was on the pillion, on a bike with no L plates, when a policeman on embassy guard sauntered into the road and held up his hand. He asked my friend if he had a full driving licence. It would have been the easiest thing to lie and drive on. But we replied honestly, feeling the weight of authority behind the uniform. We were both charged and fined, but it was over.

It is as natural to lie as it is for ducks to take to water! We lie to get out of trouble, to hide something we don't want others to know, to appear clever, to gain a position of power or prestige and for many other reasons. But very often we are found out, losing much more than the lie was intended to gain. People come to distrust us, and reputations plummet!

But fear of being found out is not the most important reason for refusing to tell lies. There is a holy God in heaven, hearing our every word. He is our judge and heaven the witness of all that we say. Let us pray that the words that come from our mouths and the thoughts in our hearts may always be acceptable to God, who is our rock and redeemer. That acceptability to God is the thing that really matters!

Read: Jeremiah 8: 21–9: 6; Proverbs 14: 12.

Anon

(Adapted from *Patterns for Life* 1996)

'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.' Matthew 6: 14

The sacrifice of Christ, prompted by love, is the ground of forgiveness. His love so passes our understanding that many long-faced Christians find it hard to believe their sins are really forgiven. Yet his forgiveness is limitless, infinite and complete, casting our sins 'into the depths of the sea.' (Micah 7: 19) What about our own forgiveness towards others? Is that, too, limitless, infinite and complete? Or do we claim to 'forgive but not forget'? Our loving heavenly Father has cast our sins into the deepest depths, but we throw those of others into the shallowest water, ready to be retrieved and recycled.

Our Lord told us that unless we forgive others, the Father will not forgive us. (Matthew 6: 15) No wonder so many of us believe ourselves to be unforgiven; we remain disqualified by an unforgiving spirit towards others. Failure to let go of past hurts has been shown to impair health, causing depression, or peptic ulcers. For such conditions, forgiveness can be therapeutic. It also frees God to forgive us.

Many years ago, one doctor saw another at a Christian conference. He thought, 'Does that man call himself a Christian? Why, years ago' (note that!) 'he fought hard to stop me doing my government work. I've never forgotten that.' The conference theme was reconciliation and forgiveness, which convicted him of his unforgiving spirit. Coming in late to a meeting, he took one of two empty chairs, the other soon to be occupied by the offender! As he turned to confess his long harboured resentment, the other man turned to him to express his own contrition. God's Spirit will direct our paths and by his love enable us to do what we could not do by ourselves.

Read: Matthew 18: 21–35; Philemon: 8–17.

AJR

God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, of love and self discipline. 2 Timothy 1: 7

We use our hands to carry out our duties as health carers.
Do we use them as a means to serve God and bless patients?

We use our eyes to examine patients.
Can we see that they have a soul? Do we see the ‘fields ripe for harvest’, and the need to spread God’s gospel of forgiveness?

We use our voice to talk about their symptoms and complaints.
Do we talk about him? Do we talk about our experience of the love he shows us in our lives? Do we have a message of hope for those who come to us with physical pain and spiritual problems?

We use our feet to fulfil our duties and rounds in the hospitals.
Do we walk in his footsteps? Do we take blessing, hope, comfort and above all, the promise of salvation along with our human knowledge of healing? To quote the hymn by H. Bonar:

*‘Fill Thou my life, O Lord my God, in every part with praise,
That my whole being may proclaim Thy being and Thy ways.*

*Fill every part of me with praise: let all my being speak
Of Thee and of Thy love, O Lord, poor though I be and weak.’*

Prayer: ‘Father, my patients often expect a word of encouragement or comfort. They often look to me for guidance through the difficulties they are undergoing. I need your strength and wisdom to give them this guidance as well as the ability to reach the correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment. You are the light. I am only the reflection! Help me to guide my patients to the safe haven of salvation found in Jesus Christ. Amen.’

Read: Philippians 4: 4–9; Ephesians 3: 14–21.

BA

'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'
John 10: 10

When societies are dominated by the desire for fame and power, or the pursuit of material things as the way to happiness, moral values fall. As well as suffering from stress and depression, some take to drugs, alcohol, sex or violence, and remain unsatisfied and empty. Dreams of popularity, professional advancement, material prosperity or family harmony end, with the realisation that they have brought neither happiness nor peace. This feeling of spiritual emptiness (Pascal's 'God-shaped vacuum') is the natural consequence of turning the back on God. He has created us to find true fulfilment only in him. Empty people will find inner peace, not through alternative medicine or any other innovation, but through personal faith in and communion with Jesus Christ.

Jesus was born into the human race to offer abundant life, with meaning and hope, to all who receive him as Saviour and Lord. Christianity is not merely one of many religious traditions, each competing with others, but is a personal relationship with the living God through the risen Christ. Only in Christ is peace and fulfilment to be found, with freedom from guilt, loneliness and poor self-esteem. He restores hope and the joy of living. Surrendering ourselves to God and living according to his will makes the human experience exciting and satisfying.

This is the amazing and surprisingly simple message of the gospel: through Christ we can be reconciled to God and to our neighbour. Then we will know in our own experience the profound meaning of the words of Jesus: 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.' (John 14: 6)

Read: John 10: 7–15; Isaiah 55.

JC

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3: 1

As I grew up on a farm in Western Kansas, I was always amazed when spring came. The black and white of winter turned into the many varied shades of the green of spring's new growth. New animal life – baby calves, piglets and chicks and wild life, the does' new fawns so small and speckled and dainty – all were wondrous signs of new life, of reawakening and rejuvenation. I often wondered, since we are told we are God's special creations, designed in his own image, where is our springtime?

The writer of Ecclesiastes gives us a clue to the seasons of our hearts and minds and souls. Many books have been written on the seasons of life, but I want to share my insight on what *inner-seasons* means to me. I believe God brings into our lives seasons over and over again just as he does in nature. I refer to these seasons as inner-seasons because I believe, just as in nature, there are four reoccurring seasons in our lives, and they begin with 'in'.

The first in-season is *inspiration*. Those are the springtimes of our lives when we receive or give encouragement, inspire the best in others or receive inspiration into our lives; those springtimes of inspiration when the Holy Spirit allows us to view wonders from the mountain tops of this life or have a glimpse of the life to come. Those inspiring times of new vision, and new insights so wondrously awakening, so new-life giving, so rejuvenating to our spirits. Just as inspiration (breathing in air) is a vital life-giving essential for our bodies, so are the springtimes of inspiration vitally essential and life renewing to our hearts, minds and souls.

Read: Psalm 104: 1–24; Song of Songs 2: 10–13.

MCo

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3: 1

With the *inner* seasons of our lives, the spring seasons can be regarded as times of *inspiration*. Likewise, the summer seasons of our lives are the times of *influence*, those times when we give or receive direction in our lives. It has been said that influence is the only lasting thing our lives leave on earth. The summer season of nature is the season of production, of growth and of fruit bearing, which is the lasting influence of the season's cycle. So also, the summer of life is the time of reaping what has been sown. The summer harvest season of influence is the reaping of the seeds sown in the springtime of inspiration. Other seeds, sown in the autumn, test our integrity as they survive the winter seasons of doubt and insecurity.

In the summer of our lives we answer the question, Will our lives make a difference, as God intended? Will his will for our lives show forth as light and salt as he intended? The summers' seasons mark the spot we walked this earth by the influence we had in the lives of others, in our homes and in our communities. The summer colours represented by the flowering of the earth, the yellows and white, blues, violets and reds, found in widely different landscapes, indicate the variety of summer's influence in our lives.

The summer flowers of influence of our lives are just as varied, just as unique but far more lasting. May they be of the Holy Spirit, for God's honour and pleasure, as godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. (1 Timothy 4: 8)

Read: 1 Timothy 4.

MCo

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3: 1

The seasons of the year reflect seasonal changes within our hearts and minds, our *inner seasons*. Spring provides *inspiration* and summer gives *influence*. The autumns of life are the *integrity* times of our lives, the times of testing. The brilliant reds and rusts of autumn speak of inner autumns which test our lives. Will we trust when we cannot trace God's leading through life's difficulties? Will we stand up to the test? Nature's autumns come, in different ways, all over the world, year after year. So also do the testing times come into our lives, over and over. It often seems when we face the autumn's testing time that neither spring nor summer will ever come again. Autumns are the times when we must resolve to keep our resolve, the time to remember, the times we must look to the Lord and his strength for our integrity.

Winter comes into our lives in a dichotomy of *insecurity* and security, much like the dichotomy of winter's colours are black and white. There are the storms of life, draining experiences which leave us disheartened and insecure. Such can be the winters of our lives when we know in our hearts, 'This world is not our home, we're just a-passing through'. I believe God brings the winter's insecurities into our lives so that we will not come to love this earth too much – and so we will love him more.

Yes, there are also the secure times of winter, the beautiful quiet crisp mornings ... serene. These times of our lives can bring us to see that our Lord is the only security, the only peace and calm and quiet that will ever last.

Read: Ecclesiastes 3: 5–6; Psalm 131.

MCo

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3: 1

As there are seasons of the year and of activity, so in our hearts and minds we have varying times of sunshine and shower, summers and winters. These we can call our *inner seasons*; spring for *inspiration*, summer for *influence*, autumn and winter for *integrity* and *insecurity*. God gives us these inner seasons for the good of our lives. We will find, unlike nature, he cleverly brings to our souls springtime in winter, summers in the middle of winters, and autumns in our springtimes.

Our inner seasons do not follow a set pattern. Springtimes of inspiration and vision; the summers of growth and harvest and influence; the autumns of testing our integrity and our commitment, the times of rooting to the solid rock; the winter times of doubts and insecurity where our worldly ground is swept from beneath our feet and we learn to cling to his security, not our own. These inner seasons are just as real, just as vital in our human existence as are the seasons of nature for the world at large. Let us consider the Creator's inner seasons and not miss their passing in our daily lives. They are meant to give us life and to give it more abundantly.

Many years ago Jeremiah was told by God to write these words of warning to his people, ‘They do not say to themselves, “Let us fear the Lord our God who gives autumn and spring rains in season.”’ (Jeremiah 5: 24) What would Jeremiah be told to write to us today? Might it not be very much the same, that we fail over and over to see his glory, his majesty and his power?

Read: Jeremiah 5: 20–31.

MCo

*You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast,
because he trusts in you. Isaiah 26: 3*

‘For God’s sake, doctor, give me a tranquilliser or I shall go round the bend.’ So said the last patient that evening, when I was ready to stop. Of the two alternatives she offered, a tranquilliser certainly seemed the better until I had time to see her again. As I picked up my pen it was as though someone said, ‘Find out *now* what the trouble is.’ The usual story poured out. Her husband didn’t understand her, she felt there was a wall between them and, of course, it was all his fault. She was on edge, sleeping and eating badly and unable to concentrate. How could I speak of God’s care for her to an angry, hurt lady who might never give him a thought?

The answer was easier than I’d expected. What she said about a ‘wall’ in her marriage reminded me that I was soon to attend a Christian drama. I tentatively invited her to join me, feeling slightly stupid as I did so. To my surprise she accepted. The play was all about the walls which various people build up between each other. God, in the guise of a doctor, moved freely from one side to the other with equal concern for both and scant regard for walls of any kind. My patient was quick to see the point. The wall she had imagined between them was as much of her making as her husband’s, and God cared for them both.

There was no more need for tranquillisers. God’s ‘*now*’ had been part of his perfect timing, both in her life and my diary.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please help me to be more alert to hear your whispers, and to act on them. Amen.

Read: Luke 10: 38–42.

FAMMcA

(Adapted from *For God’s sake, Doctor!* 1984)

'... You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' Acts 2: 38

On the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, Peter, filled with the Spirit, taught that all believers should receive the Holy Spirit as a gift from God. It is essential for us to have the power of God within us if we are to be effective in the Christian life.

There may be many occasions in our professional life when we feel inadequate for the task. We lack sufficient training or experience but are faced with a challenge. We may think, for the good of the patient, that it is best to refer him or her to a colleague with more specialised experience. At other times, we cannot avoid our responsibilities, but have to face the situation prayerfully. We can then claim the promised gift of the Holy Spirit within us, giving us the Lord's wisdom, insight and strength. He is with you – you are not on your own!

Someone once said, 'Faith confronts; fear avoids.' We must by faith lay hold of the promise that 'God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.' (2 Timothy 1: 7) With the clamour of patients' expectations, pressure of time and the responsibilities of work, home and church, who is sufficient for these things? Despite all the great pressures upon him, the apostle Paul spoke of being continually renewed day by day. (2 Corinthians 4: 16) He repeatedly found that God's grace was sufficient. (2 Corinthians 12: 9)

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labours increase.
To added affliction, he addeth more mercy,
To multiplied trials, his multiplied peace.*

Those words are from an old chorus, but still have an up-to-date message!

Read: 2 Corinthians 4: 1–18.

AV

... be filled with the Spirit. Ephesians 5: 18

A patient in the waiting room picked up a Christian booklet on how to find God and read this verse: ‘Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in ...’ (Revelation 3: 20) Although she was a regular churchgoer, for her, God was ‘up there’, to be called on in difficulty. Now she realised that the risen Christ could come in to her life with forgiveness and strength. She at once invited him in and was immediately ‘born of the Spirit’. (John 3: 3–6)

Different versions of the Bible speak of the Spirit as counsellor, comforter, helper, strengthener, advocate and Spirit of truth. We may know his activity in all these ways, but what evidence will reveal his presence?

First, there should be *fruit*. Jesus compares himself to a vine. We, as connected branches, have vitality, finding refreshment and bearing fruit. (John 15: 4) The Christ-like nature will produce in our lives the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5: 22–23) As his nature is contrary to our sinful nature there will be many battles before we grow all these fruits. We have to learn to keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5: 16–17, 25)

We are also assured that just as a body has various parts and functions, so the Spirit is the source of various *gifts*. (Romans 12: 4–8; 1 Corinthians 12: 4) These are to be used to build up the church, not for our personal glory. (Ephesians 4: 11–16)

The coming of the Holy Spirit did not stop at Pentecost. The intention is for us each to know – and show – his continued activity in our lives today. Is this happening in mine?

Read: John 3: 1–8; Ephesians 1: 13–23; Ezekiel 37: 1–14.

AV

I will not let you go unless you bless me. Genesis 32: 26

Jacob had reached the end of the line! He had cheated his brother Esau and then fled to save his life. He was a shrewd tough man, capable of driving a hard bargain, yet fearful for his own safety. Now he was about to meet Esau again after many years. He sent ahead the best of his livestock as a gift, to mitigate Esau's anger, and then his own family. He waited, alone. Perhaps filled with fear and remorse.

But suddenly a man came and wrestled with him. They sweated, grunted and struggled with each other all night but the man was unable to win. He threw Jacob's hip out of joint and said 'Let me go, for it is daybreak'. 'I will not unless you bless me' Jacob answered. (Genesis 32: 26) The man blessed Jacob and gave him a new name, Israel, because he had struggled with God and with men and had overcome. Now it dawned on Jacob that his adversary was God himself. As he limped away he said 'I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared'. (Genesis 32: 30)

Do we, when we reach the end of our own resources, or when we fail in dealing with difficult cases, also need to struggle with God? It is important to realise that Jacob's fight with God was not a mild and deferential prayer-meeting. It was in every sense of the word a wrestling bout, mysterious and powerful, perhaps something of a test, which sealed Jacob as a man of faith and from which he emerged with a blessing. There was no arrogance or conceit as he struggled with the stranger, but rather proper humility and honesty and eventually gratitude as the truth of his encounter dawned on him. Let us think about this today and return tomorrow to take it further.

Read: Genesis 32: 22–32.

JT

Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?
Job 10: 3.

In contrast with Jacob and Jeremiah, Job in his distress remonstrated with the Lord. ‘Surely, O God, you have worn me out; you have devastated my entire household.’ (Job 16: 7)

Twenty years ago, I was in England with my family on leave. The phone rang: it was the director of our mission society. Earlier that same day, there had been a terrible road accident close to our mission hospital in Thailand and twelve of those who had died were our close friends. Next morning, I flew to Bangkok, exhausted and in great mental and emotional anguish. I said ‘God, you’ve got this wrong. You’ve killed twelve good people, doctors, surgeons, loving wives and children. What am I doing on this plane, flying into the horror and bereavement which you have caused?’

In retrospect I thought that God should have struck me dead. No-one had ever told me that I could speak to God like that when in very great need. To my great surprise, when I landed I was strongly aware of God’s presence. I would never know the reason for the terrible accident but, somehow, it would be all right for me not to know.

The two weeks which followed were dreadful. They consisted of hugging and crying with bereaved relatives, looking in the hospital mortuary piled high with hastily made wooden coffins, being at the huge graveside in Bangkok and speaking at memorial services. But all the time I was very aware that God was present and in control.

God exonerated Job, but not his ‘comforters’ because they had not spoken honestly. If, through faith in Jesus, God is your best friend, speak honestly with him, especially in times of very great distress. Then you will know his presence and, leaning on him, you will receive his peace and blessing.

Read: Job 19: 21–37; 42: 1–6.

I will not let you go unless you bless me. Genesis 32: 26

The prophet Jeremiah suffered for forty years because he was faithful to God in bringing an immensely unpopular message to the people of his day. He was rejected by his family and friends, and by the religious and temporal rulers of his nation. In his mental and physical anguish he lashed out at his persecutors, and at God. ‘O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.’ (Jeremiah 20: 7) His misery was such that, reaching an all-time low, he wondered why he had been born. ‘Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?’ (Jeremiah 20: 18)

Are we shocked? Do we think that Jeremiah wasn’t ‘spiritual’? Would we like to be known, like Jeremiah, as someone who struggles with God? Do we need to struggle with God today? Perhaps not! Perhaps today we shall sense the help and presence of God. Our walk may be close with God and calm. Our prayers may be quiet and confident. I hope it is so with you.

But perhaps it may not be so. Perhaps today we will also be rejected as we try to follow Christ and to speak of his love. As we face suffering and disappointment, or the loss of patients and loved ones, for whatever reason, perhaps today we too reach the end of the line and become angry with God. Perhaps today, we need to cry ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’! Like Jesus at Gethsemane, we may not only express our doubts but also affirm our trust in the Father. We must be honest with God because only then can we receive his rich blessing. Only then will we sense his majesty and might.

Read: Jeremiah 20: 7–13; Matthew 26: 36–46.

JT

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Psalm 63: 1

When we first know God the relationship is intense, so intense that it is described as thirst. Real thirst, as in dehydration, is painful. Thirst for God comes from the depths of the soul. It is like the yearning lovers feel for each other when apart. There is an interesting Catalan word ‘morena’ (homesickness), which means ‘little death’. One dies a little when one is away from one’s love. It is so in our relationship with God.

Thirst for God is not only intense and deep, it is also unselfish. It is centred on God himself and not on his blessings. The psalmist did not approach God to get things from him. Many approach God to get and get and get. The psalmist’s thirst for God was motivated by love, and was satisfied only by his presence. He did not thirst after God’s blessings and gifts but after God’s very presence.

Today’s society is hedonistic. People want to feel good and be happy, constantly, while avoiding suffering at all costs. They come to believe that effort and struggle are stupid. By contrast, Jesus’ gift to his people was peace in a world of trouble. (John 14: 27; John 16: 33). Christians have to struggle with hedonistic attitudes, which avoid the harsh realities of life and any part in their solution. The Hebrew word for ‘faith’ is derived from another word meaning ‘tension’. Faith always contains an element of tension. We are not yet as we would like to be. The aim in Christian life is not to eliminate stress but to become more and more like Jesus, not to feel better but to be daily more Christ-like. In this way the rich satisfying fruitfulness, experienced by those who walk with Jesus, replaces the transitory pleasures of the hedonist.

Read: 2 Timothy 3: 1–5; 2 Peter 2: 13–19.

PMar

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Psalm 119: 97

Quite often Christians fear they are becoming dry. They become unfruitful and no longer thirst after God. Their lives lack the excitement and joy that was theirs when they first knew the Lord. What are they to do? There are three tools that stimulate a thirst for God; three tools that are simple and very old.

The first tool has to do with loving and having real passion for God's commandments and for his word. Fifty one times the psalms speak of loving God's word. So, each day we need to read some part of the Bible, meditate on it and seek to apply it in our lives, that very day. Reading God's word is not only therapeutic but also preventive.

The second secret for restoring a thirst for God is prayer. Speak directly with God. Tell him you are thirsty and ask him to give you living water. Often Christians have prayed that by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit they will not speak to any person, read any newspaper, or undertake any work on any day before praying. We need to recover this priority in our lives.

The third secret has to do with longing to be with God's people, that is the church. We do not love Christ if we do not love the people of God. So let us enjoy the precious gift of Christian fellowship and find in such fellowship encouragement and restoration in our dry periods.

Christ changes our lives and the first thing he changes is our relationship with God. May God help us to be mature Christians and to use the tools he gives us; his word, prayer and fellowship, to restore and maintain our thirst for him.

Read: Psalm 119: 97–104; 1 Peter 2: 9–12.

PMar

(From 'Changing World – Unchanging Values' ICMDA 1998)

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 1 John 4: 4

King Aram is furious as his raids into Israel are repeatedly thwarted. Having discovered that Elisha the prophet knows his plans and warns the King of Israel of the raids, Aram sends a strong force of horses and chariots to surround the city where Elisha was. Elisha's servant is up early next morning and sees the overwhelming force arrayed against them – impossible odds! He calls out to Elisha, 'What shall we do?'

I love the peace in Elisha as he reassures his servant and says, 'Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' Humanly speaking a ridiculous statement, wishful thinking, ostrich with head in the sand type of reaction. But Elisha has his spiritual vision and he knows the real situation in the light of eternity. He prays therefore, not for himself but for his frightened servant, 'O Lord, open his eyes so that he may see.' God graciously answers, allowing the servant to view what Elisha could already see – the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

Don't we often experience in our professional work times when demands and pressures seem overwhelming and we too can cry out, 'What shall we do?' God repeatedly in his word reassures us, 'Fear not,' he says time and time again, 'for I am with you ... Nothing can separate you from my love ... Be not dismayed for I am your God.' Let us pray that our eyes may be opened so that, as with Elisha, we do not fear apparent opposition but know we are safe with our heavenly Father always with us.

Read: 2 Kings 6: 8–17; 1 John 4: 1–6.

IS

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress ... James 1: 27

Wherever we live, there will always be poor people in need of support. (Deuteronomy 15: 11) A Russian doctor told of her experience in a remote and underfunded orphanage. ‘The building was very run-down, and there were so many children there. They were all dressed alike in dull brown clothes, and as they crowded round me I could see (and smell) how dirty they were, with runny noses and infested hair. My heart sank and I wanted to leave, but instead I cried out to God for help. “Lord, please help me not to reject these children. Fill me with your love for them.” My prayer was answered immediately and I was able to give them the genuine love they so badly needed and longed for.’

Many of those Russian children were social orphans, victims of alcoholic or abusing parents. There are thousands of Ugandan children whose parents have both died of AIDS. Grandmothers in their seventies, already widowed, have often become the chief caregivers, usually supported solely by the work of their own hands. One such old lady, Erivida, had lost all her eight children and their partners and was now providing for her many grandchildren. Her house was a simple hut with two rooms and no lighting or running water. Their food came from the vegetable patch, supplemented by her kind neighbour. As she spoke, she imitated the way she had to dig the soil and showed how tired and hungry she became. Then, her face lit up with a radiant smile as she said, ‘Praise God, he knows. He is great, he is good, he cares.’

Visiting orphans and widows can hold hidden blessings for the visitor, too. Try it!

Read: Isaiah 1: 17; Matthew 25: 40; Acts 9: 36–42.

JGo

'I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.'
Revelation 2: 2

There are many factors that motivate doctors and dentists to do their job, but for a lot of Christians there is, or at least there was at the beginning, a sense of calling to serve God and other fellow humans in this way. Yet what was originally a great motivating force seems to become counterproductive as we get tired and stressed and as we fail to show the love of God as well as we should.

The letter to the Christians in Ephesus (Revelation 2: 1–7) begins with the assurance that Jesus knew how hard they had toiled, how they had patiently endured and not grown weary nor had they given up. Likewise, Jesus knows how hard we work, how tired we get, how thankless the task, how unappreciated we feel, our frustration with ourselves when we fail – and he says, ‘Thank you’. Thank you for your hard work, thank you for not giving up and giving in, thank you for your patient service. Jesus appreciates us when others don’t seem to notice, or only criticise. Jesus appreciates us when we are disillusioned and question why we are doing our job. Jesus loves us when we feel we have no more love or compassion to give.

The one thing Jesus did have against the believers at Ephesus was that in all their hard work and determination they had lost their first love for him. He did not ask them to push themselves further, to try harder or to serve him more. So with us, Jesus simply asks that we remember our first, our basic, love for him. More importantly than any amount of self-sacrificing service, than doing anything else, we must constantly maintain a heartfelt relationship with the one who first loved us.

Read: Matthew 11: 28–30; Ephesians 1: 15–23.

MSm

'I must stay at your house today.' Luke 19: 5

The late George Appleton was formerly Archbishop of Perth and in Jerusalem, and a missionary for twenty years in Myanmar. He wrote a wonderful book of daily devotions entitled *The quiet heart* and would often add asterisks to his phrases, indicating that they were places to pause for reflection. A piece entitled 'The unexpected visitor' reflected on Jesus' request to dine with Zacchaeus and concludes with some questions: If Jesus came to my house, how would I greet him?** How would my past become clear?** And my future?** How would I show my gratitude for the assurance of God's saving love?**

The Lord's visit certainly brought about a change in the mind of Zacchaeus. Flooded by the love and grace of God, Zacchaeus reviewed in a very short time the direction of his life, his priorities, his relationships with others, and especially his need for the 3Rs – repentance, recompense and reconciliation. Reconciliation is a word that has been much in the minds of Australians as we struggle – often without a Christian perspective – to effect reconciliation with Aboriginal Australia.

If Jesus came to our house and asked as he did of Peter 'Do you truly love me?' (John 21: 16), would he have to ask three times, before the response he looked for from our hearts was forthcoming? What promises would we make? Where would we stand in regard to our work? Where would your family stand? How well would we keep our promises? The point Jesus made to Zacchaeus was not about the value or content of his words of promised future action, but of the state of his soul, out of which those promises came. 'Today salvation has come to this house.' We know not the day or the hour when he will come ...

Read: Luke 19: 1–9.

AJR

The tree of life ... for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22: 2

Most of my Albanian fellow graduates want to go abroad for further training and education – and most of them don't come back. God is asking me why we don't offer them good training and teaching here? With all the resources God has provided, Christians should make it possible to secure here what people look for abroad. How can we, through good quality teaching and training in medicine, bring revival and reformation to medicine, and through that to the whole of our society?

Christians could do this because we have something that others miss: we know God; we know the truth; we know we are made in his image, but that suffering comes when we neglect and turn our back on our Creator. We know that everything that goes wrong is not just bad politics or economics but comes from a broken relationship with God, our source of life; we know that this broken relationship is the basis for all that goes wrong in society, in our relations with each other and the natural world around us – all because we have rebelled against God. We know that we can go back to our original relationship between man and God because God loves us in a way we can hardly start imagining. Because of this love he chose not to forsake us in our stupid rebellion, but to save us through his Son, Jesus. He has provided his word so that we can know how to live in his world. (Psalm 19: 7–11)

This gives me hope for my country. My dream is to promote a biblical model of 'whole person' medicine here. Yet where are the teachers? Who will share this dream?

Read: Luke 15: 11–32; Romans 10: 14–15.

ET

And the things you have heard me say ... entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. 2 Timothy 2: 2

Knowing the current needs in undergraduate and postgraduate medical education in our country, and also considering the promotion of good medical practice as a testimony to our faith in Christ, our Albanian Christian Fellowship agreed to organise a three day course of teaching for our local students and doctors.

For me, the course was like a dream come true. God had been showing me gaps in medical education that we as Christians could fill, at first with the help of others from overseas. We needed to help medical students and residents with training in physical examination, communication skills, diagnosis and treatment. For the Christian doctors here this course was so good, both in making ourselves known and showing that we are interested in serving other doctors so that they can serve their patients better. My dream now is to plan a year's curriculum for postgraduate training, with specific times during the year for special teaching sessions by doctors from overseas who will offer a biblically based model of medical practice.

Teaching God's way of whole person medicine will include prevention of illness by lifestyle, care of the dying, compassion, respect for personal life and dignity and so on. Applying this in practice would let people see how it is when you follow God and obey his word. (Exodus 23: 25–26) They must then choose whether they continue to live without God, or for and with him.

You who are able, please consider helping medical education in a poorer country. Also, join us in praying for godly leaders here and for revival and reformation in our medical system. Through that, our whole nation might learn to seek God's face, and be healed.

Read: Acts 16: 9; 2 Timothy 3: 10–4: 5.

ET

JUNE

*Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
his greatness no-one can fathom. One
generation will commend your works to
another; they will tell of your mighty acts.
Psalm 145: 3–4.*

'... whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Matthew 25: 45

Relaxing over breakfast to the gentle strains of a guitar playing Spanish and Portuguese music, my wife and I were transported back to Brazil. Three years earlier we had made three trips to that huge country to visit orphans and abandoned children, all under ten, with HIV/AIDS. All were under sentence of death for reasons over which they had no control. They were looked after by an international group of young people, aged 20–40, who had dedicated their present lives to these children; preparing them, as they put it, for heaven. Certainly there must have been much joy in heaven reflected in the enjoyment these children were having, especially when Brazil scored during the World Cup. Sadly, many of the community in the street around them had fought tooth and nail to prevent the *Casa Refugio* being established. The young carers were indeed full of the Holy Spirit as they loved these little ones literally unto death. Each took a special responsibility for one or two of them and when one died they would take another, once their grief had subsided.

We should not ignore Jesus' words, quoted above. They kept coming back to us day after day. The facts cannot be hidden. We, in the wealthy West, and often giving some allegiance to Christianity, have less than 20% of the earth's population yet avariciously consume 80% of God's world's resources. Not only that, but year after year we cut back aid, growing ever richer as the less developed world sinks further into poverty. Nor is the little aid we give especially designated for the poorest of the poor who, Scripture time and time again tells us, lie heavily on the heart of our Heavenly Father. Why not on ours? So, in this world, we reap a harvest of hatred before the eternal punishment foretold in Scripture. It is a sorry situation.

Read: Matthew 25: 31–46.

AJR

... everyone did as he saw fit ... Judges 21: 25

Concepts like ‘doing it my way’, ‘self-rule’, and ‘autonomy’, encourage such attitudes to breed deeds. Unbridled autonomy ends in either autocracy or anarchy. Whilst true of nations, this can also be so when health service departments tell each other: ‘Get off my patch!’ Competing autonomies can deprive the very people they compete about. Autonomy is also much vaunted as an ethical principle, but it is not clear whose autonomy matters most, and lawsuits multiply.

All this is in sharp contrast to John the Baptist’s attitude to the authority of Jesus: ‘He must become greater; I must become less.’ (John 3: 30) When Jesus was asked which was the most important precept of all, his answer replaced autonomy with two inseparable rules: love for God and love for neighbour, the latter to match (not serve) love of self. (Matthew 22: 36–40) Jesus came to show us what obedience to these laws really means. God commands love, and he is love. (1 John 4: 8) As we respond to his love for us, he longs to fill us with the same love for others. (1 John 4: 19–21)

This means that taking decisions which affect other people’s lives is not a matter of doing what is right in our own eyes, but so loving God that we abide by his word. ‘Consider carefully what you do, because you are not judging for man but for the Lord, who is with you whenever you give a verdict. Now let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery.’ (2 Chronicles 19: 6–7) The rule of love, so much higher than autonomy, would free our health services (and others) from all potential autocrats and anarchists – but do they see good examples in us?

Read: passages cited.

JGo

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12: 18

A very nice sentiment, we would all agree, but what about people who really get on our nerves? Most of us could compile a little list of them – that bossy senior nurse, that critical or patronising administrator, that impossible senior surgeon, that inept junior. But Paul says we should live at peace with them – so far as it depends on us, or ‘as much as lies in us.’

There are occasions when peace at any price is not good enough. Those occasions will not be when our own personal pride or dignity is affronted. The Lord Jesus did not care about that sort of thing. Nor should we. But it may be right and necessary to fight when the interests of another person are at stake – a patient for whom we have responsibility, a vulnerable junior member of staff or someone who is the victim of malicious gossip. Even here, of course, there are ways and other ways of doing it. The soft manner (Proverbs 5: 1) can be more effective than the cutting comment that gives us malicious pleasure.

Happily, as C. S. Lewis says, loving our neighbours does not necessarily mean thinking they are nice. There are much better approaches, such as William Law’s advice: ‘There is nothing that makes us love a man as much as praying for him’. And another thought: could it possibly be that other people find it difficult to live peaceably with us?

Prayer: Give to me, Lord, the grace to be patient as you were patient; that I may bear with the faults of others, and strive at all times to root out my own.

Read: Romans 12: 14–21.

RRW

(Adapted from *The Doctor’s Life Support* 1994)

'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.' Acts 16: 30–31

When the Philippian jailer believed, Paul told him, 'you will be saved – you and your household'. The word he used, *sozo*, means salvation, healing, protection and well-being. Jesus Christ saves and heals the individual and his or her family. Salvation is not limited to the mere 'soul of an individual' but is there to be shared.

The church, as God's visible family on earth, embraces the whole family. In a family redeemed by God, the father, mother, sons and daughters all come to know better who they are and how they should relate to each other and to others.

By our 'adoption' God becomes our Father, Jesus our elder brother and the Holy Spirit the one who brings us our unity. The redeemed family brings these relationships into its everyday life. The love and acceptance of the local church heals our families and our relationships.

Prayer: Father, help us as we work with individuals and families to develop integral good health and well-being. Help us as members of your Church to share the vision of your all-embracing redemption and the reality that you can heal communities.

*May the grace of Christ our Saviour,
And the Father's boundless love,
With the Holy Spirit's favour,
Rest upon us from above.
Thus may we abide in union
With each other and the Lord;
And possess, in sweet communion,
Joys which earth cannot afford.*

John Newton (1725–1807)

Read: Romans 8: 14–17; Ephesians 5: 21–6: 4.

RZ

... we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.
2 Corinthians 4: 16

Ageing is a physiological process affecting every cell in our body. The passage of time brings the ‘wasting away’ of the outward person. Ageing produces changes which serve all too clearly to confirm the progressive wearing down of our bodies. The body, however, is but our outer self. If our spirit has been regenerated by God’s Holy Spirit we may experience the power of God within us, renewing us day by day from the inside.

When love, faith, peace, joy and hope flow from the inside outwards we can become channels of blessing to others, even while undergoing the pains and troubles ageing may bring to our physical bodies. Our gifts, in the Lord’s hands, may allow us to help others in their physical, spiritual and material needs.

Let us give God thanks for each year of our physical lives despite the signs and symptoms that our body is ageing. Let us thank God that, by his grace, we are alive and can be meaningful channels through which the kingdom of God is extended.

Prayer: Lord, may you renew our love for you day by day and may you perfect your holiness in our lives.

*Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide:
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.
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 Francis Lyte (1793–1847)

Read: 2 Corinthians 12: 5–10.

MIE

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds.
Deuteronomy 11: 18

Many years ago as a teenager, and as a new Christian, I was privileged to be part of a young people's group which met once a week in the home of a wonderful couple who led a Bible study, rooting us in God's word. Early on, Kath, our teacher, encouraged us to commit to memory each week a verse chosen from the study passage. This led to a selection of a monthly verse, then a verse for the year, which led to choosing a verse for life. Since that time I have annually tried to choose a verse for the year.

At the beginning of 2000 I resolved to read the Bible from cover to cover. In January 2001 I had arrived in Psalms, and the Lord's Spirit led me to Psalm 105: 3–5 as my year 2001 verses. The simple but profound thoughts have come to mean much to me. 'Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done ...'

Another teacher in my early grades in a one-room country school used to tell us we really did not know our lessons unless we knew them 'backwards and forwards'. Applying that adage to this psalm passage adds to its depth. Repeated backwards the verses read 'Remember the wonders he has done; seek his face always. Look to the Lord and his strength. Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Glory in his holy name.' What a privilege daily to let our hearts rejoice! If our hearts are turned to seeking our Lord and looking to his strength, we 'Glory in his name'.

Read: Deuteronomy 5: 1–21; 6: 1–9.

MCo

'... your kingdom come ...' Matthew 6: 10

You can say the whole of the Lord's Prayer in less than a minute but spend a lifetime trying to understand what it really means. When Jesus was on earth, many people thought that he was going to establish a kingdom and become its king. Does his prayer refer to a real kingdom like that or just to a spiritual kingdom? It will not mean much to us if we are thinking merely of an earthly kingdom, to come only when Jesus reappears to establish it.

When asked by the Pharisees about this, Jesus answered, '... the kingdom of God is within you.' (Luke 17: 20–21) When he began to preach, he said, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' (Matthew 4: 17) By his coming to earth, something tremendous and exciting happened. When his contemporaries saw Jesus they had a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, which is found where God rules. Jesus wants to be king and ruler of our hearts – of my heart. Am I willing to let him take the throne in every aspect of my life? This means in the practical things of time, work and money as well as in my spiritual life. Do we realise that every time we pray, 'Thy kingdom come,' we are indicating readiness to obey his will and plan? It takes time to trust and obey him completely, but if he becomes king of our hearts we will experience his blessing and discover his plan for our lives.

If I pray, 'Thy kingdom come,' there will be consequences. Do I dare to pray that prayer? Do I dare not to pray it?

Read: Matthew 6: 9–15; Isaiah 55: 8–9.

EAJ

'... your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' Matthew 6: 10

God's will is expressed in his word, for example in the Ten Commandments and elsewhere in Scripture. His ultimate goal is for us to reflect his glory, becoming transformed into his likeness. (2 Corinthians 3: 18) To this end, 'Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others ... for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.' (Philippians 2: 4, 13)

As we read God's word, we must allow it to influence our lives, daring to give up our own will to let God's will be done. His will and ours will then work together. When in doubt about one of life's choices, it may be helpful to make a list of arguments for and against a particular decision. Even better is to bring the matter to God, saying, 'I want to choose your way. Please show it to me clearly, and if I have got it wrong, please stop me in such a way that I can be in no doubt about your will.' God will seldom show you his complete plan for the rest of your life. He is more likely to reveal it gradually, step by step.

This was Abraham's experience, as he was told first to leave his country and go to a land God would give him. The destination was not clarified until much later, but Abraham believed God, and went forward in faith. This may be what we have to do, too. When we pray, 'Your will be done,' we can trust God to reveal his will when we need to know it.

Read: Genesis 12: 1–8.

EAJ

And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 1 Kings 19: 12

Does life overwhelm you? So many things can happen – all kinds of things – that they knock you flat. You wonder when they will stop. Can medicine never be a quiet life?

Elijah was a great man of God, but when Jezebel put him on her death list, he gave up. Instead of seeking God's will for his life, he asked God to let him die. At first God treated him gently and strengthened him. He came to Horeb, where he took refuge in a cave and then gave way to another bout of self-pity. This time God was not so gentle. Elijah needed to be reminded of the power of God. The earthquake and fire must have been terrifying, but Elijah had to learn the hard way. The demonstration of God's power was effective. Elijah was now ready for something different – ‘after the fire came a gentle whisper’.

Elijah is now really listening, and could hear what God was saying. Once communication has been restored confidence can also be restored. Sometimes, when we think we have had enough, God may treat us gently, and we accept the relief with gratitude. But we still may not really have been listening. Self-pity can induce severe spiritual deafness. God may need to give us shock treatment, as he did to Elijah.

The rough experience can make us ask, ‘Where is the God of love?’ We may need to realise that Love is shouting at us. Only when we are ready to listen comes the still small voice, the voice of stillness. And in that stillness, God reaches us. ‘Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, ... you will find rest for your souls.’ (Matthew 11: 28–29)

Read: 1 Kings 19: 1–21; Matthew 11: 25–30.

RRW

(Adapted from *The Doctor's Life Support* 1994)

Hezekiah ... did what was right in the eyes of the Lord ... He ... trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no-one like him amongst all the kings of Judah ... 2 Kings 18: 1–5

King Hezekiah is a biblical example of a man of integrity, defined by the dictionary as ‘uprightness, honesty, purity’. Hezekiah saw all the ungodliness of his country and was determined not to compromise, this being ‘to settle differences by concession on each side’.

As a man of God, he held fast to the Lord and kept his commands. He particularly wanted to cleanse the land of idolatry, so that even the sacred brazen serpent, used by God to heal snake-bitten Israelites in the wilderness, had to go. It had become an object of worship in the place of the God who gave it. An idol is not necessarily tangible, but is anything that comes between ourselves and God. In professional life, it could be driving ambition, material prosperity, a comfortable lifestyle, or another mini-god. One of Cowper’s hymns says,

*The dearest idol I have known,
whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from Thy throne
and worship only Thee.*

Any man or woman of God who sets out to live according to this pattern will be tempted by the devil to lower the standard, and his tactics are clever. If he fails on one front, he will try another. Hezekiah, ruthless about idolatry, found himself tested in another way when all that he stood for came under threat. He was very much afraid and, in his panic, lost his integrity and compromised with the enemy. Read more about this tomorrow!

Prayer: Lord God, our heart’s desire is to put you first. Please help us to keep faithful to you, not only when things go well but also when we run into big trouble. Amen.

Read: 2 Kings 18: 1–16; Ephesians 6: 10–13.

AV

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 1 Corinthians 10: 12

Despite Hezekiah's fine reputation as the godly king of Judah, he had a great fall. King Sennacherib of Assyria invaded his kingdom and captured his fortified cities. In a panic, Hezekiah tried to buy off Sennacherib with bribes, choosing to give him tons of silver and gold from the temple. What had been dedicated to God was given to a pagan king!

In his turmoil, Hezekiah's famous integrity was breached and he compromised with the enemy. This happened in the fourteenth year of his reign. As we go on in the Christian life, how careful we need to be not to ease up, or despise our earlier zeal as 'youthful enthusiasm'. We may sing along with a hymn of dedication, but do we mean every word? '*Take my life ... hands ... feet ... lips ... silver ... my ALL.*'

Despite the bribes, Assyria marched on Jerusalem. Hezekiah was tested again by the army commander's taunt, 'On whom are you depending ...?' (2 Kings 18: 20) This searched his heart, as it should do ours. Was he, and are we, continuing to rely on human resources, or first of all on the Lord?

Before answering, Hezekiah wisely went to the now plundered temple to seek again the Lord's enabling, repenting of past failure and reaffirming his faith. Isaiah the prophet then relayed God's comforting message, 'Do not be afraid.' (2 Kings 19: 1–6) He also prophesied the enemy's downfall, which quickly came about. So God wonderfully vindicated Hezekiah's faith.

We too can find strength under fire from Paul's encouraging word to Timothy: 'God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.' (2 Timothy 1: 7)

Prayer: Dear Lord, please help us to turn to you at times of stress, learning again that those who trust you wholly will find you wholly reliable. Amen.

Read: 2 Kings 19: 14–19, 35–36.

AV

'Everything is possible for him who believes.' Mark 9: 23

This promise became precious to a motherless young Indonesian, raised in a poor village fifteen hours' walk away from the nearest bus stop. With school fees burdening his family, he studied hard. School pictures about doctors began the improbable dream of becoming one. Confident that with God nothing is impossible, he continually cried out to him.

On his father's borrowed money and with part-time manual labour he eventually began nursing training. Then his father died, he fell ill himself, the money ran out and he faced starvation. Still he trusted in God. Having brought him so far he would not desert him now. Faith was honoured. A local pastor employed the efficient student sweeper as resident church caretaker, another funded his studies and a missionary couple, seeing his potential, asked what he really wanted to be. Hearing the cherished dream, they sacrificially paid his medical school fees.

He graduated in 2001, the dream fulfilled. His unwavering intention was to return to his remote village to serve his people and share God's love with them, and that is where he now is. He writes, 'Our good Lord Jesus made a way, in his time. He is never late. He is the God who understands his children's needs and answers prayer. Our God is a God of miracles.'

To any feeling hopeless or discouraged he adds, 'Look how great our God is. He is the God that can do everything, provide everything and in him there is nothing impossible. See what God has done in my life. If he can do it for me, he will do it for you, too. Whatever the problem you face, he is the God who is always there and never leaves you.' This God is our God for ever and ever. Praise him!

Read: Psalm 37: 1–7.

Anon (Indonesia)

'Though it lingers, wait for it ...' Habakkuk 2: 3

An early Mendelssohn sonata, prefaced by the above prayer for success, was not published for another century. His plea was answered, but he did not know it. Many godly people have learned that God may say 'No,' or 'Wait,' as well as 'Yes.' Yet when prayers are apparently in line with his will and intended for his glory, why the delay?

Jesus himself promised that requests made in his name would be fulfilled, but he did not set a time limit. (John 14: 13) Secret believers worldwide must have prayed for decades for oppression to cease before relief came. Many who read this may still be praying earnestly for freedom to practise as Christians and proclaim their faith. In many countries today the cry continues: 'How long, Sovereign Lord ...?' (Revelation 6: 10)

This is not new. Abraham was promised a nation of descendants whom he never saw. Moses, setting off to reach a promised land only about 300 kilometres away, wandered about in deserts for forty years without ever arriving there himself. As then so now: God's delays involve major lessons in total obedience and sustained trust, which quicker answers would not provide. Believers can die without seeing promises fulfilled, yet still hold on to faith in a loving, all-knowing God. (Hebrews 11: 39) This is evidently what he looks for.

We can be comforted that, after centuries of waiting for the promised Messiah, he was born only 'when the time had fully come.' (Galatians 4: 4) Unless due to our own wilful disobedience (Psalm 66: 18), we cannot explain God's delays. We can, though, be confident in his eternal purposes and refuse to be discouraged. Like spiritual physiotherapy, we are made stronger in faith by its exercise.

Read: Hebrews 11: 39–40; Psalms 42, 43.

JGo

Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him. Luke 24: 15–16

Have you ever wished that you were one of the first disciples, that you had actually met Jesus face to face and talked with him? I have. Sometimes I felt I would be so much closer to Jesus if I could hear his voice with my ears rather than in my heart. But it is interesting to read in the story of the road to Emmaus that two of Jesus' close companions did indeed walk and talk with him shortly after his resurrection but failed to recognise him, despite a long journey together and deep conversation with him.

I wonder if we are a little like those disciples much of the time. Jesus tells us that whatever we do for the least of his brothers in need, we do for him. (Matthew 25: 40) As Christian clinicians, we have countless opportunities every day to meet and serve Jesus in our patients. Mother Theresa used to view each one of the destitute and dying people for whom she cared as Jesus in distressing disguise. When I remember to see Jesus in my patients, it transforms my practice.

Sometimes we go out to a lonely, quiet place to meet with God, and it can be a very helpful thing to do. But sometimes we forget that Jesus is just as present, perhaps more so, in a crowded outpatient department or a noisy ward of malnourished children, as he is on a lonely mountain top. In every patient we have the opportunity to meet and minister to Jesus, if we allow our eyes to be opened to recognise him. (Luke 24: 31)

*Prayer: Open my eyes to see Jesus in my patients,
Guide my hands to be Jesus to my patients.*

Read: Luke 24: 13–35; Matthew 25: 31–46.

VL

He is like a tree ... whose leaf does not wither. Psalm 1: 3

There are many speculations and misunderstandings about sycamore (sycomore) trees and wild fig trees as mentioned in the Bible. One of the wild fig trees is *ficus sycomorus*. This beautiful tree grows in warm ‘lowveld’ areas throughout Africa and the Middle East. The fruit is sweet, smaller than the common fig, and of poor quality. It is plentiful throughout the greater part of the year.

When Amos described himself as ‘a herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit’, he identified himself as one of the poorest of men. When Zaccheus climbed into a sycamore tree to see Jesus, it was almost certainly a *ficus sycomorus*, a wild fig tree. I have seen these trees myself in Jericho. They are excellent trees to climb in, often with strong branches just a few feet above the ground.

What features of the *ficus sycomorus* have a message for us in living the Christian life? Firstly, it has tremendous roots going down far underground to feed its leaves and branches with water and nourishment. In the Eastern Transvaal lowveld, a tunnel was being built for a new highway. One of the engineers was interested in a very thick root which had been laid bare following a blasting. Why such a tremendous root, 600 feet below the surface? The following day he brought some dye with him and injected it into the root. Later, he went out into the open, very curious to see whether any of the blue dye would show up on top of the mountain. Lo and behold, there it was. The leaves of the wild fig had taken up the blue dye.

How far do your roots go down in the Bible to give you spiritual sustenance?

Read: Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17: 7–8.

PBre

The Lord is my rock ... in whom I take refuge. Psalm 18: 2

The second lesson to learn from the *ficus sycomorus* is that it is frequently found to be growing right on top of a rock. It sends its roots down on each side of a huge rock, anchoring it firmly so that it cannot be blown over unless the rock itself is dislodged. Are your arms holding firmly onto the Rock of Ages? Study the life of Jesus. His example is the only perfect one. Pray that the Spirit of God who filled Jesus may live and work in you to make you like him. You will be safe in him and will bear fruit. I once saw a wild fig on top of a mountain, its roots enfolding a large rock. It had been struck by lightning and its trunk split in two, but there it was, still growing and green and bearing fruit. That is how safe you are, held steady and secure by your loving Heavenly Father.

There is a tradition that when Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus fled from Israel to Egypt, there was a large wild fig tree growing in the small village of Matariya, near Cairo. They rested under this tree and took water from a nearby well. How soothing that shade and water must have been after a long journey in the hot sun.

We are to refresh others as we ourselves have been refreshed. Christians are instructed to be hospitable. (1 Peter 4: 9) Our home has been so much blessed through Christians who have stayed with us, and I've also been blessed by staying with Christian friends. Ideally, each should be for others shelter, refuge, streams in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land. (Isaiah 32: 2)

Read: Psalm 91; Galatians 5: 22.

PBre

He told them this parable: ‘Look at the fig tree ...’ Luke 21: 29

The wood of *ficus sycomorus* is useful and lasts well. The Christian life, too, besides being eternal is of great practical value now. Think again of the fruits of the Spirit. They do not come through reading a newspaper! They come as you trust the Lord in your way through life. When trials come he will be there. You can speak to him in prayer. He will encourage you from his word and guide you. You will find that this is practical, diminishing stress and enabling you to go forward. Faith in Jesus Christ has a remarkable effect on life here and now.

Not only is the wood of the fig tree useful but it lasts very well. Some Egyptian mummy cases made from it are still in excellent condition after 3000 years. If you put your trust in the Bible, you are trusting something that has stood the test of time. Jesus himself said so (Matthew 5: 17–18) as did Paul. (2 Timothy 3: 14–17)

No parable is complete in every detail. The fruit of the wild fig is inferior, but not so the fruit of the Christian life. Yet figs are plentiful and provide food for the poor, just as Jesus delivered his message mainly to the poor and despised. This message has sustained people of all classes through the centuries and is still to be trusted and applied to our lives today.

The wild fig tree usually produces large and long-lasting crops, but untimely frost can cause disastrous crop failure. The tree cannot avoid such damage, but the Christian is urged to flee from harmful influences and pursue what is good. (1 Timothy 6: 11) Following in the steps of the Master will be to bear the fruit of obedience to him.

Read: 2 Peter 1: 3–11.

PBre

'Come and see,' said Philip. John 1: 46

Not only does the wild fig send its roots down for its own sustenance but it points others to the place where there is water. In the Transvaal lowveld there are little hills, formed entirely by rocks piled on one another, with no soil to be seen. However, on these hills there is sometimes a line of half a dozen or more wild fig trees, stretching from the plain to the top of the hill. If you see that you can be quite sure that there is a subterranean stream running under that line of fig trees. Does your life point others to the place of spiritual sustenance?

A professor of ear, nose and throat surgery was performing a very tricky procedure high up in the neck. He was dissecting carefully when he nicked an artery. It bled profusely. Try as he might, he could not clamp it. He pressed in a swab and took a breather. 'Lord, please help us,' he whispered to himself, and the next minute he was able to find the bleeder and stop it. The team then completed the operation without any further incident.

In the tea-room there was a tired silence, until the theatre sister said, 'Prof, thank you for that prayer.' He had almost forgotten about it, but said, 'Yes. Although I'd not meant anyone else to hear, it is at such a time that God is there to help us.' The sister replied, 'I realised that, Prof, and it was a message to me that God does indeed answer prayer.' It appeared that she and her husband had been through difficult times and had stopped attending church. Now she had seen where she could drink from the life-giving stream.

Read: John 4: 1–42.

PBre

... the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Psalm 19: 1

One commentary on Psalm 19 begins, ‘God’s fingerprints are everywhere. God is a fabulous communicator. He is never silent. He speaks to us through everything in his creation. He can be heard, seen, felt, tasted. He uses the sunrise to declare his faithfulness; a mother’s touch to show his gentleness; and the fruits of the earth to reveal his sweetness and generosity.’ (*Christian Growth Study Bible, NIV*)

How much of our practice reveals ‘the fingerprints of God’? One way to further this is to ‘lift up our banners in the name of our God’. (Psalm 20: 5) An American Christian physician has a very popular (secular) medical radio programme in which he repeatedly ‘flags’ the glory of God. He uses phrases such as ‘God (or the Almighty, or the Creator) in his wisdom has constructed us in such a way that ...’, or ‘enables our bodies to heal by ...’. We need to seek similar opportunities for flag-waving until it becomes second nature to us.

Another way is to pray with patients. It uses ‘the saving power of his right hand’ (Psalm 20: 6) to let them know that God cares for them and understands how they feel. Why are we shy about raising the issue of prayer, even with patients we know are Christians? When appropriate we could ask, ‘Do you have a faith? Would you like me to pray with (or for) you?’ Like most forms of witness, it may be a little difficult to start with. To ask ourselves, ‘What would Jesus do?’ will usually bring a clear answer. As we let his light shine into our consultations by lifting up his banners each day, may people see his fingerprints and glorify our Father in heaven.

Read: Psalm 19; Luke 8: 16–18.

AJR

Jesus called a little child and had him stand among them.
Matthew 18: 2

At a teaching session in rural India, illiterate but capable women chosen by their villages to become health workers were welcomed and introduced to their teachers. Their worried looks reflected their lack of self-esteem. ‘This first evening we are going to learn about leprosy,’ they were told as an eight-year-old girl stood up quietly, and confidently smiling at her audience and speaking in their language. ‘Leprosy is a disease caused by a small germ. It is not too easy to catch, but when you do catch it then it can have very nasty effects for many years.’ The women’s faces visibly relaxed as they listened with full attention to every word. The child continued. ‘Some people with leprosy lose their eyebrows.’ She pointed to her own eyebrows. ‘The nerves at the elbows in others become thick like rope.’ She showed how to elicit this sign, making a rolling movement behind her right elbow. The audience imitated her and their faces lit up as they nodded for her to continue. At the end of the session the women had clearly understood everything, and were ready for more.

The senior teacher explained that if he taught the new village health workers they, knowing he is a doctor and that they are illiterate, would expect not to understand. But when a child speaks, they know that the words and message will be simple and that they will understand.

The watching missionary marvelled at the simplicity and depth of this illustration of Jesus’ teaching. When Jesus’ disciples tried to stop children coming to him, he said that their real humility and simple acceptance are the models we need to adopt if we wish to enter the kingdom of heaven. Let us listen to and learn from children today.

Read: Luke 9: 46–48; Matthew 18: 1–6.

JT

'For how long, O Lord?' Isaiah 6: 11

I have been thinking a lot lately about the fact of Christ's return. If he came right now, would he think me a good and faithful servant or a bad one? I am reminded how I waste time considering things from a short-term, earthly perspective whilst the Bible always considers everything from a long-term, everlasting perspective. And with such events happening around us every day, the end of the age does not look so endlessly far away.

I am going through Isaiah, a book very interesting in this connection, as Isaiah always talks about what will happen in Judaea in the years to come, yet mingled with that also gives hints about the coming of Christ and the end of the age. He, too, is trying to teach people not to lose the eternal perspective.

The other thing I see is the warning of judgement, joined with hope for the mercy and grace of God. Isaiah confronted his society by pinpointing the ungodly things they did, and the holiness of God. Has the prophetic gift been lost in our generation? When I previously thought of prophecy, I thought of people telling what God had revealed to them about the future, but now I understand that that is not all. The Old Testament prophet first showed his people how far from God they were and then went on to warn them to turn back, before it was too late.

Please pray that God will strengthen the Christians here, that he will purify us and make us ready for his service, like he did with Isaiah in chapter 6. May his Spirit strengthen us to be able to say, 'Here am I, send me!' We so need help to grow in our knowledge of God, not just *about* him.

Read: Isaiah 6; Matthew 25: 14–30.

ET

It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Colossians 3: 24

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan only occurs in the Gospel of Luke the physician. In it, as well as answering the lawyer's question, 'Who is my neighbour?' the Lord sets standards for healthcare which we will do well to apply as Christian doctors today. These are comprehensive compassion, costly commitment, conscientious competence, and continuing care. We will examine these in turn over the next few days.

For the present we should remember that Jesus' parables generally make a single point and we should beware of reading too much into the details. However, when Dr Luke recorded this parable we may presume his outlook as a professional influenced him. It is possible, therefore, to discern secondary meanings that set standards for healthcare.

Jesus tells the parable to a lawyer who correctly answers his first questions by repeating the two 'Great Commandments' (Deuteronomy 6: 5) Jesus commanding him adds 'Do this, and you will live'. The lawyer now feels threatened and has lost face too. Maybe he can regain credibility by establishing limits on neighbourliness. It's in answer to his supplementary question, seeking a definition of 'neighbour', that Jesus tells the parable.

For today, let us jump forward a little and note that in answering Jesus' final question, the lawyer discovered that the important characteristic of a neighbour is what the person actually does. In the parable the neighbour was the one who showed mercy. What characterises our professional behaviour? Do we seek Christ's commendation, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' (Matthew 25: 23) or do we want prestige and status, fame and fortune, and a long list of honorary degrees? These rewards are not wrong but the lure of them can be a snare. So, what will be the standard for our clinical care?

Read: Luke 10: 25–37.

AF

But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. Luke 10: 33

A traveller had been mugged. Only his gender and that he was left half dead are known. The scene is set. By chance a priest came along. Having served God in the temple, now he had an opportunity of serving a fellow man. But no! Was he afraid of the robbers who might have been lurking nearby, or of ritual defilement that would follow contact with a dead body? Similarly, we know no more about the Levite. As a temple servant, he may have had the same fears as the priest.

Jesus had caught the interest of his audience. Who would be the good guy? Probably an ordinary Jew would show compassion and give the story a popular anti-clerical slant. It was not to be. We would need to live with ethnic conflict and hatred in a divided community to appreciate the outrage when Jesus identified the good guy as a despised Samaritan. How could it be? ‘Neighbour’, for Jews, implied a fellow Jew or full proselyte. That the neighbour could be a Samaritan must have shocked many. But Jesus identified the neighbour by his actions and it was the Samaritan who had compassion.

What lessons apply to health workers? We are professionals and perhaps we get it wrong, behaving like the priest or the Levite. We are frightened of doing the wrong thing. For us the parable teaches the priority of immediate responsibility for the needs of others, responsibility that is comprehensive and without limit. Compassion is the beginning of good healthcare. The word implies suffering alongside the needy and includes notions of pity, mercy and sorrow for the sufferings of others. Love for one’s neighbour is healthcare’s first hallmark. In addition, we do well to remember that God is always compassionate, often in the face of our arrogance and our disobedience.

Read: Nehemiah 9: 16–21; Colossians 3: 12–17.

AF

June 24 Costly commitment and conscientious competence

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost ...? Luke 14: 28

Today, as we continue applying the parable of the Good Samaritan to health care, let us remember the cost involved and the commitment and the competence that are needed. The Samaritan's compassion involved risk. Was the body a trap intended to lure others into danger? Health workers may also face danger, quite often physical assault, not to speak of verbal abuse. The compassion also involved cost, for board and lodging were required for the injured man. But the Samaritan was totally committed to completing his good work. For us, salaries may be higher elsewhere and often there are pressures on family and social life. The aspiring student does well to count the cost – a sound biblical principle.

As a last thought we may note the Samaritan's conscientious competence in binding up the wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Conscientiousness is another hallmark of all Christian service. 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.' (Colossians 3: 23) So it must be with us.

In addition, we need to be competent! The Samaritan did the right things. His treatment may seem quaint now but oil and wine were then state-of-the-art. Incompetence is an awful witness, which no amount of Bible quotation or church attendance can make good. Health care has rightly become concerned with quality control, which often involves appraisal and re-accreditation. We may find these controls irksome but, as Christians, we should support them. Christ was a carpenter who, no doubt, made tables and chairs well. Health workers must also work as well as can be. 'It is the Lord Christ you are serving.' (Colossians 3: 24) It is his reward we seek.

Read: Matthew 19: 16–30; Luke 14: 25–35.

AF

'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'
Matthew 28: 20

Finally, the Good Samaritan provided ongoing care. He set the injured man on his own beast, brought him to an inn, and took care of him: to the extent that next day he paid the innkeeper and promised additional payment should that be needed.

Of course we should beware of reading too much into parables. It would be a mistake, for instance, to base transport, accommodation and fiscal policies for a health service on this parable. However, there is clearly a concept here of continuing care. This is costly and no health manager purchasing it can write a blank cheque for it, for even the richest nations face real challenges in this area. Emergency and intensive care are dramatic, glamorous, exciting – easier for fundraising and big budgets. The less popular specialties are the opposite, but patients in these categories matter every bit as much. Christians have often pioneered and maintained services for them.

A God who longs passionately for justice and mercy wants his people to be wherever they are needed, for as long as they are needed, indeed until life reaches its natural end. At that point, those who die in Christ live in a new reality. ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ (Revelation 21: 3–4) The Bible repeatedly underlines God’s ongoing and steadfast care for his people. He is always with us and he, in Christ, has shown us the most excellent way of extravagant love. His continuing care is assured to the end!

Read: 1 Corinthians 13; Revelation 21: 1–8.

AF

Barnabas ... encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord ... He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith ... Acts 11: 22–24

Barnabas's testimonial reminds us that encouragement is a far greater blessing than any amount of criticism. He first befriended Saul (to become Paul, the apostle) whilst others focussed on his murderous reputation. (Acts 9: 26–27) Later, he took him as his partner in teaching the young church at Antioch, where the believers were first called 'Christians'. (Acts 11: 25–26) Yet, after such a rich partnership, he and Paul parted.

Barnabas's young cousin, John Mark, had deserted his position as helper to Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13: 5, 13) but later Barnabas wanted to give him another chance. This went against Paul's judgment and, no doubt painfully, the old alliance split up. (Acts 15: 37–40) The Bible rarely mentions Barnabas again. From being a front-runner, he sank into the background.

It must have been hard for such a previously active leader to stand down and devote himself to the care and instruction of one young person. No doubt thanks to this encouragement, though, Paul would later request John Mark's now esteemed company. (2 Timothy 4: 11) For reasons unspecified, it also seems that the young man acted like a son to Peter. (1 Peter 5: 13) If this came about during Barnabas's lifetime, here was another lesson in accepting God's intervention in his relationships. True to his reputation, he would accept the Spirit's wisdom and keep up encouragement, even from a distance.

So what were the consequences? We have the gospel according to Mark! The second gospel is believed to be based on what Peter told John Mark. So, by cousinly encouragement, and commitment of his nearest and dearest to God's wisdom, Barnabas would unconsciously influence a ministry which still goes on. His example inspires us to become today's encouragers.

Read: Hebrews 3: 12–15; 10: 19–25.

'I am the true vine ... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.'
John 15: 1, 8

We are in Christ in order to produce fruit. Jesus repeats this concept seven times in eight verses, so must want us to be very clear about it. But what exactly does he mean?

As a young man, a certain general practitioner had been active in his medical school Christian Union. As he realised that open allegiance to Jesus could be unpopular, he argued that evangelism was not his gift. He said, 'I'll major on the fruit of the Spirit instead – on love, joy, peace and patience.' He now presents as a very kind doctor, but is not recognisable as one who belongs to Jesus Christ. (Galatians 5: 24)

John 15 suggests that bearing fruit is not something we do by ourselves but is an effect from outside. It comes from abiding in Jesus, who said, 'I chose you and appoint you to go and bear fruit.' (v 16) Fruit-bearing shows us to be his disciples. (v 8) The way we live and speak will show that we are devoted to Jesus. This is, after all, the purpose of creation, 'to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.' (Ephesians 1: 10)

The last section of John 15 makes it clear that many will react against an uncompromising allegiance to Jesus Christ. People are not persecuted for being loving, joyful or patient. We desperately need the Holy Spirit to keep us living God's way, according to his truth, and testifying openly to others about our Lord, Jesus the Christ. (v 27) Why do so many leave their first open devotion to the Lord Jesus for a socially acceptable, sterile Christianity? Let us all beware lest we fail to remain in Christ, not testifying about him. God can discard even doctors!

Read: John 15.

BVP

'... but God intended it for good ...' Genesis 50: 20

Joseph's brothers were worried. Many years before they had mistreated him and had intended to kill him. Relenting, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. Now Joseph was in control and after their father's death the brothers were at his mercy. What would he do? If he followed their example, they could expect harsh treatment. But Joseph saw God's hand in all the events in his life. God, he believed, intended these events for good. So not only did he forgive his brothers, but in addition he provided for them.

It is, of course, a very powerful lesson. Many in our professions have been treated shabbily or worse and one can understand their bitterness, and their desire for vengeance and restitution. God's people are different. They see every happening in their lives as part of God's grander design, as he fulfils his purposes in the world. A brilliant junior may be held back, so that less worthy favourites can prosper without competition from the bright youngster. Frequently, in the long run, talent will out and often the bright youngster ends on top. What will happen? The Christian will see God's hand in the process, even if apparently unfair. Eventually in authority, he or she like Joseph will continue to follow God's leading, making good use of the gifts of all, including the less worthy: surprising all by a forgiving attitude and by the success that is likely to come in such circumstances and from which all will benefit.

There are many marvellous promises for those whose primary allegiance is to God, who love him and who have been called according to his purpose. He makes their paths straight and in everything he works for their good. (Proverbs 3: 6; Romans 8: 28) Today, if you should face injustice, remember that God may intend it for good. He has plans for you that fit his overall purposes in his world. His ending is always perfect.

Read: Genesis 50: 15–21; Romans 8: 28–39.

JHJ

Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) ... Ephesians 5: 8–9

We become God's children when we believe in the name of Jesus. (John 1: 9–13) As his name means 'Saviour' (Matthew 1: 21), we are then saved from our sins and, through the Holy Spirit, change direction. (Romans 8: 12–14) We should become 'like a letter from Christ.' (2 Corinthians 3: 3)

To be a child of God therefore means:

- to become small so that others may feel great;
- to become a servant and promote others;
- to give so that those who lack may receive;
- to love so that those feeling unloved may know someone who never rejects them;
- to help those who ask for and deserve help as well as those who neither ask for nor deserve it;
- to be there when needed but never to impose when not wanted;
- to stay peaceful and so become a peace-maker;
- to keep cheerful so that those easily cast down may be lifted up;
- to keep on keeping faith even when discouraged, so that those without faith can find courage to live;
- to not only live a life of prayer, but to turn your prayers into life – more life for you and for those to whom you minister;
- to be God-centred and human-hearted, to involve oneself with humanity while keeping your vision on divinity, so drawing out the best in people;
- to share in the great moments of life – in birth and sickness, in marriage and in death – and always, whether in crisis or celebration, to bring comfort, blessing, and above all a sense of an unseen presence and of a meaning that we often overlook.

That is what it means to be a child of God.

Read: passages cited.

GMi

'Speak, for your servant is listening.' 'Here am I. Send me!'
1 Samuel 3: 10; Isaiah 6: 8

Here are two young people – or rather, a child and a young man. They stand completely alone, at different times, before God, ready to listen to him and do his will. Their prayers are brief. It is perhaps because they are young that they can be so direct with God. They have not yet learned to use a prayer language which is customary or flattering, to try to obtain what they desire. They are not calculating ... but listening.

Samuel knew the power of prayer. He was himself the answer to his mother's prayer. She had prayed and wept for a child for many years. Offering such a child to God, her dream was realised, and she bore a son. Samuel had grown up familiar with the house of God, and had confidence in him as in a good father – so without fear and in all simplicity he said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' Isaiah was presumably a young priest when, in the temple, he was made strongly aware of God's presence and heard his voice – which drew from him a similar short response, 'Here am I. Send me!'

What power there is in these brief prayers! No repetition, no argument. These two knew their Master and were ready to serve. These few words radically changed their lives and that of many another. Samuel is remembered as the first of the prophets, and Isaiah as the messenger of Messianic hope. Their total confidence in God and total readiness to serve him is what the Lord requires of us too as he assures us that he will be with us, and our strength will come from him. Furthermore, how we respond to him today will be of consequence to others as were Samuel and Isaiah.

Read: Isaiah 6; Judges 6: 13–16.

MCh

JULY

Praise be to the Lord, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song. Psalm 28: 6–7.

'Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.' Joshua 1: 9

Joshua had probably one of the most difficult jobs ever – that of continuing where Moses left off. Moses had taken over a million people through the wanderings in the desert to the promised land. The people had caused him endless problems yet he remained confident that God was with him through it all.

Joshua had to lead this motley multitude of men, women and children – with their animals – across the flooded Jordan river and to occupy the land of Canaan. What a task! He was repeatedly given the assurance that he would be victorious. He took God at his word and received the strength he needed.

We too, as believers, have a commission in life, and the command given to Joshua holds true for us. We are called to heal the sick, cheer the weak, strengthen the faint-hearted, comfort those in trouble, ‘with the comfort we ourselves have received from God’. (2 Corinthians 1: 4) Within healthcare we face many a daunting challenge, through procedures and in communicating health matters where the temptation so often is to avoid the issue. But when as a Christian we speak to a patient or a relative, we do so at the command of the Lord, and must ask for courage, strength and wisdom together with the compassion of the Saviour. Our prayer beforehand does not take away the fear of the assignment, but it does give the assurance of God’s resources.

Prayer: Lord, I know that it is part of my humanity to be afraid. May I learn to put my trust in you, so that I shall be able to do things better, more as you would wish.

Read: Joshua 1: 1–11; Isaiah 12; Psalm 56: 3–4; James 5: 1–8.

OPG

(Adapted from *The Doctor's Life Support* 1994)

'... give your servant a discerning heart ... to distinguish between right and wrong.' 1 Kings 3: 9

Despite being very clever, Solomon knew that he lacked discernment. Worldly know-how judges superficially, but discernment implies a wiser response. (1 Kings 3: 16–28) Matters of life and death, of budget balancing, are dilemmas causing much perplexity to health workers. Consultation with God's word provides working principles, but their application demands discernment.

Whenever I see a newborn baby gazing into the face of the parents or, at the other end of life, hear of final loving phone calls, I am reminded of how we are made in the image of a three-in-one God. (Genesis 1: 26–27) His strong inter-relatedness is an important part of our own makeup. As reverence for him is the beginning of knowledge, and further wisdom comes from him, it must be wise to honour his image in each other. (Proverbs 1: 7; 2: 6) Our judgments should therefore give weight to the personal (as well as physical) needs of others, ever mindful of their personal inter-relationships as well as of ours with them. (Matthew 22: 37–39) This can tip the scale when rights and wrongs seem equally balanced, but will often challenge accepted norms.

Antenatal counselling, care of the dying and even greater flexibility of visiting hours are some of the areas where to sustain (not ignore) creative relationships could radically alter much accepted practice. Our Lord Jesus paid a heavy price to restore mankind's broken relationship with God. Trying to practise after his pattern is also likely to be costly. (Matthew 16: 24, 25) Yet just as resurrection followed crucifixion so, in God's time, any cross we carry for him can be energised by his Spirit into a new, sometimes contagious, outlook. Christian pioneers of the hospice movement illustrated this, their sensitivity now being more widely valued. Whatever our field of practice, we are each offered the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2: 16) Consider (and apply) *that!*

Read: 1 Corinthians 1: 18–31.

JGo

'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?' Mark 4: 38

That is what the disciples said to Jesus in the middle of a storm on the lake of Galilee. Many of us may have said the same sort of thing in the middle of one of life's storms affecting us personally. The storm, the problem, the pain, may be in our personal lives, in the lives of those near to us, in the lives and crises of patients, in the lives of people far away caught in famine, in war or disaster. 'God!', we say, 'do you know, or don't you know, what is going on?'

This was no minor problem. Luke's account tells us they were in great danger. So it can be with the things that trouble us. They may be real problems that threaten to destroy lives, to wreck personalities or to tear families apart. They can completely throw us. But we so easily forget that, in the Galilee storm, Jesus himself was in the boat. Yes, he was sleeping. But he was there, in the same situation, sharing the same danger. The sleeping bit was irrelevant. He was neither unaware nor indifferent nor uncaring.

So it is today. He is there with us. We must never forget it. Long ago, the Psalmist knew: '... he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.' (Psalm 121: 3–4) Our God is a sharing God who does know what is going on. He does care. He is there, with us, in the midst of our storms.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, you know the storms and the problems of our lives. You have shared our human life and know it. Help us to know and to trust that you still share with us in everything. And that you are always there.

Read: Mark 4: 35–41; Luke 8: 22–25; Hebrews 4: 15–16.

RRW

(Adapted from *The Doctor's Life Support* 1994)

'What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.' Luke 13: 20–21

Jesus said 'The kingdom of God is near'. The kingdom had come with his arrival, but, like us, the disciples had much to learn about that kingdom and its implications. Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as being like yeast in dough. Only a tiny amount is needed to transform a large amount of flour but that small quantity of yeast must be 'mixed into the flour and worked all through the dough'.

As we seek to bring healing to others, we are to 'mix in the dough'. Our professional duties put us in direct contact with humanity in need. We meet the sick and those in pain, whether physical or emotional. We face illness, disease and death itself. We are committed to helping the suffering, irrespective of social status, religious beliefs or other divisive factors.

God calls us to serve him, through our medical knowledge and practice, and through the faith that transformed our own hearts. May we, in each act of medical assistance, add a tiny fraction of the yeast of the kingdom of God and a genuine measure of his love.

*Fill Thou my life, O Lord my God,
In every part with praise,
That my whole being may proclaim
Thy being and Thy ways.*

...

*Praise in the common things of life,
Its goings out and in;
Praise in each duty and each deed
However small and mean.*

...

*So shall no part of day or night
From sacredness be free;
But all my life, in every step,
Be fellowship with Thee.*

Horatius Bonar (1808–89)

Read: Matthew 13: 24–35.

Do not be anxious about anything ... Philippians 4: 6

An attractive forty-year-old female suffered from profound anxiety neurosis and over the years that I knew her consumed hundreds of tranquillisers. She had been divorced and had abandoned her children for her present husband. Her anxiety expressed itself mainly in a fear that her rugby-playing husband, who was younger than herself, would leave her for another woman. I longed to give her the faith in God which would relieve her anxiety. I thought this might also help her husband, who worked in personnel in a factory in which there were many disputes. It looked like a God-given strategy!

The first part of the plan worked. The patient developed a personal relationship with God. She looked radiant and relaxed. That was the end of the tranquillisers and she began to take a neighbourly interest in other people. Her relationship with her husband improved and he actually started asking her advice about his problems at work. Suddenly, a few months later he left her and took off with his secretary. Over the next months she faced problems, which would have tested the stoutest faith to its limits and which she met with God's help. She then left the area and I lost touch until a few years later, quite by chance, I heard that she had died. Her daughter told me that the church had been crowded for her funeral, as 'she had helped so many people'.

The lesson I learned was that human projects are as of nothing to God, compared with the salvation of a single soul. Read again Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well and learn that the person you meet today is important to him at this moment, and that he has plans for that person.

Read: John 4: 4–30.

FAMMca

(Adapted from *For God's sake, Doctor!* 1984)

July 6 God specialises in strengthening faith

'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' Luke 7: 50

My testimony may not apply so much to those who are not short of money and facilities for their work, but I praise the Lord that his mercy has helped me, an Indonesian doctor, to pass through every battle in my life. Whether the trouble has been disappointment, personal suffering, stress and frustration or simply shortage of materials for my work, God has always comforted me and given me strength to go on. He has taught me so much, particularly about the importance of faith in my day-to-day life.

A strong faith doesn't grow in one day, but one way to help it grow is to listen attentively to God's word. His word is practical – it works. The Bible is a book I can live by, always and for ever. 'Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.' (Romans 10: 17) His word reminds us that what looks impossible for men is possible with God and he will prove this as we trust him.

My work in a rural community has involved many difficult journeys, perhaps climbing up and down from hill to hill or crossing many rivers, often by canoe. There have been other dangers, when I've travelled in a small plane, or bumped over such rough, unmade roads that smoke has come out of the car. Only by God's help could we overcome the trouble. Once our speedboat was in a big storm and adrift for hours, but God calmed me with the remembrance of how Jesus stilled the waves. We ladled out the water and the captain took us safely to shore.

He stilled the storm ... and he guided them to their desired heaven. (Psalm 107: 29–30)

Read: Luke 8: 22–25; Psalm 18: 1–16.

Anon (Indonesia)

So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere. Luke 9: 6

When I moved to a rural area I already knew that life there would be hard. Equipment at the health centre was poor and there was no laboratory. To get to the nearest hospital took a whole day, and much money, for a journey by car, motorboat, ferry and car again. Yet God spoke to me through Luke 9: 6, quoted above. I knew that I was to be a rural missionary doctor.

Some patients had diseases I'd never heard of. One day I faced a very difficult situation. A teenager's condition was getting worse, with non-specific abdominal pain, and I had to decide whether he needed surgery. Suddenly I seemed to hear a voice whispering the name of the disease and also how to help his poor parents find funds. I prayed for the boy, encouraged him to pray too, and sent him off with his family, an intravenous infusion and two nurses. Later I heard of the successful removal of gangrenous gut (secondary to typhoid). A delay of two more hours would have been fatal. Great is the Lord!

I enjoyed working in the village, sharing the gospel with very poor people besides helping the sick. This was so like what the Lord Jesus had done in his earthly work. (Mark 3: 7–12) He felt very close.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you that you still work through us as we seek to help the helpless in your name. May we not only attend to their physical needs but also channel so much of your love to them that they will want to know you for themselves. Amen.

Read: Psalm 33: 8–19; Deuteronomy 10: 18; Mark 1: 21–39.

Anon (Indonesia)

July 8 God specialises in teaching and training

... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion ... Philippians 1: 6

After enjoying a time in rural work I was reluctant to take up the offer of post-graduate study abroad. Doctors assigned to poor communities cannot save money and I would need to find the course fees, a plane ticket and rent for a room – as well as to learn English. But God had his own plan for me and all was provided. All I did was to pray and then complete my studies.

With a higher qualification, I was promoted to a newly made post in the city. At first, I didn't know what to do or how to start my tasks. God told me to walk by faith and gave me godly understanding, so that I began to write many new concepts. These were eventually taken up and funded by the government, to be used throughout the province. ‘Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.’ (Proverbs 16: 3)

My main responsibility was to train medical staff over a wide area. Humanly speaking, this was already an impossible task on limited funds, but other duties and research projects also began to come my way. Sometimes I asked God why I must do all these things at once and was often tempted to give up, though I knew in my heart that he always knows in advance what is going to happen. Even on a one-day visit, he helped me to contact the right people.

In fact, all was completed just a few months before the conflict broke out which would have made it impossible for me to go on. I know that he was involved in helping me with the whole matter. Praise him!

Read: Psalm 18: 28–29; Hebrews 4: 15–16; 6: 7–12.

Anon (Indonesia)

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this. Psalm 37: 5

Throughout years of working in difficult conditions, God and his angels always accompany me. I have found this in so many ways, including matters of health, transport, accommodation and money.

When studying in Bangkok I needed emergency surgery, but was only ten minutes away from the hospital. From my upcountry workplace in Indonesia it would have taken a whole day, but the surgeon said that two hours more and I would have died. On another journey a snake bit me, but at the right moment I ‘happened’ to meet a doctor with the right antidote. Once, when unavoidably delayed, I prayed in faith that God would hold back the ferry I would otherwise have missed by over an hour. It looked incredible, but when I reached the port, the ferry was still there! It left just after I’d stepped on board. God never neglects his child.

When working as a government doctor in a dangerous area, I found the conditions of service poor, my colleagues difficult, and the salary small. Others earned as much as possible by spending afternoons in private practice, but my office work would have suffered if I’d done that. God reminded me that this was not simply a government placement but that he had put me there as his witness, so he helped me not to neglect those in my care and to be patient. My times were still in his hands. I stayed for ten years and felt his real involvement in my work and ministry, giving me so many moving experiences of his great faithfulness.

‘Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.’ (Colossians 3: 23)

Read: Psalm 18: 30–32; Philippians 4: 11–13.

Anon (Indonesia)

... it will not come near you. Psalm 91: 7

As an Indonesian working in one of our cities, I witnessed many injustices and asked to be changed to another district. My principal did not agree and I brought my struggle to God in prayer, asking him for a sign. I then had a dream about a city in chaos, with people fighting, and a voice telling me to run away. This message was confirmed in two separate sermons and my principal finally gave me leave to go away for two weeks only. By the end of that time, early in 1999, religious war had broken out and I could not book a passage back. Many in the city were killed, but in God's mercy I had been spared.

Later, I was sent back to the same place to help the suffering refugees. Though fighting was still going on, God's promises came to me from many sources, as well as in my own daily devotions, and these were stronger than the worries of those around me. As I flew back, I kept praying for the safety and protection of those who were to meet me. Between the airport and the city centre the route had to pass through alternate Muslim and Christian areas. When Christians passed through a Muslim area they could be intimidated or killed, as could Muslims passing through a Christian area. It would be easy to get into the wrong taxi and be cruelly treated. That was what I was thinking on the aeroplane.

Instead, God sent two foreigners to pick me up. When we passed through the Muslim area I prayed that we would not be stopped and asked about my religion. I did not want to save my life denying my faith and belief in Jesus Christ. He answered my prayer.

Read: Psalm 23.

Anon (Indonesia)

July 11 God specialises in coping with crisis

... it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Philippians 2: 13

After working late in an Indonesian trouble spot with an overseas woman doctor, our taxi was stopped by a troop of soldiers who threatened to seize us, but God helped us in his wonderful way and they let us go. I have found the truth of his word which says, ‘Because he loves me,’ says the Lord, ‘I will rescue him ... He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him.’ (Psalm 91: 14–15)

That psalm particularly helped when caught in the midst of fighting between two national parties. At the time, I was working both in a refugee camp and at my office base, but as the conflict lay between the two places I was advised to stay on call at home. Yet, as a doctor, how could I stay at home whilst others were being badly injured?

I knew this thought came from God, so I obtained permission to work in a hospital nearby and, with two other medical volunteers, set off to walk there, despite the gunfire. We took a stretcher and later borrowed an ambulance, very conscious of God’s prompting and protection. We were greeted with much excitement at the hospital as they were so short of medical staff. As routine commitments had been cancelled because of the conflict, I could complete my contract whilst still doing this work. God proved his power and saved me from any danger.

In all these things God has comforted and strengthened me. Praise the Lord! – and give honour only to him.

Read: 2 Corinthians 11: 26–30; Psalm 56: 3–4; Psalm 57: 7–11.

Anon (Indonesia)

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12: 18

After serious strife between the two faiths, I found myself working in one refugee camp for Muslim Indonesians and another for Christians. I was at first fearful about this, especially as my assistant nurse was a Muslim. However, they were all kind to me and never complained about my treatment. As well as praying that God would bless the medicine to my patients I shared my knowledge with this nurse, writing my prescriptions clearly so that he could still help people when I was not there. It seemed to me that this was a quiet way of showing him Christian love.

I have at times had to work with those who were not loving. Self-interest in the workplace can lead to jealousy, or sabotage of someone else's prospects, and I have experienced both. God has always comforted me through his word, reminding me that he is the principal manager and I work for him. At such times I pray for self-control as well as for those who hurt me, trying to encourage them in their work for the sick.

I also need help to show the same forgiveness and patience out of the workplace, for example in my marriage. Whatever the temptation before us, if we put God first in our lives, he will rid us of it. It is as we obey him that we can feel peaceful and happy at heart whatever happens.

*Trust and obey
for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus,
but to trust and obey.*

John H Sammis (1846–1919)

Read: Psalm 33: 12–22; Hebrews 13: 15–21.

Anon (Indonesia)

July 13 God specialises in making provision

'God himself will provide ...' Genesis 22: 8

God knows our needs and, despite a poor salary, he has met mine. Once, when I had to move to another assignment, I had very little cash left but needed to rent a room. Most rents were more money than I had, but whilst I was looking, a Christian businessman offered me a room free of charge, including meals, and I was accepted as one of the family. Another time a Christian friend lent a whole house in the city centre, again without rent. This became a house of medical mission, where doctors could share with and strengthen each other. I also used it for training junior doctors, which God called me to do without charge. Some would be sent to remote areas and I knew what they faced there.

Once, between jobs, and urgently needing funds to attend our regional ICMDA conference, I was unexpectedly asked to take over someone's practice during her leave. This gave me the necessary money, and my visa and means of transport were also remarkably provided at exactly the right time. Wonderful!

Sometimes I still wonder whether to make money more easily, for example by joining a private hospital or company, but God's answer so far keeps me in government service. I understand why many Christian people prefer private practice, as it is hard to work with high dedication and integrity on a government salary alone. Yet aiming for a comfortable income could make us forget to look for God's plan for our lives and careers. In fact, by working hard and waiting for God to lead, I was eventually promoted to a senior position in work that I like. It seemed unlikely that this could ever be, but his plans are brilliant! He is my Provider.

Read: Psalm 46; Philippians 4: 19.

Anon (Indonesia)

'... the God we serve is able to save us ... and he will rescue us ... But even if he does not ...' Daniel 3: 17–18

Daniel, threatened with death, firmly believed in God's ability to save, and he and his friends later stepped unscathed from the burning fiery furnace. Yet John the Baptist, jailed for his faithfulness to God, was not freed, but decapitated. The Lord Jesus, when arrested, knew that his Father could release him if he so willed, and told Pilate so (John 19: 11) but was still cruelly put to death. Persecution and martyrdom are both experienced by some faithful Christians today, whilst others tell inspiring stories of deliverance. Is God selective in his interventions, or no longer to be trusted?

Our own daily lives can go through times of difficulty or even danger. Sometimes we share the mystery and misery of prolonged suffering, when prayers seem to go unanswered – or could it be unheard? More often, our trouble is the endless workload, or a sense of carrying the burden alone. We long for deliverance, but the furnace only seems to get hotter. Like Elijah, we feel like saying, 'I have had enough, Lord.' (1 Kings 19: 4) God may be able, but seems so strangely inactive. Elijah felt like this, but was able to get up and go on after a good sleep and a couple of meals. His depression finally lifted when he tuned in to God's gentle whisper. (1 Kings 19: 12–13)

Our God does hear us and his voice still speaks, amplified by his Spirit as we reflect on his written word. As with Elijah, there may be practical steps which would relieve the tension. Then, clinging to his promises, and exercising trust that his way is perfect, we begin to realise that stress can be strengthening. In fact, it can become a spiritual growth point.

Read: Psalm 119: 25–32; 1 Kings 19: 1–18.

JGo

Therefore we do not lose heart ... For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 2 Corinthians 4: 16–17

Those watching Daniel and company inside the fiery furnace could see with them a fourth figure. In my own day I've seen heavenly light shining from the face of a dying woman as she expressed her great desire to glorify her Lord, despite many unanswered prayers for her healing. Yet were those prayers unanswered? God's 'No,' or 'Not yet,' are answers as well as his 'Yes.' In his good time, my friend *had* been healed of the fears and anxieties which lay behind the prayers for cure. She was dying, but her own last prayer was being abundantly honoured.

Others have described the radiance of certain Christian martyrs, from Stephen's day until now. (Acts 6: 15) Jesus himself has drawn near and walked with them, until it was time to go home. It is often in the furnace that he reveals his enabling presence to a watching world. Daniel's friends had confidence in God's ability to deliver them from the flames, but even should he not do so, a painful death would not conquer their faith in him. (Daniel 3: 18) Their murderer would have lost the power struggle, because it is those who endure to the end who receive the crown. (Revelation 2: 10)

Just as Easter Day followed Good Friday so, for all God's people, resurrection will finally follow crucifixion, whatever form this has taken. The outcome of our trials is in his hands and we can confidently leave it there. Eventually, every knee will bow and every tongue confess him Lord (Philippians 2: 10–11) – and some in that company may first have believed when they saw him walking beside us, even in the flames.

Read: Daniel 3: 28–30; Isaiah 43: 1–3; 2 Corinthians 4: 8–18.

JGo

'... you are precious and honoured in my sight, and ... I love you ...' Isaiah 43: 4

Belgian law states that, unless officially opposed, a dead person's organs can automatically be taken and used for grafts. As this was announced, my father turned off the radio and a discussion started. Ingrid, aged six, asked her grandmother, 'Would you like people to take bits of your body when you die and give them to other people?' Grandma replied, 'You know, dear, dead people feel nothing, so if someone else can be helped to survive, why not? But there isn't much left in me that will be worth giving.' The little girl's eyes flashed as she retorted, 'But Grandma, there is all your love!'

God is love and love is like God. It cannot be defined, measured or weighed. Love is a driving force, above material things. Ingrid was not worried about her grandmother's pace-maker or failing kidneys. What mattered to her was that her grandmother loved her. Such love is far more precious than all possible physical assets and the gift to be treasured most.

I once asked a nun what was her favourite Bible verse. Although in a wheelchair after fifty years of advancing multiple sclerosis, she immediately said, 'It's Isaiah 43 verse 4. We are precious in the Lord's eyes.' She knew God's immense love in spite of all her physical incapacity. God does not love us because we are someone special, or because we have done something tremendous, or been specially self-sacrificing. He loves us because we are precious in his eyes. Whatever our physical state, he calls us precious. It is he who gives us value and a reason for living.

Read: Deuteronomy 7: 6–9; Song of Songs 8: 6–7; 1 John 4: 16–18.

MCh

'Blessed are the poor in spirit ...' Matthew 5: 3

Perhaps you know the feeling? Things have gone wrong, maybe for a very long time! We have made mistakes, or have continuing and unresolved disagreements with colleagues. We know we should have acted differently. Perhaps the problem is one of ongoing sin! Added to this, we are physically and mentally exhausted, pushed beyond any reasonable limit and pressed on all sides to do more. No one, it seems, either knows or cares about the position we are in. Then, we read the words of Jesus quoted above, and find that he added 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

How can it be? Jesus was not implying that it is good when things do not go well or that we should seek to be in such a position. Rather, it is good when we recognise the position we are in, for only then can we discover the magnitude of God's grace in Jesus in which we, though guilty, are treated as though we had never done wrong. Only then do we turn meaningfully and confidently to God, receiving the gift of faith and being justified by his grace. Take heart, many have walked this way before and found joy and blessing in Jesus in their spiritual bankruptcy.

But spare a thought for those who do NOT feel poor in spirit. For them, things have gone very well, or so it appears. They feel in control. They overlook their own faults and do not see their own sin, even though they may be among the first to judge others. They seem to be so very rich, in worldly terms and maybe also spiritually. The Bible says otherwise and we need to pray that such people will humble themselves before God and receive his grace in Jesus. Today, let us pray that grace and peace may be theirs and ours in abundance. (1 Peter 1: 2)

Read: Ephesians 2: 1–10.

JHJ

***'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?'
Matthew 7: 3***

An old joke asks, 'Why can't we all live together like one big family?' and answers, 'The trouble is – we do.' Everybody, in spite of implicit problems, wants to be part of a happy family. The question is, how?

Every general practitioner knows the importance to health of secure marriages. Unhappy looking partners, suffering from domestic upkeep and a struggling marriage, come for consultation crying, 'But I must think of myself.' Yet if they would stop doing just that, life could look so different. Instead, their children produce psychosomatic symptoms, fearful that quarrelsome parents are about to separate, or if one has gone that the other will go, too. Health workers can be too stressed to identify these traumas, and some share them.

Fear has many causes. Partners may fear that their spouse will find someone else. Pregnant schoolgirls, afraid to own up at home, run away. Teenagers fear that their peers think them odd. Behind most of these fears lies fear of criticism and rejection, with poor communication between all those concerned, including advisers. The best recipe for a 'stick-together' family is 'Change starts in me.' If we ask him, God will find ways to tell us what he needs to change. We may need simpler ambitions, or less critical attitudes, to bring about happier families.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your human family sometimes misunderstood you, yet you responded with wisdom and grace and won your brothers' allegiance. As part of your extended family, may we know your peace and harmony in our own homes, then be ready to share the secret with others. Amen.

Read: Mark 3: 20–21, 31–35; Luke 4: 22; 1 Corinthians 9: 5.

FAMMcA

(Adapted from *For God's sake, Doctor!* 1984)

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Matthew 5: 3

The Son of the Most High was born in a stable. In his hidden life he was a carpenter. During three years of teaching, he had no place of his own. His burial was in a borrowed tomb. Not only did he pay particular attention to the poor (Luke 4: 18) – he was poor.

Is poverty a virtue and wealth a sin? Jesus blessed poverty of spirit, the humble acceptance that both spiritual and material wealth come from God. Sin lies in giving first place to money rather than God, and in forgetting to help his beloved poor. Though this can be a temptation, especially to private practitioners and entrepreneurs, we cannot serve both God and Money. (Matthew 6: 24) The economically poor are tempted to envy and hatred, sometimes to revolution and bloodshed, but without healing social tensions or ending poverty. Yet those showing true poverty of spirit as they look to God for their needs are often most generous to their poorer neighbours. There can be dignity in poverty as well as generosity in wealth.

Prayer: Take from me, O Lord, a clinging to more than is necessary, and help me not to be envious of those who have more: not only those who are richer, but who are more talented, more successful than I: of those who impress me because of their moral and mental superiority, who live in the world of fame because of their personalities and position.

Instead, clothe me in simplicity so that I can enjoy the last place, be satisfied with the lowest service and goodness, with the least regard and esteem: briefly, to be content with your grace, the most precious gift of all.

Bishop Gellert Belon of Hungary

Read: 1 Chronicles 29: 10–14.

GBel

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.'
Matthew 5: 4

In Luke's version of this beatitude he says, 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.' (Luke 6: 21) Nietzsche missed the laughter and protested, 'Christianity is contrary to my taste, because Christians are so sad.' Is that really so? There are times of justifiable sorrow. Thus, all but the stony-hearted find death sad. Jesus wept in sympathy at Lazarus' grave (John 11: 35) and as he foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem. (Luke 19: 41–44) Konrad Lorenz, Nobel prize winner, wrote about the awfulness of being unable to share another's pain. He added, 'Those who are unwilling or unable to suffer with others are also unable to share in their joys.' To try and quench grief with sedatives delays recovery after the loss and denies a comforting role to others.

Another kind of sadness comes when we labour in vain. Isaiah wrote of this: 'I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.' (Isaiah 49: 4) Yet later he could say, 'Shout for joy ... For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.' (Isaiah 49: 13) Preoccupation with self may cause needless sadness. It distorts perspective, perhaps causing insomnia after a dispute or misunderstanding, whilst the suffering of millions of hungry people does not disturb our sleep. We should repent of such egotism and open our hearts and hands to the sufferers, sharing their relief as we do so.

True repentance brings comfort after sorrow, as Mary Magdalene found. Released from past evil (Luke 8: 2) and an appalled witness of his death (Matthew 27: 55–56) she was rewarded by being first to see Jesus after his resurrection. She immediately shared this unforgettable joy. (John 20: 18) Mourners are truly blessed when, in God's time and care, the comforted become the comforters.

Read: 2 Corinthians 1: 3–11.

GBel

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.'
Matthew 5: 5

Today, meekness has lost its meaning and become equated with weakness, helplessness or foolishness. In turn, aggression is interpreted as courage, energy and dynamism, often used as a means of obtaining money, success, status, or even 'love'. It threatens the unborn, the disabled and the dying. Instead of marvelling at God's creation, it exploits it.

Yet Jesus said that the meek will inherit 'the earth'. His own meekness took him to Calvary, expressed there in prayer for his aggressors: 'Father, forgive them ...' (Luke 23: 34) Yet what an inheritance was his and, through him, ours as 'co-heirs with Christ'. (Romans 8: 17) This is not simply inheritance of a transient earthly kingdom, but an eternal spiritual one. The energy of his Holy Spirit is ours already, given 'as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.' (2 Corinthians 5: 5)

Meekness in the face of aggression requires superhuman inner strength. It is a natural instinct to retaliate and to seek to dominate, be this on the military battlefield, around a committee table, or in confrontation with an awkward patient. The Authorised Version of the Bible uses the word 'meekness' for the penultimate fruit of the Holy Spirit. (Galatians 5: 23) So we are offered superhuman strength!

*Mortify in me, O Lord, the desire to dominate,
 the feeling of spiritual superiority,
 the sense of physical advantage ...
 Reveal to me how divine harmony of the soul is spoilt
 if I do not carry out my duties towards others
 and when I make unjustifiable demands on them ...
 Open-hearted meekness recognises
 the warmth of your fatherly love everywhere,
 so will soften the severity of my heart and temper its anger.
 Help me gladly to take upon myself this sacrifice of meekness,
 so that I may truly possess
 every joy and beauty of the earth.*

Bishop Gellert Belon of Hungary

Read: passages cited.

GBel

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.' Matthew 5: 6

The concept of righteousness includes that of justice. Christ's justice is filled with forgiveness, so surpassing every justice of the world. When he promised the Holy Spirit, he spoke of how he would 'convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment ...' (John 16: 8) The world is full of injustices. Despite our souls having been created with a natural hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, only his Spirit can help us to apply his justice to those in our care. This means that we should be hungering and thirsting for more of his vision and provision ourselves, not only for our own satisfaction but to spill over into the lives of others.

Luke's version of this beatitude is shorter: 'Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.' (Luke 6: 21) As most of the hungry in the world are also poor, this emphasises our responsibility to relieve them, both practically and by confronting some of the injustices which oppress them. How can we do this in our lives as health professionals? A few may be called to act in the political arena, or to join missions or aid agencies on the front line of world need. Most of us lead more restricted lives, but we can usually offer health education, and sometimes more practical assistance, to those we meet who live in material poverty. It is certain, too, that even the most prosperous of our patients can have a conscious lack of deeper satisfaction.

By being close to people, we have the great privilege – and responsibility – of sharing with hungry souls where to find the bread and water of spiritual life. It is an injustice not to do so.

Read: Luke 6: 37–38; Romans 8: 1–17.

GBel

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.'
Matthew 5: 7

At any time throughout history, God could have banished mankind from the earth, but has chosen not to do so. In his dialogue with Abraham about the fate of Sodom, he would have shown mercy for the sake of just ten good men. (Genesis 18: 32) In describing God's acts of mercy, Ezekiel could as easily have been describing the tasks of a health professional: 'I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak ...' (Ezekiel 34: 16)

Dr Luke reports Jesus' parables of the prodigal son (Luke 15) and the good Samaritan. (Luke 10) Not only do they both tell us of God's mercy, but how we can model it by receiving the outcast and caring for the broken. Many health workers can facilitate what have been called the seven corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to shelter the homeless, to visit the sick, to visit the prisoner and to bury the dead.

More directly, most of us can actually perform the seven spiritual acts of mercy: to comfort the afflicted, to counsel the doubtful, to instruct the ignorant, to admonish sinners, to forgive offences, to bear wrongs patiently and (let us not forget) to pray for others. Jesus said that mercy will beget mercy. A prisoner was repeatedly beaten by his jailer, who then said, 'I know that you hate me.' Each time, the victim replied, 'No, I love you. I am a Christian.' Gradually the beatings stopped and instead the jailer brought food.

As well as meditating on God's mercy, each of us may well give thanks for other times when to show mercy has been to find it coming the other way.

Read: Psalm 136.

GBel

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.'
Matthew 5: 8

Moses was eager to see God. 'Show me your glory,' he asked, but the Lord answered, '... no-one may see me and live.' (Exodus 33: 18–20). During the transfiguration of Jesus, Peter wanted to prolong the moment, but on hearing God's voice, all three disciples present 'fell face down to the ground, terrified.' (Matthew 17: 6) Similarly, when the glorious Son of God appeared to John, the apostle wrote, 'When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.' (Revelation 1: 17)

Why was it that to glimpse the glory of God overwhelmed these men with fear? God is absolute power, purity and holiness, and men are evil-hearted and unclean. The two are incompatible. Today, the media suggest that the pure heart is old-fashioned and sin non-existent. Yet ten years ago I happened to enter a Budapest church during a five-hour evening service on a weekday. It was full of mostly young people, celebrating the Hungarian medieval Prince Imre, or Emeric, canonised because of his chastity. They still had a desire for purity of heart.

In our work as health professionals we meet many who have fallen short of God's standards of purity. We are not immune ourselves. King David shows us the next step. After his double sin of adultery and conspiring to murder, he wrote the finest of all penitential psalms, pleading for mercy. The impure can be made pure again.

Prayer: '... wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow ... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.' Psalm 51: 7, 10–12.

Read: 2 Samuel 11; Psalm 51.

GBel

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.' Matthew 5: 9

Anticipating the coming of the Messiah, Isaiah foretold that he would also be known as 'Prince of Peace'. (Isaiah 9: 6) At his birth the heavenly host said, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.' (Luke 2: 14) What is peace? It is not the truce after a battle nor is it the inevitable result of compromise after negotiation. Satisfactory negotiation requires special talents, exercised by people in special positions. Yet although none of this applied to the apostles, Jesus sent them out to proclaim peace. (Luke 10: 5)

To grant us this peace, Jesus paid the highest price for it in his blood. He now sends us to proclaim his peace in the conflicts of our personal and professional lives. This may not always be pleasant, but it is a duty. To be peacemakers we need to accept diversity of opinion whilst maintaining a fruitful dialogue, and avoid condemning someone totally because of particular misdeeds. Holding such a grudge is to sin against truth and justice.

To keep the peace, we must be ready to listen, to learn and to unlearn, expressing appreciation and respect where we can. Thus Pope John XXIII sent a telegram of congratulation to the first woman astronaut, a Russian. He was not implying that he agreed with the current ethos of her country, but praising what was praiseworthy. Would our inter-departmental (or family) conflicts perhaps diminish through such peace offerings? Our next step is to examine our own conscience for sins which cause us to oppose peace, dealing with these at source rather than allowing battles to commence. If, despite our best efforts, disagreements persist, we should keep on praying. Peace, after all, is a gift of God.

Read: Romans 5: 1; Ephesians 2: 13–18.

GBel

'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Matthew 5: 10

How absurd it sounds to be blessed by persecution! Yet in every generation there have been those who have lived and died by this beatitude. The faithfulness of the three young men, thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's burning fiery furnace, caused him to glorify their God. (Daniel 3: 28) The early apostles rejoiced 'because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.' (Acts 5: 41) In 1679, the Jesuit Philip Evans played his harp under the gallows; in 1794, sixteen Carmelite nuns sang a hymn before being guillotined; in 1945, the Franciscan Maximilian Kolbe took the place of a family man and accepted his death penalty, surprising his jailers by first singing in his cell. Many others, named and unnamed, made the twentieth century outstanding for its record number of Christian martyrs.

Luke's version of this beatitude gives more detail: 'Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.' (Luke 6: 22–23) Though some may do so, few of us who read this are likely to face death for our faith, yet most committed Christians will experience something from Luke's list. It can be hard to rejoice in unkind remarks unless we keep these verses before us, mindful of those who have suffered more and yet borne it patiently, even joyfully, for the sake of one who was despised and rejected that we might enter his kingdom.

Prayer: I beseech you, O Lord, that I may be happy though persecuted, because I know that this is the infallible sign that I belong to you and not to the world.

Bishop Gellert Belon of Hungary

Read: 1 Peter 4: 12–19.

GBel

... contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. Jude: 3

This letter from Jesus' brother Jude urged the early church to fight for biblical doctrines, from which some divisive church members were trying to depart. They challenged the apostles' authority, although it was drawn from the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. However spiritual they might seem, false teachers 'follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit.' (v 19) The antidote? To 'build yourselves up in your most holy faith' (v 20), and then to defend it.

Such theological problems have never left the church, but to follow the teachings of the Bible is the way to remain true to God. The false teachers were guided by instinct rather than the Spirit, possibly claiming spiritual dreams as God-given guidance. (v 8) Unfortunately, some today still think that to be 'led by the Spirit' is when God guides their instincts by personal inspiration. In fact, the Spirit takes people back to the teachings of Jesus, his Old Testament prophets and his apostles, recorded in the Bible as the only reliable revelation of God. Any contrary 'inspiration' is not from him.

A London medical school lecturer loved his Bible and was a gifted teacher. His spirituality impressed many. Following various experiences, he believed that the Lord had spoken directly to him, telling him to leave his wife and children and later directing him to a younger, more vivacious, partner. Next, his Bibles were seen in a secondhand bookshop. What apostasy! To be truly in the Spirit means living in accord with and obedience to the word of God. To contend firmly against false teaching will be difficult and is often called unloving. Yet we should be loving and welcoming to all others, in the hope that they might be saved. (v 23)

Read: Jude's epistle.

BVP

... I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.
3 John: 2

There are curious inadequacies in many of the definitions of health used in contemporary medicine. Health, we are often told, implies complete or optimal physical, mental, and social well-being and is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. This particular definition, good as it may be, does not mention the soul, a word which does not appear in many medical dictionaries but which describes the spiritual part of a person distinct from the body and mind. The soul controls the motivation for living and doing and it sparks the joys and hopes, which are so much parts of the healthy personality. Nor does the definition really include the idea of exuberant vitality, a quality to be used and expended before one dies.

In the Bible health implies well-being of body, mind and soul. When Jesus healed, there was so often spiritual as well as bodily healing. We see the same approach in John's letter to his dear friend Gaius, a part of which is quoted above. Again, in the Bible, it is clear that God wants exuberant and wholehearted service. There is to be no holding back. Read again the account of Amaziah's life. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, but not wholeheartedly. (2 Chronicles 25: 2)

One can waste health by doing nothing with it or by frittering it on trivialities. By contrast, Paul struggled with all the energy Christ gave him to benefit the new church. (Colossians 1: 29) When Jesus heals, he heals body, mind and soul, opening the door for those healed to a new world of peace, contentment and joy, found in following his example of extravagant service to others. In his case this culminated in his death on the cross. How healthy is your soul today? How extravagant is your service for him?

Read: 2 Chronicles 25: 1–10; 14–16; Colossians 1: 28–2: 5.

JHJ

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. Psalm 20: 7

So much in life depends on trust. The Bible frequently uses the word. Human relationships depend on it. In the UK, organisations like ICMDA and CMF have established Trusts, whose trustees supervise money given to benefit others, but are forbidden to use any themselves.

There are at least three aspects of trust that concern the Christian doctor. First, we have been entrusted with talents and gifts, money and possessions, and not least the gospel itself. These are not to keep to ourselves, but we are to nurture and develop them to benefit others. So, having taught the gospel to Timothy, Paul told him to ‘guard what has been entrusted to your care.’ (1 Timothy 6: 20)

Secondly, this means that we must be trustworthy people. I am one of twelve members of a church Trust, in existence since 1554, with the remarkable record of no trustee ever having used the money improperly. Christian health professionals should be the sort of people with whom patients can trust their secrets, their health and their lives, knowing that the knowledge will only be used for their benefit. Sadly, the present upsurge of litigation, and championing of patients’ rights, shows how, rightly or wrongly, this trust has broken down.

Thirdly, the only way we can be so trustworthy is by putting our trust in our utterly trustworthy God. In the verse above, the psalmist noted what others trusted in (and some still trust in race-horses today!) Instead we need God’s mind and his daily help.

Prayer: Lord, strengthen my trust in you, so that I can be trusted with talents and possessions, patients’ confidence and the gospel message. Amen.

Read: Psalm 62.

AJ

'... You are a stumbling block to me ...' Matthew 16: 23

This rebuke was given by Jesus to Peter after he had denied Jesus' warning about his forthcoming arrest, death and execution. Peter was acting as Satan's agent of temptation – a stumbling block instead of a rock-like support.

Several years ago, I climbed a high mountain in the state of Colorado. The long final ascent involved an exhausting scramble over boulders, some almost a metre high, and I began to doubt my resolve. Then the wonderful view from the summit and the exhilaration of being there completely banished those doubts. The rocks were my stumbling stones. As Christians, when our behaviour is un-Christlike, we can cause unbelievers and immature Christians to stumble or become doubtful. I confess that at times my actions, attitudes or words may have been stumbling blocks to fellow workers in the hospital or office.

A second passage about stumbling blocks is harder to understand. Paul quotes Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus, calling him 'a stone that causes men to stumble'. (Isaiah 8: 14; Romans 9: 33) Clearly Jesus does not impede the way to salvation, but becomes a stumbling block to those who will not believe.

On a mission trip by bus to Honduras, we found many roads in great disrepair, sometimes bordered by rock-falls. Surprisingly, one pile of rocks had clearly been put in the middle of the road by human hands. We slowed to drive round it, and found the road ahead was a washout, with a steep drop-off. The rocks were our warning of great danger ahead. Jesus warned that 'broad is the road that leads to destruction'. (Matthew 7: 13) Perhaps we are to act as his warning of danger ahead to our unbelieving friends. Our love and compassion will be much more effective than words of condemnation. Let us be the right kind of stumbling block.

Read: 2 Corinthians 6: 3–10.

RFA

... a righteous man will be remembered for ever. He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Psalm 112: 6–7

We are constantly bombarded by bad news, which can have a powerfully negative influence on the way we think and feel. Whether it comes from the media or from conversation with our colleagues or associates, it will influence our lives, because what we hear and see becomes part of our own reality.

When bad news leaves us shaken or confused our first need may be to calm down and ask ourselves, ‘Is this true or false?’ In such a situation, prayer can calm our emotions and thoughts. If we ask God, he is able to help us find a true perspective. If the bad news is true it may mean that we are entering a time of trial or testing in our lives. Negative thoughts can dominate our minds, plunging us into a state of anxiety. We may be tempted to give way to feelings of hate, resentment or anger, or even to turn to alcohol or drugs which could ruin our lives.

When tested we must simply accept it, putting all our faith in the Lord and trusting that he who allows such a trial will see us through it and ultimately release us from it. We must look to Jesus from the start and ‘fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith ...’. (Hebrews 12: 2) He will not let us be moved.

*Fear not, He is with thee, O be not dismayed;
For He is thy God and will still give thee aid;
He'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by His righteous, omnipotent hand.*

Richard Keen (c. 1787)

Read: Psalm 112.

MIE

AUGUST

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'
Lamentations 3: 22–24.

He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord. Psalm 112: 7

Bad news, of course, may not be true. Whether it comes in the news media or from private sources, discernment is needed. The Bible defines Satan as a deceiver, a liar ... the father of all lies and the lie which disturbs us may simply be part of the devil's evil scheming.

If God allows us to discern the lie quickly there is no problem. But if we have to carry the burden of bad news for any length of time, believing it to be true, then we must carry it prayerfully. We need to learn to leave what is troubling us in God's hands, resting the full weight of its consequences on him, trusting that he will intervene in the right way and at the right time.

The enemy wants us to lose the peace, joy, love and self-control that Jesus has given us. We have three powerful weapons to protect us from our enemy: the word of God, prayer and praise and we must not allow the enemy to rob us of God's blessings. He is our strength, so let us resist Satan's strategies.

Prayer: Father, teach us how to rest in you and help us to learn how to remain firm and confident. Work in us and in our problems and may our victory be in you alone.

Read: Romans 8: 28–39.

MIE

... he humbled himself ... Philippians 2: 8

The rest of this passage and John's story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet both lie behind the meaning of the ICMDA logo of the cross, bowl and towel, recalling Jesus' example of humble self-sacrifice. Yet humility is not always the first thing we notice about doctors. From school days on, they tend to have done rather well and been praised for it. To graduate from student to house officer can be to walk the wards with a definite swagger, not always subsiding with time. Yet what is there to be so superior about? What have we that we did not receive?

The medical world is a competitive one. Scoring over others, whether by a brilliant diagnosis, a clever test or a long list of publications – this is the way to stand out. Yet how does such a goal reflect Paul's call to seek the same humble mind and manner as Christ Jesus showed? It doesn't.

If such achievements do come our way, they should be seasoned with humility, for it is God who exalts to the highest place. Should this happen, the glory is his, not ours. Of course, there is pleasure and celebration to be found in doing well, but with a thankful, not a proud, heart.

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day.
By his love and power controlling
All I do and say.*

...

*May the love of Jesus fill me,
As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing,
This is victory.*

...

Kate Barclay Wilkinson

Read: Matthew 6: 1; 20: 20–28.

JGo

Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 1 John 3: 16

Our logo goes even further than reminding us to be humble. It speaks of loss as well as lowliness, of a willingness to die to worldly ambition, to put a cross through our capital 'I' and to know the fellowship of Christ's suffering. (Philippians 3: 10–11) This can mean death to fame and prestige. Many believers, working for oppressive regimes, may deliberately be given remote and difficult postings, or still harsher forms of persecution. Others, who have volunteered for missionary service, will find that the going gets tough, whilst old classmates write of their more comfortable or prestigious lives.

Yet the cross of Christ led on to his resurrection and ascension, and to our salvation. He has given to his followers the transforming power of his Spirit, whose first fruit is love. (Galatians 5: 22) Whatever the workplace, any service or suffering willingly undertaken for him, out of love, renews fellowship with him and transfers energy from his Spirit to ours. Like Paul, we learn to count as worthless other possibilities, if not in his will for us. (Philippians 3: 7)

Our goal should not be to carve out great careers for ourselves, but to let him change us into his likeness. (2 Corinthians 3: 18) As with all sculpture, anything spoiling the artist's intention has to go. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. (1 Peter 5: 5) Those who humbly endure to the end, even in painful circumstances, may miss out on earth's merit awards, but receive instead heaven's crowns. Then, in unending worship, they will put these at his feet. (Revelation 2: 10; 4: 10–11)

Prayer: Lord Jesus, please help me to make your goals my goals, whatever the cost involved, and in all things to seek to be like you, to your glory. Amen.

Read: Philippians 3: 1–11.

JGo

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. Galatians 6: 2

Caring for patients is a very important vocation, taking care of a human being with both spirit and body. The patient is a human like you, so you identify with his or her suffering. I have seen some patients whose suffering touched my depths. As I tried to see the image of God in them, I prayed to him in tears, ‘Lord, why do I see you in these circumstances? Why do you suffer so much?’ The conviction I received from him was, ‘I know my flock is suffering, but for you, as you say you love me, just show your love here.’

When we are caregivers we should know our limits – we are not God. Even in our scientific, stress-filled and competitive careers, deep down we are still human. Nevertheless, if indeed we are Christ’s disciples, we must abide by the basic principle of love, laying down our lives for others. (1 John 3: 16) We must also remember how, when Jesus heard the story of the Galileans who had suffered brutality under Pilate, he showed us his attitude towards extreme suffering. It did not mean that they had sinned (Luke 13: 1–3), or that God was not merciful.

It is vital to realise that God knows us humans better than we know ourselves.

Prayer: God our Father, you sent us our Lord Jesus to redeem us. We are bought with a price. Moreover, your Holy Spirit nourishes us in these tough times. Help us to identify with suffering people and endeavour to love them. Console us, Lord, as we weep to see your image suffer. Let us not condemn anybody, but know that your power sustains us all. Amen.

Read: Matthew 25: 31–46; 1 Corinthians 13.

PMas

... we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love.
1 John 4: 16

Having gone through medical school and worked half my internship in Europe, going home to Africa to finish the internship was just one more uncertain venture. Yet it was clear in my spirit that this was what God wanted, and even my faithful Christian doctor friends were convinced that I was doing the right thing. Then, in my good old third world country, I was suddenly thrown in the middle of the deep blue sea like a toddler and expected to swim. Due to shortage of staff, my duties ranged from those of a nurse to those of a registrar. Occasionally, I had to take a decision which, in the safe haven of a developed country, would only have been taken by a consultant. Job satisfaction became non-existent.

I knew that the system was not being fair to me. I felt abused and exploited. Reverse culture shock made matters worse and I whined and whined. At one point I thought, ‘Was God really right to tell me to complete my internship here?’ Perhaps I had been wrong to think so. Yet despite my doubts, deep down I knew that I had heard him aright. Does that sound familiar?

The goodness of the Lord then amazed me. The Bible tells us how Abraham was presumed righteous for having believed when he could not see. (Genesis 15: 6) In the same way, I was amazed how well things worked out, for this is what God did for me: he gave me colleagues, patients and even seniors who were under tremendous pressure from their workload, including attending to major pandemics, but who were still willing to accommodate and support me.

Yes, Lord, I know. You are the God who performs miracles.
(Psalm 77: 14)

Read: Psalm 77.

PMas

I will remember the deeds of the Lord. Psalm 77: 11

I can say ‘Yes, Lord, I know,’ because of my personal experience of Psalm 77. He sustained me when I was a blind and blinkered ‘Christian’, when I was an obvious sinner, and eventually when I accepted him as my Lord and Saviour, yielding to his sovereignty. He carried me through a tough time when I was doubtful about being able to complete medical school, and other hard times since. Remembering, too, the responsibilities of some medical students in underprivileged nations who have to work like physicians or surgeons during their electives, it seems that God sometimes gives us tasks beyond our capacity so that we learn to know more of his strength.

I wonder what was going through Abraham’s mind as he was preparing the altar and tying Isaac’s hands for sacrifice, whilst at the same time knowing that God had promised a lot of descendants through this particular son. (Genesis 17: 19) Remembering God’s past faithfulness would strengthen him to entrust both the present confusion and the future fulfilment to the one who had given that promise. He, too, must have said, ‘I will forever know.’

Prayer: God my creator, I praise and confirm your sovereignty in my life. I know that you have a plan for me and I glorify you for so far showing me the clear way forward. And with the little you give me to be a health giver, may I always know that, in your hands, that little will work. Let there be no clouding of my vision of your power and perfect providence, and let not circumstances obscure from me the knowledge of your will being done.

Read: Hebrews 11: 11–19; Lamentations 3: 22–24.

PMas

You shall have no other gods before me. Exodus 20: 3

Never did I imagine I would disobey the commandment that I should have no other gods before God. I have been a Christian for many years and drifted along happily, in the church and within a Christian family. Of course no other god would have a place in my life. But what is a god? A god is some supernatural being that becomes the major driving force in one's life, the source of comfort, strength, and reward, and with the ability to judge and control. So what had my profession become? Well, not supernatural at any rate! Leaving that aside, it certainly met many of the other criteria detailed above and, if I am honest, it does consume the greater part of my life.

That said there is much that is good in my profession. It is worthy. It sets and maintains high and moral standards, usually! Its purpose is to help and heal people individually and in communities. It struggles with the problems that arise from human behaviour and has very great wisdom. Many Christians have contributed to it. So, what is my problem?

Essentially it is, I suppose, a matter of precedence. All is well if my allegiance to my profession is clearly subservient to my allegiance to God and if God controls and has priority in my professional life. But if my professional life intrudes to the extent that it, rather than God, controls me and that I worship it, then I have broken God's commandment. This is, I am sure, a problem faced by people in many walks of life. Let us be warned! We must continually test our allegiance to God in prayer, by reading the Bible and by maintaining fellowship with other Christians. Take care lest you miss the warnings, allowing your profession to become your god.

Read: Ephesians 4: 1–16.

JHJ

'This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.' John 15: 8

When we sing and proclaim the glory of God, of what do we naturally think? To my mind comes the wonder of his eternal existence, that he made everything and keeps track of all that is in creation – even to counting small birds and the hairs on people's heads! Then, too, is it not amazing that the Almighty should describe himself as Love, the love which gives itself for others? (1 John 3: 16)

But what does Jesus say of his Father's glory? It is that we, you and I, his followers, should bear a lot of that sort of fruit which demonstrates that we are Christ's disciples. In other words, what God Almighty regards as his glory, is what we his followers do, quite apart from what he does. God the Creator treasures supremely how we live to demonstrate his love and grace, through what we do and how we do it. The more like Jesus we are, the greater our proclamation of the glory of God.

For us, how do we define our glory, what makes us pleased or proud? Is it that we have attained a prominent position or become famous for some particular discovery or therapy? If God glories in what people do in following him, should we not assess our value in terms of what others do because of us? Paul described his glory and joy, and that of his colleagues, as being the Christ-like lives of those to whom they had ministered. (1 Thessalonians 2: 19–20) Similarly, John echoes what many a parent feels when witness is given that one's children are walking in the truth of Christ. (2 John: 4; 3 John: 4) Our glory then, as with God, is in what others are or do because of us.

Read: John 17.

RKMS

'Can you fathom the mysteries of God?' Job 11: 7

Are we reluctant to believe that God heals, or can heal? After all we work in carefully regulated professions. Our names appear on registers, their presence indicating levels of education necessary for particular forms of professional practice. We are likely to have read of disastrous interventions by those not qualified in health care, so we may not find it easy to accept the possibility of divine intervention in healing. The problem is apparently much wider, because many find it very difficult to accept the possibility that God exists, is in control and that he intervenes according to his will. So the virgin birth, Jesus' miracles, and the events of Pentecost, to give but a few examples, fly against the understanding many have of scientific truth.

The underlying difficulty has to do with acceptance, or lack of acceptance, of God, as a spirit, infinite and unchangeable; God who holds all wisdom, power, goodness and truth. The idea, one accepts, is mind blowing and challenges rational humankind in believing that it has the potential to acquire all knowledge and to control the future without dependence on any higher being. One way or the other, it is a matter of belief, for we have no means of proving or of disproving the existence of God. The Christian tastes and finds that God is good and is blessed. (Psalm 34: 8) With belief comes deep humility, accepting the all too evident limitation of human knowledge. Then too, ears and eyes, sharpened by God's Spirit, discover his interventions in our lives, interventions fitting us for his plans, for us and for his world. It is indeed 'marvellous in our eyes'. (Psalm 118: 23) Pray that you may hear and see today, as God in Jesus heals bodies and souls and that the unbelieving may be given the faith that will change their lives.

Read: Daniel 4: 34–37; Psalm 90: 1–12.

JHJ

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. Deuteronomy 33: 27

We have all known patients who are angry that they are not healed, or relatives unable to bear the thought of losing loved ones. Careful diagnoses have been made and suitable treatment provided based on those diagnoses and according to the best medical practice. But healing has not occurred and the symptoms and signs of disease remained with relentless downhill progression. Quite often in such circumstances patients feel let down and blame God. After all, they were Christians or they lived good lives! Why hasn't God intervened?

The Bible frequently describes healing by divine intervention, more frequently in the New Testament than in the Old. There are accounts of healing by Jesus, the apostles and by others. About 41 of Jesus' miracles involved healing, compared with about nine non-healing miracles. Jesus healed leprosy, paralysis, gynaecological disorder, blindness, inability to speak, crippling deformity (including severe hand damage), dropsy, dementia and demon possession, and he raised some from the dead. Peter, Philip, Paul and an unnamed apostle also healed; as did the 72 sent out ahead of Jesus and an unnamed man found by the disciples casting out demons in Jesus' name.

Why then have our patients not been healed? Perhaps we, and others in the church, prayed fervently for healing but it did not occur. It is a fact that none of those healed by Jesus is alive today and, as one would expect, the Bible recounts occasions when healing by divine intervention did not occur. 'There is a time for everything ... a time to die ...' (Ecclesiastes 3: 1-2) There is of course no answer to satisfy the human mind. Understanding comes through faith that God is in control and that, come what may, the Christian is safe in his hands, safe should recovery occur or should death lead into his presence. After all, has he not gone to prepare a place for us?

Read: John 14: 1-14.

JHJ

'He who believes in me will live, even though he dies Do you believe this?' John 11: 25-26

Where do we turn for help, comfort or guidance? Those struggling with computer problems can look at the manual ... but may then need help to understand it. In life's difficulties we often turn to others for help. When the problems are secular or professional, a non-Christian friend may satisfactorily meet the need. Support from fellow believers, though not inevitably infallible, underlines the invaluable resource of a local church. Our truest guide is the Bible, although it is not to be made subject to our own interpretation (2 Peter 1: 20) or obeyed to the letter without regard for the Spirit. He alone will bring it to life. (2 Corinthians 3: 6)

The Jews of Jesus' day believed the scriptures, but were mostly blind to the fulfilment of prophecy going on before their eyes. Martha, distressed about her brother's death, and no doubt a little comforted by the sympathy of others, also believed in the general resurrection. Yet Jesus challenged her to go further. He did not ask her to seek the opinion of others, or even to believe a Bible verse. He asked her to trust him.

Martha and others, then and since, had to see the person of whom the scriptures speak, and respond to him in person, rather than only in theory. 'Yes, Lord,' she told him, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.' (John 11: 27) Trusting him with her problem became the answer to it. This principle still applies, not only to our initial salvation, but to all life's subsequent experiences and problems. What was veiled can become clear as we submit it, in faith, to Jesus.

Read: 2 Corinthians 3: 16-18; James 1: 5.

DEPB

Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Colossians 4: 5

Health professionals meet people at times when, facing mortality, some begin to think about God. We need to be wise in the way we respond to them. Jesus said, ‘Salt is good ... Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.’ (Mark 9: 50) As natural man is neither good nor peaceful, how can he be salty? The ‘salt’ referred to must be God himself. As we trust and abide in him, so he is able to use us as seasoning to a tasteless world.

In medical practice, intravenous solutions use different concentrations of salt. Too high a concentration is damaging physically, and there are Christians who, by being too ‘salty’, cause damage spiritually. More commonly, Christians are not salty enough, only differing from non-Christians by how they spend their Sunday mornings. Jesus warned ‘the salt of the earth’ to stay salty. If too insipid, he pronounced it no longer good for anything except to be thrown out. (Matthew 5: 13)

Jesus promised his disciples the power of the Holy Spirit as their witness radiated out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1: 8) So he does not only call Christian health workers to consider foreign missions (long-term or short-term) but to be salt in the examination rooms into which God has placed them. We can witness right where we are to our patients, about how God, or prayer, or the Bible, have affected and changed every aspect of our lives. This testimony, signalled or spelt out, is given in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the results left to God. Every appointment can become a ‘divine appointment’ as we take opportunities to learn how to be the right concentration of his ‘saline solution’ for every patient, every day.

Read: Colossians 2: 6–7; 4: 2–6.

WL

'Is it not written in your Law, "I have said you are gods"?'
John 10: 34

I love what I do for a living. Someone has said that general practice gives us a ringside view of humanity and it is a great privilege to earn a living from doing what you'd always dreamed of doing, and knowing that you do it well. Of course there are pressures, sometimes pains, but always some pleasure in a normal working week. In making a correct diagnosis, in receiving a 'Thank you' card from a patient, or in seeing my students master a new skill, I feel the same kind of thrill as that expressed by Eric Liddell, the Olympic runner: 'When I run, I feel God's pleasure.'

Os Guiness writes, 'Somehow we human beings are never happier than when we are expressing the deepest gifts that are truly us.' Isn't this because we are made in the image of God? We may usually think of 'being godly' in moral terms, but creativity is also part of God's image in us. To quote John Elredge in his book, *Journey of Desire*, the imagery 'is not certain qualities in our character but capacities of our nature.' Thus, God announces our likeness to himself in the context of our place in creation. We are to 'rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air ...' (Genesis 1: 26–28)

This is what differentiates us from the rest of creation and gives us such potential for happiness in our vocation. As health care workers, we have a role which can be intensely rewarding. It gives us enormous scope for personal fulfilment as we exercise the capacities God has given us as part of being in his image.

Read: Genesis 1; Psalm 104: 1–15.

TS

'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Mark 12: 31

The young and very fit intern paused by the bed of a dying elderly patient and, taking his hand, gently asked, 'Do you need anything?' 'No, but thanks' came the reply, spoken with a dry mouth but with quiet understanding. As it happened both intern and patient were Christians and had spoken before about their shared faith. Looked at from one perspective, it was a sad little cameo performance. The intern was following a long and excellent tradition of caring and the patient, though recognising that death was imminent, was careful to express gratitude for the human touch. Humanly speaking, the contrast between the two could not have been greater, youthful good health and approaching death in old age, but spiritually intern and patient had much in common.

The moment had, no doubt, many heavy theological overtones, but the simpler question is: Do I in good health, and will I when dying, behave as a Christian? Certainly, I am called to love the Lord my God with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my mind, and with all my strength, but I am also called to love my neighbour as myself, to reflect God's love in Jesus. The intern reached out and the dying patient said 'Thank you.' Love and loved are words that appear very frequently in the Bible, almost 600 times according to my concordance. Our professions give more opportunities to show warm Christian love than many others. Modern society degrades the word love, but Christian love sees something precious in its object and continually seeks what is best for it. My spiritual gifts and good deeds have little value if I have not love! Love has many wonderful characteristics, but please do read the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians for yourself.

Read: 1 Corinthians 13: 1–13.

JHJ

'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'
Mark 2: 27

It came to my notice that our local gastroenterologist chose to do a routine endoscopy on a Sunday morning. He makes no Christian profession, but it set me thinking as to why, as a Christian, do I choose to be different? It used to be said that ministers were the most likely to break the fourth commandment, failing to take a day off in lieu of their Sabbath labours. Today it is also likely to be a failing of doctors where professional calls always take precedence over other things. This is a highly dangerous stance to take.

The principle of one day's rest in seven is rooted in the very nature of our being created by God. (Genesis 2: 2–3) Truly this is the Maker's instruction and we ignore it at our peril. Jesus countered the religious legalism of the Sabbath with a reminder of the original purpose of the command, and from earliest times the Christians applied the principle to the first day of the week.

So how do I work this out in my life as a doctor? Firstly, I will endeavour to do my work thoroughly and well, but seek to contain this within six days of the week. Secondly, I will remember that the day of rest is not a day of idleness and inactivity. Rather it is a day for worship, a day that reminds me of my dependence upon the grace of God, (Hebrews 4: 9–11) a day to strengthen my family bonds and loosen the grip of materialism on my life. Thirdly, when circumstances mean that I lose my day of rest, I will not resent it nor feel guilty; but I will look out for the God-given opportunities to 'catch up' and live in the grace of God.

Read: Matthew 12: 1–14.

BDS

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. Luke 18: 1

Early one Friday morning I was called out to see a middle-aged man in circulatory collapse from no obvious cause. I immediately admitted him to hospital with a preliminary diagnosis of internal bleeding of unknown origin, then started praying to God for efficient help. I imagined that, after investigation, this would prove to be surgical.

From phone calls later that day I learned from the patient's wife and the hospital that investigations were still going on. Over the next two days I rang the hospital repeatedly, encouraging the medical officer in charge to keep up his efforts to find the source of the bleeding. He promised to do so but sounded very frustrated. The patient was receiving intensive care, repeated blood transfusions and was still bleeding. As well as pleading with my colleagues, I kept on praying to God that he might control everything.

Two days after admission, the doctor telephoned me to say that abdominal angiography had revealed a bleeding haemangioma in the small intestine. After successful surgery, the patient made a speedy and total recovery. On my retirement, he and his wife thanked me for my medical care over so many years. In a letter back to them, I explained how, years before, his life had been saved when I hadn't given up praying and God had answered. It was, of course, he who had given the surgeon his skill and the wound its healing, but prayer had also prevailed.

The lesson I learned was always to pray and not give up. Sometimes we hesitate to plead with our colleagues as well as pleading with God, or we may do one and leave out the other. God wants us to do both, for his glory.

Read: Luke 18: 1–8; Ephesians 6: 18; Nehemiah 2: 1–5.

D-RS

... if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 1 Corinthians 10: 12

Never say, ‘That can’t happen to me.’ Temptation is everywhere. It can become as familiar as the incoming sea, wearing away the cliff so gradually that, until a section collapses into the water, no-one notices the danger. Temptation can also strike suddenly, bringing an irresistible compulsion to do what is wrong. It is like an examination. We should not fear it, but face it. Only when victory is won will we realise the strength of the test. In sending temptation, Satan wants to separate us from God but, as God’s faithfulness helps us through the trial, we shall instead become much closer to him.

Should we fall, another of Satan’s tactics is to imprison us in guilt, instead of our asking for the Lord’s forgiveness. We cannot know the pressures experienced by someone else. The Bible is full of stories of good men, considered to be strong in faith, who have still given way to temptation when taken by surprise. Such were Noah, Samson, David, Solomon and Peter. But God’s patience and love are greater than man’s weakness. As the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, ‘If a man sincerely repents, God puts him back to his ministry.’

Peter, confident that he would not deny Jesus, still denied him three times. We ourselves often experience the tiredness, stress, fear or disappointment that led to his downfall, so need to be particularly on guard at those times. Yet, should we fall, there is help on offer to help us up again. Jesus will then ask us, as he asked Peter, ‘Do you love me?’ If the answer is a repentant ‘Yes’, he forgives the failure and invites us once more to follow him.

Read: John 18: 15–27; 21: 15–19.

MCh

August 18 Difficult relatives still need my love

'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Mark 12: 31

The barium enema list went well until it was the turn of a lady referred for vague abdominal pain. This increased after the examination so, despite reassurances from a senior radiologist, I kept her in for observation. Three hours later her abdomen was distended and she had subcutaneous neck emphysema. Within hours I had called a surgeon, and she had an emergency hemicolectomy for a perforated diverticulum at the hepatic flexure. She recovered well, but a bulky pancreas, noted during surgery, was later diagnosed as an inoperable pancreatic carcinoma.

Shortly afterwards, the patient's relatives wrote letters to the hospital and Ministry of Health, accusing me of medical incompetence and negligence. The case is still ongoing. My initial feeling was one of indignation. I had kept her under observation despite reassurances from a senior colleague, and her surgery had not been delayed. Should I have felt vindicated at the finding of the carcinoma? No doubt many of us have faced situations when, despite all our best efforts, patients remain unappreciative and accusing.

Yet if I put myself in the position of the patient and her family, would I not be indignant if a harmless procedure had precipitated this sequence, ending with the diagnosis of an inoperable cancer? As a medical person in the same situation, I would probably have been an even more difficult patient or relative. As things are, the lawyers have advised me against speaking to the patient or her family, but I hope that they are coming to terms with the illness. I pray, too, that whatever the outcome of the case against me, she may somehow come to the saving knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Read: Luke 6: 27–28.

Anon

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. Galatians 6: 2

Each morning we medical students gathered around this particular patient. He made us feel confident in finding our feet in following Jesus Christ. But then, he had been following Jesus for a long time! His kindness and quiet confidence were an inspiration to us all. He had a malignant lymphoma, presently in remission after chemotherapy, but he was fully aware of his prognosis. He smiled at us and told us of other patients he had talked to about Jesus. Several were interested, and some had become his personal friends. He asked us to pray for them and he enquired about our personal needs for prayer. He made little reference to himself but, in a quiet moment, he led in prayer for all the patients and staff in the ward. We left feeling light-hearted, as though burdens had been lifted from our shoulders.

I did not see him again for nearly two years. Then, as a junior doctor on the same ward, I saw him once more, his thin arm beckoning me for he had relapsed and was terminally ill. ‘I can’t pray!’ he whispered in distress. I held his hand in mine, for a few moments. Then I prayed aloud, thanking Jesus for being present with us and asking him to comfort this dying man. ‘Thank you’ he murmured in relief. He died the next day.

It shocked me to think that someone, confident and strong in his faith, should have become so weak and needy as to feel unable to pray. But I remembered that two years earlier he had carried my burdens and, as he approached death, I had carried some of his, holding his trembling fingers as Jesus reached out to him. As we carry one another’s burdens, in our case looking after the sick, let us recognise that we are obeying and serving Christ.

Read: Matthew 25: 31–46.

JT

'For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?' Esther 4: 14

Esther, a Jewish girl married to King Xerxes, saves her people by being Queen.

The verse above is a challenge to all who are privileged. As doctors we can sometimes feel under-privileged, with long hours of demanding work not adequately rewarded. However, when we stop to think, we realise that our education, training and experience do give us tremendous privileges. While we are not in a royal position like Esther, we have opportunities, responsibilities and influence that many people will never have. Will we rise to the challenge of using our abilities for God's glory and the service of others, 'at such a time as this'? Will we dare to go to (or stay in) difficult places where we are needed, where others refuse to go?

These are big questions, which have uncomfortable answers. When Esther's father, Mordecai, is exhorting her to speak out for the Jewish people, he points out that if she does not rise to save them, 'deliverance will arise from another place', but she will suffer herself. Sometimes we can feel that we are doing God a favour by serving him, and that he couldn't do without us. In fact, our sovereign God will carry out his purposes whether we help him or not, but we miss out enormously if we do not fit in with his work and become part of it.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the enormous privilege you have given me. Help me to be willing to serve you wherever you might ask me to go, or by whatever you might ask me to do.

Read: Esther 4; Luke 12: 42–48.

VL

*The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’
Matthew 25: 40*

The ordinary lady in an ordinary town in England bowed her head and beamed up a petition to the majestic throne. She pleaded for a place she had never visited, for people she knew only by name. She prayed that this day the King would visit them in whatever needs they might have. ...

I was asleep, warm and relaxed ... then the crash of the spear on the window, the night watchman's message – the Kisiizi equivalent to a bleep. Groaning, I reached out to the window for the torn bit of a drug carton on which the nurse had written, 'Dear Dr, Patient just arrived, large neck wound, bone visible, BP 70. Patient has changed condition.'

Twebaze's relatives crowded round the door to the theatre, sure he would die. The trail of blood lay on the floor in spite of the cloths pressed round his neck. As always, we prayed for him and all involved. We ran the saline drip fast. Blood pumped out of the wound from round the vertebral artery, which could not be clamped or sutured. We pressed bone wax into the cavity around the artery, packing it with gauze and applying some pressure. Post-operatively his face and neck were grossly distended. Next day, Twebaze asked for the hospital chaplain and said he realised he had nearly died and wanted to put things right in his life. Joyfully the message of the Way was shared and he returned home, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven – a changed condition.

Who effected the change? Who healed him? Surgeon? Blood donor? The ordinary lady? Those who had provided money for theatre equipment? The Lord used each one to effect the change.

Read: Romans 8: 28–30; Colossians 1: 15–20.

IS

'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Matthew 25: 40

On Friday Arineitwe delivered a bouncy healthy baby boy. Her two previous babies had each been fine at birth but then developed jaundice from which they both died. And now, tragically, history seemed to be repeating itself as, within six hours, the first sign of jaundice appeared.

Far away, six months before, a couple had shared with their church some of the experiences and emotions from their African trip. In response love flowed, money was given, and an oxygen concentrator was sent out with prayers and hope.

The baby lay on the warmer (a tin sheet over a light bulb) with the gentle hum of the concentrator in the background providing him with 94% oxygen, while we carried out an exchange transfusion. My wife assisted as her blood, in a bag on the wooden drip stand, flowed in and gave new life. His mother praised God for the miracle as the baby's jaundice faded. Later, in the ward prayers and services, she heard of the One who gave his own blood to bring life to all of us who are as helpless as her child had been, but who had now indeed *changed!*

Who saved this child? The Ugandan laboratory staff and others who stayed up late to cross-match the donor's blood and ensure sufficient intravenous fluids? The people in the faraway church who sent the oxygen concentrator? The teacher sharing her experience of Africa at a Christian Union weekend and used by God to challenge a medical student who later found himself treating this child? The Lord, he used each one in his service to restore this baby and *change his condition* for ever.

Read: Proverbs 19: 17; James 2: 14–17.

'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Matthew 25: 40

Samuel smiled for the camera not knowing what was to happen. He had been a passenger on the back of a pick-up, yet sadly the ingredients for disaster were all present. No seat belts, bumpy pot-holed roads, excessive speed, too many passengers – and Samuel had fallen off. He would have no movement below the waist ever again. So he was brought to Kisiizi, but his family, too poor to pay for his care, abandoned him.

Elsewhere – An elderly couple in England went without their Sunday lunch, as they usually did. The money instead went with prayers and love to help in Uganda and it paid for Samuel's care.

– The doctor was home on leave addressing morning assembly at his old school. It was an unusual assembly for them that morning, a series of slides of children their age yet almost seeming to come from another planet. Samuel's picture was shown up for barely 40 seconds; the boys saw him smiling, despite his paralysis, and lying on the earthen floor of his family hut, only half a man.

The boys suggested it, the boys worked at it, the love flowed, the money was given, and Samuel's new wheelchair was sent out with prayers and hope. At first it seemed ridiculous to send a wheelchair to a place where there are hardly any flat surfaces. Yet for Samuel it was to mean his situation transformed. Now he was able to look people in the face, to have dignity, self respect, a *changed situation!* He found that he was loved and cared for by the family of God world-wide, and that this had changed things for him.

Read: 1 Corinthians 12: 31–13: 13.

IS

'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.' 1 John 3: 16

Have you ever thought why Jesus had so many followers? A young Muslim man told me he recognised that the Christian faith is about love. This is correct. Jesus told us to love our brother, neighbour, even enemy. He was doing this. He loved people, he talked to strangers, sinners, rejected ones; he was showing them love and they followed him. Pure love attracts people because it is so rare in the world.

In medical school, there was one student who hated me from the first. I had become a Christian, so instead of fist fights I started showing him love and when he was in trouble I helped him. He became one of my friends and a strong supporter. Another time I was stopped by a drug dealer in a bad San Francisco district, when giving out flyers to invite people to a church function. He was not interested in my flyers but in a gold chain round my neck. He grabbed my chain and said, 'Is it gold, can I have it?' I answered, 'If you really need this, I will give it to you.' He did not take it, but wanted to know why I was 'different'. Love often requires sacrifices which sometimes we don't want to give. My spiritual mentor, Dr Keith Sanders, often reminded me of the verse above. Oh, it is too difficult! We would prefer others to lay down their lives for us!

Many among us are very successful doctors. What causes our success? Knowledge only? No, our patients need health workers who will treat soul, mind and body. They can and need to see Jesus in us! We can show love to all, whether we think they deserve it or not.

Read: 1 John 3: 11–18; John 3: 16–17.

JM

‘Whether you turn to the right hand or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” ’ Isaiah 30: 21

When I was a young Christian, I liked to read Christian testimonies. I read about fascinating things which God was doing in people’s lives. I made a decision. If God really exists and is working in people’s lives, it means he could also do things in my life too. I searched and I looked for ways to accomplish this.

God put in my way incredible Christian friends and speakers who helped me walk with him. He became real! My life became adventurous and full of God’s blessing and surprises. I grew up in a family where my father was an alcoholic and often we did not have enough money for food. I will always remember a sentence that I heard during a Christian conference: ‘Faith in God sees the invisible, believes the incredible, and accomplishes the impossible.’ I tried this and it worked, as I let God lead more of my life.

My Polish non-Christian friends call me lucky, but this ‘luck’ is just God’s blessing in my life. No, I am not the most holy person on earth, but I have tried to live by faith. I have tried to look often for the invisible, for him, for his guidance. (Proverbs 3: 6) During incredible times of sorrow, I believe that I am in his hands and only good things in the end will happen to me. I have laughed and I have cried sometimes, asking God why is this happening to me? But always, the end has been good, God always found the solution to my problem and he has always led me the way I should go. God wants to guide your life if you let him do it.

Read: Isaiah 30: 19–26; Matthew 6: 25–34; Philippians 4: 12–13.

JM

Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe. Proverbs 29: 25

The fear of man. Which of us does not feel it from time to time? When we read the Bible, we see that this fear has existed at all times, even in people who are listed as heroes of faith, such as Abraham, Aaron and David. Take a closer look at Abraham. When he went down to Egypt because of the famine he told Sarah ‘Say you are my sister … and my life will be spared because of you.’ (Genesis 12: 13) Later on, it happened again when he went to live in the land of Abimelech, king of Gerar. He seemed to have forgotten God’s promise that Sarah would have a son and that he would become a great nation.

Look at Aaron, who had spoken God’s word to Pharaoh. When Moses stayed a long time on the mountain, he was afraid to refuse when people asked him to make a golden calf. (Exodus 32) Look at David, the man anointed to be king, defeater of Goliath, who feigned insanity when he was afraid of Achish, the king of the Philistines. (1 Samuel 21: 12–13) Fear of man is also found in the New Testament. Peter disowned the Lord Jesus three times. (Matthew 26: 69–75)

Fear of man. To have it is very understandable. But it is also dangerous. It can make great people look very small. It can make people refrain from repenting of or from confessing their sins, or from proclaiming their faith. It can stop people speaking about Jesus Christ to other people. Do you recognise this? Do you also have thoughts like, ‘What would my colleagues say?’ or, ‘Why should I have to witness?’ Read again and take to heart – ‘but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.’

Read: Hebrews 11: 32–40 and 12: 1–12.

RP

He entered a house and did not want anybody to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. Mark 7: 24

Jesus had been receiving harsh criticism from the Pharisees in Galilee and must have relished the opportunity to go up to the north of the country and take some rest. He had barely set foot in the region of Tyre, however, when he was called back into service to heal the daughter of a Greek woman. Something about him meant he could not hide his presence even from Gentiles. There are many times as junior doctors when we might yearn for the end of the shift, yet for Jesus there was no such thing as a day off. How did he have the strength to keep on giving out without giving in?

The apostle Paul reminds us that the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead dwells in us too, (Romans 8:11) giving us inward strength and sustaining us at all times. Even though we may not always feel his presence, that does not mean we have stopped reflecting something of Christ as we go about our daily work. A few days after caring for a dying patient, a Christian doctor visited a new church and was recognised by the family of that patient. ‘So you are a believer too? We thought there was something in you that made you different’, a relative said. That doctor had not consciously been exhibiting anything different, yet God’s Spirit had been sensed in him on the ward.

When we are hard pressed on every side and excessive demands are made of us, will we still be unable to hide Christ’s presence? As we trust and obey Christ, God’s Spirit lives in us, and we will not be able to hide that fact, however exhausted we might be feeling.

Read: 1 John 4: 12–21.

DP

'For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' John 6: 33

It is not just wrestlers and athletes who need to concentrate on what they eat. We must all take into account the needs of our usual activities as well as being prepared to cope with the demands of extra stress. Healthcare professionals are constantly being faced with ethical choices, the consequences of which can cause estrangement from patients and colleagues, severe opposition or employment doubts and, sometimes, physical danger.

Jeremiah's situation was no easier than what many of us face today. When religious and political leaders were wanting to compromise standards of faith and nationhood, he bemoaned his situation before God but expressed trust and said, 'When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight.' (Jeremiah 15: 16) He did not just read or hear them, he digested them! Ezekiel was told to fill his stomach with God's word so that he could then go and speak God's mind. (Ezekiel 3: 1–3) Similarly, manna was given to the mistrusting Israelites as an object lesson 'that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.' (Deuteronomy 8: 3) Jesus quotes this in rebuking Satan and affirms that to seek first his kingdom (community) and his righteousness (morality) ensures a stable balanced diet. (Matthew 4: 4; 6: 31–33)

Ultimately, Christ offers us himself as the 'living bread'. Isn't it amazing, awe-inspiring, and far beyond our understanding that as we, in spirit and in truth, consume his body and blood in the Communion Service, we are united with him and God the Father! And we are one with all others taking part!

Read: Jeremiah 15: 3–21; John 6: 25–58.

RKMS

'Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.' John 5: 8

The patient was severely depressed. The sorry downhill course led to suicidal thoughts. Time after time, hospital care provided only temporary respite, and discharges were for short periods before the illness returned with increasing force. Dedicated clinicians tried hard to find effective treatment but, in desperation, prescribed ever more drugs, in higher dosage. Patient and family were distraught. Through it all, their faith in Jesus held, an anchor that seemed at times might slip away. Where was God in all this? Didn't he care? The church gave prayerful and practical support, its elders concentrating on prayer ministry directed to the patient's needs. Healing came, hesitatingly at first but then surely, decisively and remarkably. Medication was discontinued and life returned to normal.

What do you make of it? In a medical sense, it is impossible to be certain, but those who observed the healing had no doubt that God's hand was in it. All who suffer from depression need massive and repeated encouragement and the best possible medical care. Christians, knowing of the possibility of divine intervention in healing, must pray for the sick and regard a healing ministry as an inherent part of the Christian ministry. There is, of course, much that we do not or cannot understand. Why are some not healed? Why does disease cause seemingly pointless pain and horrific misery? Today's note is not intended as a treatise on divine healing. There are many excellent books on the subject. Rather it recounts a simple and true account of one such healing. If the reader ends by wondering at the ways of an almighty God, which are far beyond human understanding, and marvelling at his mercy, the point will have been made, partly! In addition, Christians must pray for the sick, expectantly, persistently and often with others.

Read: John 5: 1–15.

JHJ

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
1 Thessalonians 5: 16–18

Much of our Christian walk seems to involve searching for God's will and we are often frustrated because God seems silent regarding the details of our lives. But God is not silent! His word clearly reveals so much of his will, which is the same today as it has been for every past generation. We are to live each moment with a thankful heart, regardless of circumstances, communing continually with him in prayer instead of pursuing the trivial matters of the world.

Yet some circumstances make this more difficult than others. I recently heard from a woman whose brother is on death row; from parents who had buried their eighteen year old son, and from another woman who had discovered her husband's unfaithfulness after many years of marriage. How do these people pray continually with a thankful heart? How do any of us stay by God's side when the pulls of the world seem relentless?

First we must learn to view life from an eternal perspective. 'The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever.' (1 John 2: 17) Then we must truly accept that in *all* circumstances God works for the good of those that love him. (Romans 8: 28) As we trust and love him with *all* our hearts, he works *all* things for the good – no matter how bad our situation may appear. This is the secret of being content. (Philippians 4: 12)

Perhaps God sometimes waits to give more details of his will for us until we are being obedient to his more general desires. Let's come before him with thankful and loving hearts and walk each step by faith, joyfully discovering, and submitting to, God's perfect will.

Read: 1 Peter 4: 1–11.

GS

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist ... and began to wash his disciples' feet ... John 13: 3–5

After qualifying as a surgeon, my doctor wife and I set up a small medical clinic in a tribal area. Often tribals would come to me, put their foot up on the chair and say, ‘Dress it.’ After I had dressed their wound they would toss me a rupee coin and then leave. For some reason this would leave me feeling quite humiliated. How did Jesus wash the disciples’ feet without feeling humiliated? As medical professionals we find it difficult to serve in ways that are humbling. How can we learn to ‘wash feet’, that is ‘serve’ without feeling hurt, but instead serve with joy? John 13: 3 helps.

Jesus knew that God had put all things into his hands. So we need to know that God has entrusted us with healing for his body, the Church. Jesus knew he had come from God. Our origins are from God, created by him for himself. Created in his image, not by accident but by design. Jesus knew he was going back to God. We have such a future also, one that none can take away. We will be co-heirs with Christ and enjoy uninterrupted relationship with God himself.

With such an attitude of mind, humiliation now in service to our fellow men will be a small price to pay. Just think. The crown of thorns, the nakedness, the ridicule and the crucifixion could not humiliate Jesus. He was too humble for that. So for us, the truly humble cannot be humiliated.

Read: John 13: 1–17; Romans 8: 12–17.

VS

SEPTEMBER

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Philippians 2: 3–5.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household ... Ephesians 2: 19

When my wife and I went to Africa over forty years ago, we did not understand the concept of the extended family. It was confusing to us when young Liberians would introduce us to their 'ma' or 'pa', brother or sister, only to find that such a title could apply to an older relative, a cousin, or even someone in their village from the same ethnic or tribal background.

Dr Walter Zielonko, a past president of the Christian Medical and Dental Society of Canada, has spoken warmly about his fellow CMDS members, who were an extended family to him. Due to World War II, his immediate family became separated from other relatives in Eastern Europe, so he never knew the support of grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. As a result, his Christian brothers and sisters in CMDS meant so much to him.

I, too, have come to appreciate the membership, ministry and impact of both national and international Christian Medical and Dental Associations, having been privileged to represent both around the world. I have experienced the loneliness of being in a country away from my own family, but because of my faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, I have also experienced the fellowship and joy of belonging to the greatest extended family there is: the family of God. What a difference it makes.

*Still we are centred all in Thee,
Members, though distant, of one Head;
In the same family we be,
By the same faith and Spirit led.*

Richard Baxter (1615–91)

Read: Ephesians 2: 19–22; 3: 14–21.

RSS

'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' 2 Corinthians 12: 9

I take this promise very personally for my life each day. There is nothing else in life which has sustained me so far. As I face many challenges, difficulties, heartaches, and go through physical infirmities as well, I am constantly reminded of this wonderful promise. It gives me the assurance that there is nothing in life that cannot be faced with his grace so freely available. As I continue to trust him, his grace comes to me as waves of the sea, one after the other. The magnitude of the problem never exceeds his grace and power.

In working with a slum community in my town for the past seven years, so often I have been discouraged when my labour has gone unnoticed, unappreciated and unrewarded by people. These are the times when I needed his grace in full measure. Repeatedly his soft voice has given me the assurance – 'My grace is sufficient for you.' The three words *my, is, and you* are so assuring and personal to me.

In my ministry with the slum women, I strive to teach them how to become empowered by learning different skills and to become literate. But the Lord is constantly teaching me to become empowered by his grace. His grace, experienced in full measure, has sustained me so far. I am not afraid to face the uncertainties of the future with his amazing grace. I do not have to rely on my own resources to get through this life on earth. His grace will sustain me.

His grace is freely available – why not enjoy this bargain offer? Even if we do not deserve it, he still offers it free!

Read: Romans 3: 21–26; Ephesians 1: 3–10.

RR

I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; Psalm 18: 1–2

I was talking with a group of women in Asia. They were sharing their concerns about their children's wellbeing, and their husbands' problems at work. I sensed insecurity. They were slipping about in the quagmire of life without a firm foundation. I thought back to an occasion several years before.

I had been driving to a mountain village, but a small landslide had blocked the road. We would have to walk. I viewed the scene with trepidation. A sea of mud covered the way ahead. Local people were used to going barefoot – would my Western feet be able to cope? Holding my long skirt with one hand and dangling my sandals in the other, I stepped cautiously into the ankle-deep mud. As my foot sank down, I was relieved to feel the roadbed beneath. Each step was the same. Slowly and carefully, I walked safely across, very thankful for the firm foundation, hidden but not swept away. ‘Thank you, Lord, for keeping my feet from slipping.’ I shared this experience with my friends. It was like a picture of our daily lives with all the turmoil and confusion around us. Where is our security? It is in God’s word: his truth and power.

Many of the Psalms have been written against a background of insecurity and danger. David was often in danger. He found strength and comfort in the presence of the Lord being with him. Time and again the Lord rescued him. We, too, need the comfort and security of knowing the Lord is with us. The promise of his presence, help and guidance is our security, even in the hardest of times.

Read: Psalms 19: 1–6; 40: 1–5.

DD

Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall. Psalm 55: 22

Are you facing a crisis today? It may be in your professional life, or perhaps in your home life. There may be a family problem which is very difficult to solve, or you may have a sick child or elderly relative.

Health care professionals around the world also face many changes in work practices, with challenges of rapidly advancing technology and declining ethical and moral standards. Many of us lack material resources in our health care systems which makes it difficult for us to do our job properly, or to treat our patients as we ought. We long to be people who calmly face every stressful situation, whether at work or in the home, but we are not! These things make us feel anxious, stressed and threatened. We must remember that our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ does not make us immune to the anxieties of life.

Early in Psalm 55, David wrote, ‘My heart is in anguish ... Fear and trembling have beset me ...’ (vv 4, 5) He wanted to run away from the crisis, to fly away like a dove. (vv 6, 7) Do you feel the same? Would you like to run away from your problems? None of us can; we must face them. So what can we do? We can learn from what David did. He told God about his problems, not just now and again, but all the time. ‘Evening, morning and noon I cry out in my distress, and he hears my voice.’ (v 17) We can do the same, in the certainty that our heavenly Father hears us and upholds us.

So today, ‘Cast all your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you ...’.

Read: Psalm 55.

OAR

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 2 Corinthians 9: 10

By current standards, the patient suffering a miscarriage who was driven to hospital by her gynaecologist experienced an unusual degree of personal care, yet such individual, human touches are what people remember. Paul's statement about reaping after generous sowing applies not only to money but to all that we give. Research indicates the efficacy of a good patient–doctor interaction even without any specific therapy. Such self-giving should apply not only to those we like, or when we have had sufficient rest, but to all our patients, all the time. This is a high standard and one we could not hope to achieve alone.

In many ways, the works of Jesus, the Great Physician, show an exceptional level of health care. He was never too busy or too tired to give himself to the multitudes drawn to him and he healed more than their physical ailments. Yet he knew how to recharge his batteries by taking time alone to pray. This is also the way he provides us with 'seed', working within us by his Spirit to change our hearts and make us more like him. Though vital, time available for prayer, church attendance or fellowship can be very limited. Instead of letting this add to our stress we should remember that our Father is constantly aware of our circumstances. He can make our few minutes of Bible reading and prayer very valuable and can also provide us with fellowship.

He helps us to offer listening ears, compassion and high quality treatment. Our patients' wellbeing will improve as we give them thoughtful, genuine care and time for their questions and concerns. These are the seeds of God's love being sown into their lives. The harvest is up to him.

Read: James 2: 14–18; 2 Corinthians 9: 6–11.

SR

... we have this treasure in jars of clay ... 2 Corinthians 4: 7

Some relatives hold an intense concern about the body parts of deceased loved ones, especially should they find that a previously caring hospital seems now to have acted without proper explanation and in an uncaring way. Those who believe that death is the end are not alone in counting respect for the body as a last act of love. Yet Christians believe that there will be new bodies in heaven, so may be less troubled about parts retained by a pathologist.

In a beautiful and encouraging passage, Paul contrasts our worn and wasting bodies with the inward renewal going on day by day. After all, disease and disability are but ‘light and momentary troubles’ when compared with ‘an eternal glory that far outweighs them all’. (2 Corinthians 4: 16–17) The ‘tent’ is transitory, but the ‘house’ prepared in heaven is eternal. (2 Corinthians 5: 1)

We must remember, though, Paul’s later warning that, before we receive our heavenly bodies, there will be an assessment at the judgment seat of Christ, ‘that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.’ (2 Corinthians 5: 10) The abilities of the new body will be related to how we used our decaying material bodies in his service. Elsewhere, Paul puts it that all the wood, hay and stubble that we have accumulated during our lives will be burnt up. Only the gold, silver and precious stones will remain. (1 Corinthians 3: 10–15) ‘Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise ...’ (Ephesians 5: 15)

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for evermore! Amen. (Jude: 24–25)

Read: 2 Corinthians 4: 16–5: 10.

PCE

Give us today our daily bread. Matthew 6: 11

Many years ago, a patient came with an obviously inoperable cancer. It was one of those cancers that are insidiously relentless rather than dramatically progressive. Yet the patient had, it appeared, been under care for some time! Why was he in such a state? Again and again he had refused appeals to accept treatment. How could such a small swelling, he had thought, be dangerous? So, he neither believed the advice given nor did he think the surgery recommended was necessary. Now, in pain, he wanted treatment but the cancer was already untreatable!

How often is it that we do not recognise need and do not believe advice given? We are sturdily independent and can easily be confused by discordant voices offering contradicting opinions. I remember, as a very young and inexperienced Christian, feeling when I said the Lord's Prayer that I did not need to request bread daily. After all, I was well fed, to the extent of being overfed, and I was prosperous so that I was able to supply all my needs. I was missing the point! In pride, I was failing to recognise my dependence on God, indeed for my next meal. Like the patient whose sorry tale appears above I did not, and do not, know what the future holds. Years of experience, and some unhappy episodes, have taught me that I do need God's provision every day.

Perhaps more importantly, one can forget spiritual needs. Like food to eat, I need to receive from him who said, 'I am the bread of life'. Yet today, as in Jesus' time, people grumble and argue and do not believe that he is the source of spiritual food, life-giving now and eternally. It is so easy to ignore essential information until it is too late!

Read: John 6: 25–59.

JHJ

'Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.' John 4: 21, 23

The Samaritan woman had switched the subject from her sexual behaviour to religious practice. It is common for people to make such jumps when the subject matter has become uncomfortable. She wanted to talk about something less threatening! The mountain was clearly inspiring, yet the Jews worshipped in the temple, mostly in one of two set daily services. Which was better? Jesus appears to be saying in his reply that times and places are beside the point. One does not become a worshipper at 3 pm in the Temple or at daybreak on a mountain. Worshipping God concerns the entirety of our lives, all that we are and do, including the way we behave sexually.

We are expressing how much we value God (our ‘worth-ship’ of him), not just when we meet together for prayer and singing, but in every aspect of our work, relationships and behaviour. Our dealing with other people, whether patients, family or colleagues, is on the basis of them having been made in the image of God. Our thoughts and private behaviour are lived out constantly and consciously in the presence of God. We do not go up mountains or to special buildings to worship him, if we are not already worshipping him moment by moment in our daily lives.

The apostle Paul taught the same truth. When he had completed his great explanation of the Gospel in his letter to the Romans, he turned to its application – ‘Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.’ (Romans 12: 1)

Read: John 4: 4–26; Colossians 3: 22–24.

PMay

'You have forsaken your first love.' Revelation 2: 4

Revelation chapters 2 and 3 record letters for the messengers to believers in seven churches. The first part of this letter to Ephesus reads almost like a personal message of encouragement to hard-pressed medical students or junior doctors. The risen Christ who holds us in his right hand and walks among the drip-stands and monitors of our wards says 'I know your hard work'. It is a tremendous encouragement to be reminded that he knows hardships, sleepless nights, the extra kindness done 'for my name'. He knows our weariness (John 4: 6, Hebrews 12: 3) and the burden of living and working alongside some whose only motive in life is self-interest.

He comes to us first with encouragement, but his all-seeing eye pierces our compromise as he calls us back to first principles –

Have you allowed love for Jesus to grow cold?

Have you let other motives than love creep in to each day's decision making?

Has self love (excused as self-protection amidst almost intolerable burdens) begun to replace love for others?

Have the desires for promotion, for scientific research or financial incentives begun to squeeze love into a corner?

Have even our battles for justice and truth held higher profile than our love?

In all such circumstances the simple penetrating word of the Lord comes to us again, 'You have forsaken your first love – remember, repent – do the things you did at first'. Once we get our priorities sorted out again, the oft-neglected Word of God will once more yield for us fruit from the tree of life.

*If our love were but more simple,
We would take Him at His word,
And our lives would be all sunshine
In the sweetness of our Lord.*

F. W. Faber (1814–63)

Read: Revelation 2: 1–7.

BDS

'Be faithful, even to the point of death.' Revelation 2: 10

Does your hospital or place of work seem sometimes a bit like Smyrna, a difficult place to be a Christian? There were the problems of resources, afflictions and poverty. Is your heart torn out sometimes by the things you cannot do, through lack of resources? It should be. Yet this is no new problem. It will be with us to the end of time. As you seek to live for Christ with integrity, do you suffer the stinging rebuke (whether silent or spoken) of colleagues whose commitment is to other faiths or to none? This, too, is at least as old as the days of Noah.

Is yours a situation where to be an active Christian is to invite persecution? There are medical colleagues of our generation who, even today, are in prison for their faith. There are others all over the world who have been passed over for promotion, squeezed out of committees or cheated out of rightful earnings. Not a few of our contemporaries have laid down their lives rather than deny Christ. In the words of Matthew 24: 9–10 Jesus warns that these things must be and are likely to get worse as the end approaches. If we do suffer as Christians, let us be sure it is for Christ's sake and not just because we are awkward, selfish or lazy.

How do we handle these situations? The risen Christ tells us, 'I know ... I know your afflictions ... I know the slander ...' This is great comfort for us when life is hemmed in with troubles. As Hebrews 12: 2–3 reminds us, Christ has been there before us. To Smyrna the risen Christ came as 'the First and the Last', who died and came to life again. Let us keep our eyes fixed on him, then all will be well.

Read: Revelation 2: 8–11; Hebrews 12: 1–4; Philippians 1: 27–30.

BDS

'I know where you live – where Satan has his throne ... and where Satan lives.' Revelation 2: 13

Does your city, your country, the medical world in which you live, seem sometimes like the place where Satan has his throne? Revelation 2: 12–17 describes that situation. Pergamum was the seat of civil and political power, and was where Satan lived. But the true followers of Jesus could not feel at home in such a community. It was a daily fight to remain true and not renounce him. Sometimes, in our own day, as in Pergamum, this is a fight to the death. We should not be surprised at such things; Jesus warned us that it would always be so.

However, as a consequence of Satan's presence, the saints in Pergamum faced another and more subtle temptation. It came from among their own people, not from outsiders but from those who held to the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, and which led the people of God astray into idolatry and sexual immorality. Such people are still with us and when they masquerade as members of the Christian community they are doubly dangerous. All of us are exposed to such temptations. Even if we do not succumb ourselves, it is easy to keep quiet when we see it happening all around us. Yet such things lead to personal downfall, the leading astray of the people of God and the severest divine rebuke.

No wonder the risen Christ says 'Repent, therefore!' He comes with 'the sharp double-edged sword' of his word of truth to excise such things from our souls. Yet he comes, too, with a word of comfort and a glorious promise for those who overcome in his strength.

Read: Numbers 25: 1–3; John 15: 10–21; Revelation 2: 12–17.

BDS

'I am he who searches hearts and minds ...' Revelation 2: 23

The opening words of this letter to believers in Thyatira acknowledge their love, faith and persistence in good works, but warn them that all is not easy going, for, 'These are the words of the Son of God whose eyes are like blazing fire.'

Do you sometimes worry that all your attempts at living a pure, honest and kindly life are wasted? Your willingness to admit you don't know the diagnosis, when you don't. Your refusal to request unnecessary additional investigations or to prescribe needlessly expensive drugs or plasma fluids because the patient's best interests take precedence over your own financial gain. The extra time you give to the patient's relatives to make sure they have understood the diagnosis and its implications. Do you fear that these things are not only despised by the world but forgotten by God? Nothing could be further from the truth.

The medical world is a fierce battle-ground over values. 'That woman Jezebel' may be in courteous clinical guise or friendly 'Christianity' or both, but her values are as deeply opposed to the gospel as they were with Ahab's wife in the days of Elijah. (1 Kings 21: 25) She 'calls herself a prophetess' and loves to be in the vanguard of 'modern progressive thinking'. She loves to publish articles that shock and inflame. She is happiest when speaking or writing what has hitherto been unthinkable – but it's all a lie. 'Satan's so-called deep secrets' are nothing more than old-fashioned sin dressed up in new clothes, and the piercing eye of Christ sees it all.

Prayer: Lord, give me grace not only to live with purity and gentleness, but to resist evil in ways that bring honour to you and help to my fellow human beings. Amen.

Read: Revelation 2: 18–29; 1 Kings 21.

BDS

'Sardis ... you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.' Revelation 3: 1

Sardis was a comfortable, wealthy city. It was easy to make a living and not difficult to be a Christian. Its subtle temptations are reflected in many of the wealthier parts of our contemporary world. How do you relate to the time you first trusted Christ? I still remember those heady days of unconditional devotion to Jesus; it changed everything, affecting every waking moment of my life. And now? Well, perhaps the devotion is deeper, quieter, but there have been times along the way when other things have taken centre-stage and pushed devotion to Christ into the wings.

How does this come about?

- It comes about through comfortable living.
- It comes about through the privatisation of religion. 'My faith is my personal affair. I will not press it on others.'
- It comes about by driving a wedge between Sunday activities and weekday professional life. Sadly, many a doctor active in Bible class on Sunday is no different from his colleagues on Monday – and earns their scorn because of it.
- It comes about by accepting too many church commitments. Sometimes we have to decline church-based invitations in order to be fresher for world-based witness and service at other times.
- It comes about through neglect of the Word or sluggish response to it. (1 Thessalonians 1: 5; 2: 13)
- It comes through the inroads of sin; often sins of omission, before sins of commission – failure to share a simple word of testimony or to fulfil an act of kindness.

Prayer: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart: test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' Psalm 139: 23–24

Read: Revelation 3: 1–6; Matthew 10: 32–33; Hebrews 10: 32–39.

'I know that you have little strength ...' Revelation 3: 8

This letter to Philadelphia, Revelation 3: 7–13, could have been written with despondent doctors in mind. We often feel guilty over the things we have said or done, or we feel a sense of failure over the things we could have said or done and did not. Sometimes we are right to feel like this and need to come back to our Saviour in repentance asking for forgiveness and cleansing. Often, though, we are oppressed by a vague sense of guilt at the great ocean of need around us that we have not been able to meet. This is especially so when we are tired, and when times for reading the Bible and for prayer have been short and interrupted.

This letter of pure encouragement is for times like this.

Firstly, it sets out our weakness in the context of God's strength. (vv 7–8) Do we feel overwhelmed by the demands? Do I feel defiled or compromised by the filthy world around me?

Secondly, it sets our present trouble in a much wider context. Is it matters of work or witness? (v 8) Is your patience tried beyond endurance? (v 10) Is there a mis-match between energies and opportunities? (v 8) Is there an almost irresistible temptation in areas of sex or money? (v 10) Are we entangled in a web of slander and lies among colleagues? (v 9)

Thirdly, this letter reminds us in detail of our Divine Physician's credentials. He who is holy and true holds the keys to that job or this opportunity of service. (vv 7–8) Do we long to establish a prayer group in our hospital, to be a witness among colleagues and medical students? Are we discouraged? 'I am coming soon. Hold on,' he says (v 11) and sets before us wonderful and trustworthy promises about the future. (v 12)

Read: Revelation 3: 7–13; 1 Peter 1: 3–13.

BDS

September 15 Lukewarm? – No, thank you!

‘... you are neither cold nor hot.’ Revelation 3: 15

Do you like ice-cream or good hot soup? Maybe both in their place, but probably neither if lukewarm! So it was with Christ’s message to the church in Laodicea. (Revelation 3: 14–22) ‘You make me sick’, could be a paraphrase of v 16. Laodicea was a ‘middle aged’ church and the letter speaks to the dangers of middle age. ‘You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” ’ How many of us have thought this even if we have not put it into so many words? We have acquired a good practice or secure teaching position: now all will be well.

The letter is addressed both to the church at Laodicea as a whole and to each individual in it, ‘If anyone hears my voice ...’ We do well to take stock of our lives. Where are my priorities today? How is my giving compared with my expenditure on luxuries? How does my zeal for Christ compare with 10 – 20 – 30 years ago?

Christ would woo us back to first principles. ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock’ is the voice of an excluded Christ. Professor O. Hallesby of Norway used this verse as a picture of prayer. Will I ask the risen Christ to come into this situation, that relationship, the next patient? Will I welcome him to share with me and minister his grace? Do I welcome this daily voice of Jesus as much as at first?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I hear your voice. Come afresh into my life today. Be Lord of all that I have and am. Work your grace through all my labours and all my relationships today. For your name’s sake. Amen.

Read: Revelation 3: 14–22; Luke 12: 13–21; Colossians 3: 1–4.

BDS

September 16 What kind of doctor was Jesus?

'What do you want me to do for you?' 'Lord, I want to see,' he replied. Jesus said to him, 'Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.' Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God. Luke 18: 41–43

'Jesus M.D.' sounds a little odd, doesn't it? But should it? The New Testament contains more than 75 references to the healing work and ministry of Christ. Down through the centuries, one of the names his followers have traditionally used to refer to Christ has been the Great Physician. The term is every bit as orthodox as the Good Shepherd or King of kings. Indeed, the image of Jesus as the Great Physician could be even more instructive for us today.

After all, how many of us these days can personally relate to the ways and work of shepherds? Unlike the people of Jesus' day and for many following centuries, we have little practical experience with sheep and their everyday care. Come to think of it, few of us have any first-hand experience of royalty either. Kings are even rarer than shepherds in our day and age. In contrast there are more physicians than at any point in human history.

'Jesus Christ M.D.' It is still as hard to imagine that name on a sign in front of a modern medical building as it is to picture a hospital nametag reading 'Dr Jesus'. Trying to envision him in a contemporary health-care setting raises all sorts of interesting images and questions – such as: What would be his specialty? Perhaps his sign would not just say the Great Physician, but '*The Greatest Physician – can reverse death*'.

Read: Luke 18: 35–43; 2 Peter 1: 3–11.

DSt

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases.
Mark 1: 32–34

Many jobs require people to be on-call. The Great Physician too obviously knew what this meant. His healing skills were often in great demand. The above verses tell about one of the occasions he took night calls.

Mark describes how Christ's night call came after an incredibly busy day in Capernaum, teaching in the synagogue and healing in public and private. Then at sunset, when he must have longed for rest, he was confronted by all the town's folk seeking healing. Instead of turning them away and saying the doctor's office was closed, 'Dr Jesus' began his night call.

Can you imagine the impact that example must have made on his followers? Jesus was showing them what it is like to put others' needs ahead of his own. Later he put into words what he was doing in practice: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.' (Matthew 16: 24–25)

Maybe he is calling you to leave your job, go into a second career at some point in your life, become involved in some ministry or go back to college. Maybe it's finding a natural way to share your faith with your boss, befriend a neighbor who has been unpleasant to you, or get up earlier in the morning to spend time 'doing a round' with the Great Physician in Bible study and prayer. What is God asking you? Are you on-call for him today?

Read: Mark 1: 21–34; 1 John 4: 7–21.

DSt

'What comes out of a man is what makes him "unclean".'
Mark 7: 20

The Pharisees complained to Jesus that his disciples were not doing the ritualistic hand washing before they ate. On the surface such ritual provided a guide to good health and higher community standards, but Jesus told them that their actions amounted to nothing more than superficial, outward scrubbing.

'Dr Jesus' is saying that spiritually it is not enough to go through the motions. Also, we have to go farther than carefully scrubbing under the fingernails. We must go deep enough so that even our inner heart is clean. And that standard of cleanliness is not easy to achieve. We must confess – not just one time, but continually. We have no choice but to say, 'God, this is dirt, it's wrong, it should not be there, it's in my life, and I need to have it removed'. Then we need to ask him, especially if there is sin involved, to forgive us for that. As Jesus said, 'For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean".'

(Mark 7: 21–23)

We need our inner being scrubbed. We also need protections around us to keep us from being contaminated, for which we must put on the full armour of God. (Ephesians 6: 10–18) 'Surgery' in the hands of the Great Physician, or one of his assistants, such as a counsellor or pastor, may be painful. But once the problem is removed from our lives, we will find that the pain and effort were worth it. Whenever our hearts and minds are dirty, God is waiting to scrub us clean. The Great Physician knows how and where to properly scrub.

Read: Mark 7: 1–15; Luke 11: 37–40.

DSt

He appointed twelve – designating them apostles – that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. Mark 3: 14–15

The Great Physician's discipling method was much like a residency program, five aspects of which are clear.

1. He expected his disciples to follow him around. Jesus told his disciples to follow him, to spend time walking and talking with him and watching what he did.

2. He taught through the natural flow of daily events. As we know in learning or teaching medicine, the best educational opportunities come when dealing with real life issues, and in direct relationship between teacher and taught.

3. Jesus made effective use of questions. Questioning is also an essential part of any medical residency program, and Christ did this all the time. He continually questioned the disciples, in order to force them to think, to decide what they believed, and to work through difficult issues and concepts.

4. Jesus believed in the 'See one, do one, teach one' concept. Clearly the Great Physician could do everything better than his followers, but he knew it wasn't enough for them to watch what he did every day. He also had them do what he was doing because in offering them the chance to 'do one', he gave them the chance to fail. He knows that in failure we sometimes learn the most. To 'do one' always requires taking a risk.

5. Jesus' teaching was long term; it is actually endless! He spent three years with his disciples, but he clearly did not consider his responsibilities and relationship finished.

What Jesus told his disciples before he ascended he says to us today. 'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' (Matthew 28: 20) And his Spirit is with us still.

Read: Luke 10: 16–18; Mark 8: 1–11; John 14: 25–27.

DSt

... a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases ... and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Luke 6: 17–19

The Great Physician seemed to specialise in impossible cases. In the course of seeing so many patients he probably healed a lot of routine problems, but virtually all the specific conditions mentioned in the gospels would have qualified as impossible cases in that day – the blind, deaf, mute, lame, even those with leprosy.

There were also those patients whom Jesus actually brought back to life after they had died – Jairus' daughter, and the widow of Nain's son. But the Great Physician's most impossible case had to have been Lazarus. Unlike Jairus' daughter, or the widow's son, Lazarus had been dead and buried for so long that he was beginning to decompose. Now that's an impossible case for a doctor! Yet this was just the kind of circumstance Jesus was looking for to demonstrate God's power.

If we want to accomplish the impossible things God wants us to do, Christians today need to do better work together. Also, for the strength to do the impossible, we need to tap into the power of prayer. And finally, if we want to see God accomplish more impossible things through us, we need to remember what God has already done in our lives. Remember too what the Great Physician told his 'interns', or followers, just a short time after he had raised Lazarus: 'I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these.' (John 14: 12)

Read: Mark 5: 18–20; Luke 7: 1–17; John 11: 17–27.

DSt

The Lord will guide you always ... Isaiah 58: 11

God's promise of guidance is certain and repeated. He has recreated us and has a prepared plan for our lives. (Ephesians 2: 10) Jesus himself promised that his followers would not walk in darkness but have the light of life. (John 8: 12) Yet in our professional and social lives recognising and applying God's will is a continuous and necessary practicality. The following thoughts stem from long experience:

1. God is more anxious than we are that we should know his will, trying neither to delude us nor obscure his plans. But we are not always ready for the answer for which we ask. God's promises are often conditional on our mindset: 'In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.' (Proverbs 3: 6) 'But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well.' (Matthew 6: 33)
2. God sometimes withholds answering our requests, having some better thing for us, 'For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!' (Isaiah 30: 18)
3. Guidance may be given in different ways to different people and in different ways to the same person. Our God is a living God of infinite resource and initiative, seldom working in the same way twice.
4. We may not be acutely aware of God's guidance at the time, but with hindsight can see how unerring it has been. A multiplicity of 'coincidences' of circumstance and timing assure our hearts of his good hand upon us.

*Child of my love, fear not the unknown morrow,
Fear not the new demand life makes on thee,
Thy ignorance shall be no cause for sorrow
Since what thou knowest not is known to me.*

Read: Psalm 121; John 10: 1–14.

MCr

(Adapted from *The Doctor's Life Support* 1994)

‘As for me, the Lord has led me ...’ Genesis 24: 27

God’s guidance is a natural consequence of being ‘on course’. Anything that disrupts our fellowship with him obscures our vision and blunts our perception. Given a right relationship with God, his guidance may be unobtrusive, almost outside our conscious awareness, many decisions being dictated by common sense, albeit the common sense of a renewed mind. Maybe we can only see one step ahead. Take it and the way will open, as do automatic doors on our approach.

Guidance may be by restraint. In Acts 16: 6–10, Paul and Silas were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. How – since it seemed so good a thing to do? By spoken word, vision, unease, lack of assurance? But for every door that closes there is one that opens. The invitation came to Macedonia. Satisfied that this was the Lord’s call they were free to push forward. The way opened up. The wide door for effective work in Greece lay open.

But sometimes God not only restrains us, he appears to eject us from where we are. Paul longed to preach to the Jews (Romans 9: 3), for which he was eminently fitted. But God had a different sphere for him, hence his rejection by the Jews. Let us not bang our heads against the brick walls of non-acceptance. Sometimes a misfit in one sphere is eminently suited for a successful and fruitful life in another. (But we need to be certain that the rejection is not due to our unpleasantness or incompetence!)

*One step thou seest, then go forward boldly,
One step is far enough for faith to see.
Take that, and thy next duty shall be shown thee,
For dark and light are both alike to me.*

Read: Genesis 24; Acts 13: 44–52.

MCr

(Adapted from *The Doctor’s Life Support* 1994)

'He who has ears, let him hear.' Matthew 11: 15

There is a saying that there are none so deaf as those who won't hear. It is possible to shut our ears purposely. (Zechariah 7: 11) In this respect problems of the will may be more significant than those of spiritual perception. Words of Jesus, taken completely out of context, yet enshrine a principle, 'If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out ...'. (John 7: 17) It is true in experience that not until we are truly willing can God make clear to us which of the options before us is right. We may think we are unbiased when we are not. This may involve a major spiritual battle.

God's guidance may come in the language of a look (Psalm 32: 8) – provided that we are watching for it (Psalm 123: 2); or by the whisper of the Spirit in the heart, as with Simeon and Philip. (Luke 2: 27; Acts 8: 29) If we do not hear his whisper, he may speak, or even shout to make himself heard. If we are still unresponsive, he may need to 'goad us' to attract our attention, or even to stop us in our tracks. (Acts 26: 13–14) And all the time we are wondering what is happening to our lives!

The trouble sometimes is that we are seeking his will with our minds already made up, asking him to confirm our plans rather than reveal his own. We can deceive not only ourselves but other people into thinking that we only want God's will, thus effectively stifling any further discussion in the matter.

*O give me Samuel's ear, the open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear each whisper of thy word.
... Like him to answer at thy call and to obey thee first of all.*

James Drummond Burns (1823–64)

Read: Acts 26: 9–16; Jeremiah 42: 1–6, 20–22; Hebrews 4: 12–13.

MCr

(Adapted from *The Doctor's Life Support* 1994)

'This man could have been set free if ...' Acts 26: 32

There was no doubt about the rightness of Paul's decision. Directed by the Spirit he had planned to visit Rome (Acts 19: 21) but things went badly wrong. Arrested in Jerusalem because of a total misunderstanding (Acts 21: 28-29), he became the object of a smear campaign and found himself instead unjustly jailed for two years in Caesarea. And then – ironically, justice at last but too late – Agrippa's judgment was in his favour, 'this man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.' (Acts 26: 31) Had he made a big mistake? Could he have gone to Rome and Spain as a free agent just as he had originally planned?

But Paul's plans would never have materialised. He would have been murdered in Jerusalem before he even started. God's plan was better. He actually used Paul's captors to save his life, to facilitate his work and to ensure the spread of the gospel to the west. Five times the Romans saved him from death! They gave him free and safe travel – so different from his missionary journeys. Not least they guaranteed him secure accommodation for four years, with his friends coming and going at will, with freedom to preach, teach and write unhindered. (Acts 24: 23; 28: 16–24, 30–31)

Are you worried about injustices in job appointments; about unfairness and favouritism; about the malicious and false things people say? Are you afraid that God's plan for your life is being spoilt? Our plans may not materialise, but God's always do.

*The soul that on Jesus has learned to repose
He will not, He cannot desert to his foes.
That soul though all hell should endeavour to shake,
He'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

Richard Keen (c. 1787)

Read: Passages indicated in the text.

MCr

(Adapted from *The Doctor's Life Support* 1994)

But God was very angry when he went ... Numbers 22: 22

Balaam asked God a straight question, should he go with the messengers of Balak? He was given an equally straight answer, ‘Do not go with them’. Balaam’s immediate reaction was decisive and right in that he said to Balak’s men, ‘Go back ... for the Lord has refused to let me go with you.’ But gradually his resistance was worn down, new considerations made a difference; God apparently had changed his mind, so Balaam went off with the messengers.

The result:

1) God’s anger was kindled because he went. 2) God who had been his master and guide, became his adversary. 3) God drove him into an impossible situation, no way forward and none to right or left. 4) Then, as commonly happens, frustrated Balaam began ‘to take it out’ on an innocent victim of his disobedience. 5) When convicted by God Balaam was of course remorseful of what he had done, but he could not go back. 6) Balaam had learned the hard way. It was costly and time consuming and he had not gained what he had hoped for.

There are some clear commands in God’s word. If he says ‘Don’t do it’, we are foolish to expect him to contradict himself or make an exception of us. If he has made his will clear in a matter not explicitly dealt with in his word, we cannot expect further or different guidance. If we do, we may have to be content with God’s second best, or find, like the Israelites, that ‘he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them.’ (Psalm 106: 15)

C. S. Lewis comments that in the end there are only two kinds of people: ‘There are those who say to God, “Thy will be done”, and those to whom God says, “thy will be done” ’.

Read: Numbers 22–24.

MCr

(Adapted from *The Doctor’s Life Support* 1994)

I long to see you ... that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. Romans 1: 11–12

Christian friendship is one of God's greatest gifts with its mutual encouragement, support, fellowship and advice. We need to consider the role of other Christians in the matter of guidance.

1. Example. While benefiting from the example and experience of others, don't try to copy them. God's plan for your life is not identical with theirs. Don't be forced, or force yourself, into their mould.

2. Advice. The advice of Christian friends may be invaluable. Paul's zeal would have precipitated him into the uproar of the Ephesian amphitheatre, courting unnecessary trouble. The disciples and influential friends dissuaded him. Older Christians in the profession can assess our capabilities better than we, giving advice about openings, telling us how to set about fulfilling what we believe to be God's will. The wise counsellor will always encourage someone to look to the Lord for his leading.

3. Ultimate accountability. The line between profiting from the experience and advice of another, and allowing someone else to determine our future for us, is a fine one. In Acts 21, we read of disciples who had been told by the Holy Spirit of the danger awaiting Paul in Jerusalem, confirming what he already knew. Some sought to prevent him from going, but Paul was not moved. He was confident of God's guidance in the matter. When the advisers failed to persuade him they wisely stopped pressing him, but instead, with everyone else, committed Paul and his companions to God in prayer.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for your promise that your followers shall not walk in darkness. Grant that I may be humble enough to take advice, but discerning enough to distinguish between your will and mere human opinion.

Read: Acts 20: 22–25; 21: 3–15.

MCr

(Adapted from *The Doctor's Life Support* 1994)

... let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’
Isaiah 56: 3

There were few things in Old Testament times which mattered more than having children. Children carry on the family line, pass on the inheritance and care for parents in their old age. This most fundamental desire was clearly not an option for eunuchs, and the loss of esteem that accompanied infertility can be profound. When Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8: 26–40) the man was reading Isaiah 53. The evangelist shared the good news about Jesus and the eunuch responded by being baptised. When Philip left him we are told that he was rejoicing – no doubt at the new life promised him in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps there was another, personal reason, for his rejoicing. He would barely have turned the scroll around from Isaiah 53 to chapter 56 when his eyes would have lit on these awesome words: ‘For this is what the Lord says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant – to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.”’ (Isaiah 56: 4–5) A memorial far more wonderful than sons and daughters?

It is difficult to comprehend just what God has in store for those who believe in him despite having to live with some physical incapacity. Through accepting and obeying God’s word the Ethiopian clearly saw the magnitude of what God was offering him. He was not a ‘dead tree’, his name would go on living. We need to approach God’s word each day trusting that he will open our eyes to new and ever greater insights about how God sees us.

Read: Acts 8: 26–40.

DP

'For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.' Psalm 1: 6

Psalm 1: 1–6 sets the tone for the rest of the Psalms. It sets before us the choice that faces every man and woman. Ultimately there are just two ways, no ‘third way’, no middle path. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the world of medicine. It is always a tragedy to watch some who began well as Christian students or junior doctors gradually harden until ultimately ‘They are like chaff that the wind blows away.’ (v 4)

We spend a lot of time in medicine listening to and observing the follies of our fellow men and women – the life choices that lead to obesity, infidelity, heart disease, depression and a great deal more. If we pause to reflect, it is often a depressing picture. It is one which drives many of our non-Christian colleagues into cynical detachment, which all too frequently leads to alcoholism. If we are not careful they drag us with them into the same perspective of life, where we need to beware of double standards, such as drinking too much alcohol with our colleagues as long as nobody in church finds out.

What is the antidote to all this? Answer, ‘His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.’ (v 2) I like that ‘day and night’. For the harassed junior doctor a ‘quiet time’ may be a distant dream. However, there are God-given moments day and night when the heart can home in on the Lord and his word. The secret is to recognise them when they come and to grab the opportunity with both hands. This is the one true antidote to the polluting effect of the world’s attitudes around us.

Read: Jeremiah 17: 5–10.

BDS

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, and do it, not only when their eye is upon you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Colossians 3: 22–24

Life can easily seem like slavery as ‘earthly masters’ apply unreasonable demands and increase pressure, but overall we serve our heavenly Master, for ‘it is the Lord Christ we are serving’. As followers of Jesus we will ‘work at it with all our heart’ in the wards but, in addition, we will strive to love and serve the patient – and that takes time.

Remember, Jesus was tested as we are and he had to make hard decisions concerning the use of time, not so much deciding what to do as what *not* to do. Saying ‘no’ may be more difficult than always saying ‘yes’, and yet more helpful. In every part of life there is always more to do than we can cope with, but as ‘it is the Lord Christ we are serving’ the whole of life comes under one Master.

He wants us to serve our earthly masters well, but the instructions in Colossians go on to say – ‘Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.’ (Colossians 4: 2) This is an attitude to underlie it all. When we know that every part of our life is one in the service of Christ then we can even smile at the unreasonable pressures from all sides, knowing that Jesus understands. For Jesus also lived with only 24 hours in the day and had to take hard decisions which would not always be understood by others.

Read: Luke 4: 40–44; Colossians 3: 18–4: 6.

BH

'... you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God ...' 1 Corinthians 1: 30

The gospel narrative indicates that our Lord had brothers and sisters. (Mark 6: 3) We are told that his brothers did not believe in him (John 7: 5) and misjudged him completely. (Mark 3: 21) The fact that our Lord was familiar with opposition, if not actual hostility, within his own family should reassure any of his followers who have similar difficulty today.

It seems likely that his brother James' conversion occurred at or soon after the resurrection. Soon James became a respected leader of the Jerusalem church, being noted for his sagacity. When he writes in his epistle about gaining wisdom as a gift from God he clearly knows what he is talking about. The context in which he makes this point is when he is writing about 'trials of many kinds'. (James 1: 2–5) The temptation to give up in the face of trial was as familiar to John Bunyan when he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* as it is to us today.

Difficulty must face us all almost daily; social difficulty, moral difficulty, ethical difficulty, clinical difficulty – to use James' words again, 'trials of many kinds'. How does he suggest we respond to such trials? Firstly, don't resent it but instead be elated because, in the purpose of the Almighty, such experiences develop perseverance. Secondly, if it makes us aware of our need of divine wisdom, James assures us that it will be given generously by God.

*He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the Master.
There's no discouragement shall make him once relent,
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.*
After John Bunyan (1628–88) by Percy Dearmer (1867–1936)

Read: Proverbs 2; James 1: 2–8.

JGra

OCTOBER

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words ... we have the mind of Christ.
1 Corinthians 2: 12–13, 16.

'Heal the sick ... and tell them, "The Kingdom of God is near you." Luke 10: 9

'What is a Christian doctor?' is a question we constantly need to face. Being in Christ, we have the special privilege of being able to care, like the Great Physician, for the whole person. (John 7: 23) Like him we are to preach and heal. Like him, we are to be servants, motivated by love. (1 John 3: 16) Jesus says we are the light of the world, the salt of the earth. It is into the malaise of some patients and the corruption of some administrators and colleagues that we are to shine and cleanse, 'that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven'. (Matthew 5: 16)

The big question then arises: just what is our light, our saltiness? How, practically, is it transmitted to patients and colleagues? What should they see and experience at the hands of a Christian doctor, which they could not in the case of a non-Christian colleague, were he ever so competent and kind? We have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to inspire and enable us, and the power of prayer to be used on behalf of our patients. We are not just to save souls – we do not need to be doctors for that; nor are we just to heal the bodies – we do not need to be Christians for that.

We are to integrate all that we have and are to demonstrate Jesus' love for the whole person in deeds and words. This is our specialty, be we GPs, surgeons, physicians ... or whatever. But how? No university or church qualifies us for this specialisation. But we can learn from Christian colleagues, as we share our insights, successes and failures. This is why we need our Christian medical fellowships, locally, nationally and internationally.

Read: Matthew 5: 13–16; Luke 10: 1–16.

TG

'You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill.'
Haggai 1: 6

Are you satisfied with your life today? If not, why not? Perhaps Haggai can help us diagnose the problem, for his piercing words ring true today. The picture is of hardworking Christians who are not happy. And dissatisfied Christians don't obey God. The temple was the very place in which God was pleased to meet with his people, but it was in ruins. Israel had responded: 'The time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built.' Instead of following the Lord, each person was 'busy with his own house'. (Haggai 1: 9) Notice that this is not a condemnation of other nations, but of the people of God. Within our churches, Christian Unions, and Christian medical societies, are we working together for God's kingdom first? Or are we too busy with each day's work, distracted by too many other commitments?

The challenge from the Lord is, 'Give careful thought to your ways.' (Haggai 1: 7) But after the people learn to fear and obey him, the warning is replaced with comfort: 'I am with you.' (1: 13) This wonderful reassurance comes again in 2: 4: 'Be strong ... all you people of the land,' declares the Lord, 'and work. For I am with you.'

Like God's people in Haggai's time we can be confident of his presence with us as we serve him. We do not need to fear failure when it is God's glory that is at stake. Will he not defend the honour of his name? The day is coming when he will 'shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and (he) will fill (his) house with glory.' (Haggai 2: 7) There we will find true satisfaction.

Read: Haggai 1–2: 9.

CA

'... the joy of the Lord is your strength.' Nehemiah 8: 10

The Israelites who had returned from Babylon had rebuilt Jerusalem and settled in towns and villages. They now assembled in Jerusalem for the Feast of Trumpets in the seventh month. They heard the Law of God read and explained to them. They were so convicted of their sins that they were weeping. But Nehemiah reminded them that the day was for feasting and rejoicing. 'This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' We are not strong when we are cast down or discouraged. Rejoicing in God and serving him with cheerfulness and thankfulness gives us the strength of mind and body to perform our work and to endure and oppose all enmity against us.

There is much opposition to the Christian gospel today and we need the strength of the Lord to overcome it. 'Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.' (Ephesians 6: 10) James exhorts us, 'Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds' (James 1: 2) and describes how testing produces maturity. Peter writes of believers' 'new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ ... and into an inheritance that can never perish ... kept in heaven for you ... In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.' (1 Peter 1: 3–6)

Suffering is part of being a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. We become more like him if we face our sufferings with patience, fortitude and joy. It is not easy. It was not easy for him. He went steadfastly up to Jerusalem knowing what lay in front of him. He then endured the cross with its agony and shame 'for the joy set before him.' (Hebrews 12: 2) Let us follow in his footsteps, drawing strength from our joy in him.

Read: Leviticus 23: 23–25; Isaiah 50: 4–7; Acts 5: 41–42.

DD

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure ... 2 Corinthians 1: 8

These words, written by Paul after experiences in Asia, are echoed by many Christian healthcare professionals worldwide. We feel pressurised by greater bureaucracy, increasing expectations of patients, limited resources and future uncertainties. We also feel overwhelmed by the continuous pressure of daily contact with sadness and suffering, so often self-inflicted or the result of disobedience to God's laws. Sadly, many colleagues are disillusioned and have lost their sense of medical vocation.

If we could bring our list of problems to Paul, Peter or James, their response would be, 'Consider it pure joy ...' (James 1: 2) Nehemiah would urge, 'Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' (Nehemiah 8: 10) We might protest that this is unreasonable. Can't we just endure and forget about the joy? Well, no! Jesus promised that grief would turn to joy, that his joy could be in us and that our joy could be complete. (John 16: 20; 15: 11) So how can we rediscover that joy which is our strength?

Much of our joy comes from circumstances, experiences, feelings and sensations – perhaps from a fine sunset, or beautiful music. But the Bible speaks of something which can flourish despite difficult circumstances. Such joy results from a relationship with Christ which is confident that he is closer than ever when the situation is at its worst, that when we are in despair Jesus is still in control and that he cares infinitely more than we do. Trials of many kinds and the testing of faith develop both perseverance and maturity. (James 1: 2–4) Once we realise this, then we can be joyful about anything which helps that process.

Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him (Hebrews 12: 2) – the joy of knowing that he was doing his Father's will. May we know that same joy.

Read: Hebrews 12: 1–12.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 2 Corinthians 4: 16–17

Perspective can make large seem small and small large. Paul's view of the world was made clearer by being in but not of it, though he endured hardships which sometimes made him despair. (2 Corinthians 1: 8) Yet in the eternal scheme of things, he could view these earthly troubles as short-lived and relatively lightweight. New life in Christ should shift our perspective from seen to unseen, from temporal to eternal.

How often do we look at our troubles in this light? We work amongst patients and families who are suffering. We feel the helplessness of not being able to cure or even to comfort adequately. Our work can be tiring and stressful, sometimes producing heaviness of spirit. This is the very time we must alter our perspective and fix our eyes on Jesus. As author and pioneer of our faith, he carried this weight, and more.

Paul also bids us to look to a future weight of glory, which is no mere counterbalance but is so heavy that earthly troubles become comparatively light. Our final destination is heaven, and no scriptural symbolism, whether of crowns or jewels or light, can help us to imagine its glory. In shouldering the weight of the current troubles, we are preparing for our heavenly home and securing an even greater weight of glory there.

To turn our eyes to Jesus is to start to understand this world in the light of the next and to find that our troubles do, indeed, appear lighter. To look to the end of the race is to be better motivated to complete it.

Read: Colossians 3: 1–4; Romans 5: 1–5.

SR

‘... I will repay,’ says the Lord. Romans 12: 19

We work in communities that are becoming more and more ready to take others to court. Should something go wrong, claims of malpractice are often made and compensation sought. Sadly, some of this is justified and, where clinical practice has been sub-standard, the honourable way forward is a clear admission of guilt, an apology, and perhaps compensation. But accusations are easily made, many are contrived and unfair, and occasionally a career is unjustifiably ruined.

For the Christian who suffers an injustice, an unreasonable accusation, or even an unfair criticism, Peter holds up the example of the Lord himself. He committed no wrong, but did not retaliate when insulted or make threats when suffering injustice. Instead, he entrusted his cause to the one who judges rightly. (1 Peter 2: 23)

When earthly judgment has been given and arguments are over, the Christian can have peace of mind by taking all injustice to the cross. Putting it at the feet of the one who judges rightly means leaving to him the final assessment ... and getting on with life. Easy? Not at all, but neither was it for him. Perhaps that is one reason why Peter, having given this advice, concludes the passage by referring to Jesus as the ‘Shepherd and Overseer of your souls’. (1 Peter 2: 25) Having endured similar suffering himself, he is there to help us when he sees ours. (Hebrews 2: 18)

At the final judgement, all injustice will be sorted out. When the Sovereign Lord comes with power, ‘his reward is with him and his recompense accompanies him.’ (Isaiah 40: 10) So what about the here and now? ‘He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.’ (Isaiah 40: 11)

Read: 1 Peter 2: 18–25; Isaiah 40.

PCE

... he quickly falls away. Matthew 13: 21

I was saddened to discover that a friend who had received the gospel with great joy in his youth had subsequently fallen away. He no longer believed because, he said, science had disproved the existence of God. Belligerently, he rejected that to some extent believing in God, or not believing, is a matter of faith, because neither position can be proven. Indeed, I said, the Bible openly states this to be the case, whereas non-believing scientists affirm with great confidence what they cannot prove. My friend was not moved. There was, I believed, another reason for his rejection of the gospel or, at least, an occurrence that had shaken his faith in a loving God. It happened that, in the past, part of the church had treated a member of his family shabbily. This person had been rejected in a moment of need and denied the love that would have characterised Jesus' approach. Perhaps my friend was bitter. We need to ensure that the brother or sister in trouble is covered in loving kindness, and in prayer. Families and friends are watching, testing the reality of God's love in practice.

The whole matter troubled me very greatly. The early chapters of Romans spell out very clearly the foolishness and consequences of humankind's turning from God. Like a cascade, which does not hide God's anger, Paul takes us through effect after effect; often introduced by a harsh 'therefore', in the midst giving a warning to those who would judge. Forgive me if today's reading is rather long but it must be taken as a piece. Do read it as a whole, and return to it, studying its various sections. For my part I shall not cease to pray for my friend – and for the church, that it might always be a channel for God's love.

Read: Romans 1: 18–2: 16.

JHJ

'Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.' John 14: 21

It is natural to want to express our love. A child runs to a parent with outstretched arms and shrieks of delight. A man buys a woman a diamond ring. Sometimes, we say it with flowers. But how do we express our love for God? Emotional songs may enable worshippers to release their feelings. But Jesus is quite clear how we should express our love to God, and that is by doing the things he has asked us to do.

This saying of Christ breaks into our feelings and confronts us with our deeds. How can we say we love God, if we do not do the things he asks of us? We cannot. Our hypocrisy is exposed. Loving God is not a passing emotion. It is expressed in our daily obedience to his clear commands, not least the commission to 'Go and make disciples.'

But the verses above tell us something more disturbing. God discloses himself to those who do his will. When we are busy with his agenda, he draws alongside us and blesses us with his comforting presence. If we act on what we have learned about him, he shows us more of the things which are hidden from the wise and learned and upholds us. Conversely, if we do not obey his commands, we can expect him to draw back from us. Morality and spirituality cannot be separated. God draws close to those who draw close to him. (James 4: 7–8) He becomes distant and enigmatic to those who disobey him. Doubt and disobedience are intertwined. They come and go together.

Read: Matthew 11: 25–30; Galatians 5: 16–26.

PMay

I the Lord do not change. Malachi 3: 6

Recently, I re-read an old book entitled *The Indian Mutiny*. Having been to India several times to work, short term, in a Christian hospital, I was immediately aware that many of my Indian friends would regard the events described in the book as a phase in a war of independence, and not as a mutiny! How views of events, and opinions sincerely held, change. What is regarded as reasonable at one time is often seen quite differently later. Horrors such as slavery and apartheid, once upheld in some circles, are now an embarrassment to the descendants of those who supported them. Something similar is true in health care. Therapies once regarded as treatments of choice are now contraindicated because they were found to be imperfect, or were superseded. It was John F. Kennedy who said, ‘Everything changes but change itself’. Or does it?

God does not change. He has no need to change because, as the seat of all knowledge and wisdom, his dictates were perfect from the beginning. I have no idea how Jesus would have viewed the ‘mutiny’ but it is quite clear that he favoured the poor and the oppressed. It is God’s changelessness that makes the Bible enthralling. Even when I cannot explain or even completely understand what it says, it is ever challenging. Unfortunately, people have often interpreted the Bible to fit their particular bias and picked from it supportive statements, carefully avoiding or explaining away anything contrary. So it is good that courageous Bible students sometimes challenge established views. Some have been imprisoned or executed for so doing. Let us avoid the temptation to criticise but rather hasten to our Bibles and find the truths therein for ourselves, sharing and testing interpretations of them with other believers. Why not start, this day, by re-reading the opening chapter of Genesis with its account of the works of the all-wise creator?

Read: Genesis 1.

JHJ

Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy. Psalm 47: 1

For many, life is a dull experience. Some, it is true, have cause to be sad, but there are others who, never satisfied, scatter gloom like confetti. Even Christians may behave in this way. Perhaps it has all to do with one's notion of life. There is a startling difference between what is generally believed about life and what is taught in the Bible. Many think that one is alive as long as one's vital signs are present, as long as there is circulation, respiration and evidence of cerebral activity. When these vital signs cease one has died and that is the end of the matter. To the cynic life becomes a dreary downhill process of wearing out. By contrast, the Bible describes an exciting eternal dimension to life, declaring, 'the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord'. (Romans 6: 23) For those in Christ, according to the Bible, bodily death is only a transition from this world to an eternal life in God's presence. This will be supreme joy to the believer and quite different from the foolish notions of a heaven of self-gratification popular among the unbelieving.

Christian joy is not empty emotion or thoughtless revelry and gaiety. It flows from an inner peace, which anticipates the joy of being with Christ forever. Joy, as a mark of believing, is found in individual Christians and in the church. So, Christians celebrate and are happy here and now. A church short on joy, and characterised by unhappy, unforgiving, judgemental and harsh attitudes, does not reflect the certainty believers have of salvation. Jesus behaved very differently when he walked among us.

Today as we remember the promise of eternal life to those in Christ let us demonstrate the reality of the gospel publicly with joy, in helping, supporting and giving, even when the going is rough!

Read: 1 Peter 1: 3–12.

JHJ

... God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ Hebrews 13: 5

The ward round reached the last patient. She was dying and clearly distressed, despite regular opiates and analgesics. She was, apparently, semi-conscious and murmuring, barely audibly. The consultant bent over her, listening to catch her words. ‘He has left me alone! He has forsaken me! I am alone!’ – over and over again.

The consultant sat down by the bedside, having suggested that the others leave for coffee, and spoke to the patient, but not in his own words. The words were given: ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ (Hebrews 13: 5) ‘I am with you, always, to the very end.’ (Matthew 28: 20) – ‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.’ (Isaiah 43: 2) – and several other similar promises of God.

She opened her eyes for a few moments, looked at the consultant and said, ‘It was good of you to come,’ naming her pastor. The consultant explained who he was and promised to contact the pastor, who came later the same day to give her communion. She died the following day and when the consultant returned to the ward the senior nurse said to him ‘I don’t know what you did to Mrs X, but she did not require any more morphine!’

Spiritual pain and distress had been met by the ‘peace that passes understanding’. None of us is beyond the reach of God’s grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Read: passages cited.

GLC

'... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.' Matthew 5: 16

Isn't it great being able to help someone at a point of real need? The simplest gesture of sympathy or welcome, let alone the exercise of some gem of medical expertise, is often received with astonishing gratitude. The patient's expression of thanks, whether in words or as something more tangible, can be a real boost. It makes us think it is all worthwhile, and we feel good about ourselves. We can gradually become convinced that we deserve it and that we are, well, truly a little bit special. As they trust us more, patients can even start to treat us – like God! We suddenly find that we have stolen glory from God.

So how is it possible to let the good deed shine but to ensure that God takes the credit? I often say (or write) something like, 'Thank you for your encouragement – and may I say something personal? If we here have been able to help you with this illness, then we really do thank God.' Today, count up how many times people say 'Thank you' to you and see if there's a way you can turn the credit back to Jesus Christ (without whom we would never even have made it into the consulting room!)

Prayer: Father, forgive me when I steal the credit for good things in which I have had a part. Thank you for a new day a fresh adventure of faith with you. Please enable me to work out how to point people to you, and ensure that you get the credit in my life, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Read: Matthew 5: 14–16.

GMcA

'I had a dream! I had a dream!' Jeremiah 23: 25

It can be a good thing to have a vision in life. The prophet Joel anticipated a time when old men would dream dreams and young men see visions. (Joel 2: 28) This was vividly fulfilled at Pentecost – a happy antidote to dry-as-dust formal religion. God still works in this way, giving his people the ability to fulfil God-given dreams.

Yet it can be difficult to distinguish between the validity of visions. God's people are warned about false and lying prophets, who use God's name but are deluded in mind. (Jeremiah 23: 26) The warning is still needed today, even in some professedly Christian circles. The contrast lies with the one who holds to God's word. The comparison is between chaff and wheat. False visions keep on changing, appearing and disappearing. God's word is unchanging.

That some hold to different interpretations can cause problems. Our basic attitude should be to seek for the truth and honestly face its implications. As Peter said when warning against error, there are some things in the Bible hard to understand. (2 Peter 3: 16) Yet do we come to it believing in Jesus Christ and being subject to his word as the Word of God (1 John 1: 1, 2) or are we instead to pick and choose or even judge it? Much division is based on competitive prejudice, not on a humble desire for enlightenment.

There is always the danger of coming to God intellectually, not relationally. If we come to him trusting in his Son, then just as the Holy Spirit inspired those who first wrote the scriptures (2 Peter 1: 21) so we are assured that the same Spirit will interpret and convey God's word to us, as a light shining in a dark place.

Read: Jeremiah 23: 25–32; 2 Peter 1: 16–21.

DEBP

‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ John 21: 15

When Jesus asked Peter, ‘Do you love me more than these?’ we can’t be absolutely certain what he was referring to. Was it the nets, the boats or the catch of fish? All of these symbolised Peter’s old way of life before he met Jesus. Or did he mean ‘these other disciples’? After all, Peter had made that very boast, that others might desert Jesus, but not him. (Matthew 26: 33) Either way, the challenge of the question still applies to us.

All too many Christians find that their initial zeal and enthusiasm for Jesus drains away as professional pursuits and commitments take up more and more time and energy. It is easy, too, for us to start thinking that we are a cut above others, and that our Christian service is more valuable to God than is that of Christians whose jobs are more mundane. It is not our service that Jesus most desires, it’s our love. Paul tells us that love ‘does not boast, is not proud.’ (1 Corinthians 13: 4) Paradoxically, our love for Jesus is often most deepened when things go wrong and, like Peter, we discover that we are not as clever, strong and dedicated as we thought we were.

Jesus does not want us to follow him out of a sense of duty. Mere morality can be stifling. Yet how many of us who follow Jesus really do so out of love, rather than habit or custom? In the personal intimacy of breakfast on the beach, Jesus invited Peter to share his closeness once more and so be equipped for the tough times ahead. In the pressure of our lives, it is vital that we, too, share similar times of intimacy with God.

Read: John 21: 15–24.

TS

October 15 The cost of discipleship – sacrifice

‘... someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ John 21: 18

We live in an age of instant gratification, when even a short delay causes frustration. Road rage and other acts of violence may reflect the increasing pace of life and loss of an overall framework to live by. Christian concepts such as loyalty, commitment and self-sacrifice are harder than ever to put into practice. Yet Jesus made it quite clear to Peter that he would ultimately lose both his freedom and his life for Jesus’ sake. If we want to follow him we, too, must deny ourselves daily and take up the cross. This often involves our going where we ‘do not want to go.’

Over the years, I’ve become involved in teaching Christian perspectives on human sexuality. This is an increasingly difficult task in a secular culture which has moved away from the Judaeo-Christian ethic on these matters. It has been tough to be ridiculed in the popular media and academic press, and I often struggle with the Lord as to why he has put me into this arena. For me, this is part of the ongoing cost of discipleship, but I can honestly say that God strengthens us for what he calls us to do.

The cost of discipleship also prohibits comparing ourselves with others, whether favourably or unfavourably. ‘What about John?’ asked Peter, but Jesus more or less told him that it was none of his business. The same principle applies to us. We have to answer to God on our own account, not on behalf of others. Empowered by his grace and motivated by our love for him, let us gladly do all that he asks us to do, no matter what it costs.

Read: 1 Corinthians 12: 4–11; 1 Peter 4: 12–16.

TS

October 16 The means of discipleship – grace

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him a third time, ‘Do you love me?’ John 21: 17

Like Peter, health professionals are often pioneers and leaders. Peter is usually mentioned first when the disciples are listed. It was Peter who first acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, Son of the living God, Peter who walked on water (although briefly!) and Peter who boasted that even if everyone else forsook Jesus, he never would. (Matthew 16: 16; 14: 29; Mark 14: 29) People like Peter get things done. The great danger in Christian discipleship is to get so good at doing things that God is unconsciously left behind.

So it was that Peter, as his Master had foreseen, denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed. It's easily done. A few months ago I was a main speaker at a sponsored weekend for doctors at a smart hotel. During a special dinner, one of the other speakers said to the conference convener, ‘Of course, John is very religious. In fact, he’s a lay preacher, you know.’ As I am a lay preacher, too, I nearly spoke up to say so, but something held me back. Although I justified my silence at the time as discretion, it was actually plain cowardice. I was enjoying the company and wanted to be invited back. Like Peter, I simply didn’t want at that moment to be picked out as a follower of Jesus.

It sometimes hurts to face the truth. Even without a direct mention of his denial, how skilfully and graciously the Lord confronted Peter with what he had done and at the same time recommissioned him. If you feel you have failed him, forgiveness and a fresh start are always there for followers of Jesus. What a wonderful means of discipleship is his grace. Drink in it today.

Read: Ephesians 2: 8–10.

TS

'Who despises the day of small things?' Zechariah 4: 10

The condition known as Kartagener's syndrome includes dextrocardia, bronchiectasis, sinusitis and sometimes male infertility. Instead of the body's cilia acting together normally, like a sweeping brush, to clear out mucoid secretions from narrow passages, an abnormality at cellular level produces ciliary immobility. Advancing bronchiectasis results, with death from respiratory failure.

Where are you in the body of Christ? If you consider yourself to be the least in faith, hope, prosperity or gifts, perhaps it will help to think of yourself as a small cell whose inactivity may be catastrophic.

Are you a member of a small student fellowship? Sit down and pray for your church minister, or an evangelist who reaches and teaches others. Are you a medical officer in a remote area? Be accountable to your patients and your seniors, and forgive them if they overload you with work. You are like one of the cilia, waving out inhaled smoke. Are you a consultant who loves God, and does the best for your patients? Remember that God put you there on purpose. You might be feeling that you are not advancing, that your health service is taking advantage of you. Or have you been feeling that you are now too important to show love? Remember that meekness and humility are the ways of Jesus. If you are willing to consider yourself small whilst you are up there at the top, God will raise you even higher. (1 Peter 5: 6)

Prayer: Lord my God, as the body stays alive through the hidden action of the heart, and stays well through even smaller activities, please help those whose work is unseen but essential. May we find vocation in service to you, each small part fitting in with all the others in love, to build up your body, the church. Amen.

Read: Ephesians 4: 15–16; Romans 12: 4–8.

PMas

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. Psalm 62: 1

The Lord really is nearer than breathing, at the very ground of our being. Prayer was also at the ground of our Lord's being, because he and his Father were one. And his prayer for us was that we would be one with them. I have come to recognise that we must not, we cannot, keep our worship life separate from our work life.

We must 'in the middle of demanding tasks learn how to wed contemplation to activity, so that our greatest activity does not divert us from God'. How can the Father come into us, 'help himself to our lives' if we are not practising his presence hour by hour, not just once or twice a week? 'We cannot be filled with God until we are not so full of ourselves.' (Oswald Chambers)

We cannot go on being babes in the Christian wood, drinking only the milk of the Word, if our love affair with him is to grow. For so long mine was 'arrested development' at an immature level. 'A life of prayer is not completely linear, any more than one's intellectual or emotional life is linear. It is cyclical; it turns and turns again, and carries us along with it'. (Robert Benson) Maybe our prayer life has plateaued again and we must seek once again to recognise his presence, that he is with us as he intended.

Prayer: We know, O Lord, that all things are ordered by your wisdom and love; grant us in all things to see your hand; that we may walk with Christ in all simplicity, and serve you with a quiet and contented mind. (Living Prayer by Robert Benson)

Read: John 17: Psalm 73: 21–28.

AJR

'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up ..."' Matthew 4: 6

Our basic identity lies not in accomplishments and achievements, but in the fact that we come from God and will go back to God. Here the Devil suggested to Jesus that his Sonship needed to be discovered and ratified by some extraordinary feat like throwing himself from the pinnacle of the temple. Similarly, we can be tempted to do good and to achieve, so that we confirm to ourselves our identity in Christ. To do good just to prove ourselves can be very tiresome and destructive. Better to let our actions speak for themselves, reflecting Christ.

Through this temptation the Devil was also trying to manipulate God. The Devil wanted to force God to act by saving Jesus. We too can be very manipulative in all our relationships – with children, spouses, authorities and patients. Subtly, we are telling people that unless they do what we approve, we will withhold our love or support. Jesus did not yield to this temptation. The true joy of being loved is when it happens without compulsion or manipulation.

This temptation was also about wanting to impress rather than doing what is really worthwhile and helpful. Jumping off the top of the temple would have greatly impressed the worshippers but would not have helped them in any way. Jesus only did those miracles which healed or helped people. We have many ‘god-men’ who do great magical things that attract attention to themselves but bring no help or wisdom to others. Our actions should be directed towards helping others rather than highlighting ourselves.

Prayer: Thank you Lord, that your sacrificial love sets us free from the struggle to impress and instead gives us the glorious liberty of being your children, made in your image.

Read: Hebrews 2: 5–18.

VS

'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.' Acts 9: 15

After the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, he told him to go into the city and wait for further instructions. The Lord then appeared to Ananias in a vision to tell him to go and heal Paul. Ananias was very hesitant to go, but the Lord was emphatic, referring to Paul as his 'chosen instrument'. It was no accident that Jesus had appeared to Paul that day. For Paul, this was a direct 'calling' from God. It was part of a plan, a plan developed in the mind of God and carried out with perfect precision.

As Christians, we are all 'chosen instruments', and as such, we also are called by God. Your coming to a saving faith in Jesus Christ was no accident. He has chosen you, and has chosen you for a particular purpose. For Paul, that purpose was to 'carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.' Only in exceptional cases does God give us our purpose statement when we come to faith in him. Usually, it is we who are left with the responsibility of finding out God's purpose for us, a task that should be continued for the rest of our lives.

In a sense then, from the time we commit our lives to Jesus Christ, what we undertake from that point forward should be done only because we feel his 'calling' to us to do it. His purposes for you will be varied, but certainly one of those purposes will be to 'carry his name' before unbelievers as well as before believers. There is truly no higher calling for a Christian.

Read: 1 Corinthians 1: 26–31; Ephesians 1: 3–6; 1 Peter 2: 9–12.

JB

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
Ephesians 2: 10

Paul tells us here that we are God's 'workmanship', or literally the 'product' of his work. Often, it is tempting to think that we became the professionals we are solely as a result of our own hard work and innate abilities. With such thinking, we can subtly give credit to ourselves for our achievements rather than to God, who is truly responsible for who we are. Certainly there is hard work involved, but that work is accomplished only through the abilities and perseverance that God has given.

We may have co-workers who manifest pride in a very arrogant and obvious fashion. But we must be diligent that we do not allow this attitude to creep into our own thinking. How often do we, in our own church setting, begin to think that we somehow deserve special attention, or are more qualified than others to serve in the leadership? How often do we, because of our higher income and higher giving to the church, begin to think that we deserve a special hearing from the pastor in regards to our specific concerns?

We are the product of God's work, which was accomplished in Christ Jesus. We are not the product of our own work. As such, we have no right to take any special pride in any of our achievements. Our accomplishments arise out of what God has done in us. When our thinking is in line with this, our attitude will display it. We will exhibit a high degree of thankfulness to God for what he has accomplished in our lives. We will view others within the kingdom as equals, and lastly, we will be very hesitant to accept praise from others without also giving glory to God.

Read: Matthew 23: 1–12; 1 Corinthians 1: 27–31.

JB

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, ‘Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.’ Simon answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.’ Luke 5: 4–5

Imagine the scenario; you’ve been working in your field of expertise for a number of years, you trained on the job, you know how to apply your knowledge to the local situation. Then when things are difficult someone outside your field dares to tell you what to do. How do you feel? How will you react? This is precisely what happened to Simon and his colleagues. After a fruitless hard night’s fishing, Jesus borrows Simon’s boat to preach from. The above conversation follows. Jesus tells Simon what to do and Simon obeys him. Simon recognises Jesus’ authority as he speaks into Simon’s work situation.

The results are dramatic. There is an abundance of fish. Suddenly Simon’s work becomes immensely fruitful and a blessing to his colleagues. Through this encounter at his place of work Jesus opens Simon’s eyes. Simon recognises that he is a sinful man and that Jesus is Lord. However, Jesus’ impact through Simon’s work is not on Simon alone; the eyes of his colleagues James and John are also opened. Ultimately all three choose to dedicate their lives to following Christ.

Jesus longs and loves to speak into our working lives. As we put his word into action, and learn to recognise his voice and respond to his leading in specific situations, we will, like Simon, see similar fruit. However, we must first allow the Lord Jesus into our working lives and, recognising his authority and hearing his voice, act as he leads. Whatever our knowledge and expertise we must also say, ‘Because you say so, I will ...’

*Lord Jesus, you are welcome in my work.
Let me hear your words and obey them. Amen.*

Read: Luke 5: 1–11; Colossians 3: 17–24.

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3: 4–5

As physicians and dentists, we have ‘climbed the ladder’ through all the steps of hard work and study in our early training and through postgraduate education. Hence, our background in medicine and dentistry is very much performance-based. This motivation does not stop once we are in practice. If we want to be successful practitioners, we must perform our duties well. We live and work in a performance-based world.

No wonder it is so difficult for us to grasp the fact that the kingdom of God is not ‘performance-based’. It is so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that in order to ‘show our worth as a Christian’, or ‘to earn salvation’, we must be performing well as a Christian also. But the kingdom of God is not like that. Paul reminds us in this verse that our salvation rests solely upon the work of God, not upon what we have done. It is only because of God’s grace and mercy that we can enter the kingdom of God.

So for us physicians and dentists, it is very difficult to grasp this fact because there is so little grace and mercy within our materialistic fields. It is not taught within the profession. Nevertheless, the fact is, as we have believed and trusted in Christ, our salvation has already been accomplished, there is nothing we need do to guarantee it. We are destined for heaven, due solely to his grace and mercy. Such belief and trust in Christ will be demonstrated by what we do and how we behave. (James 2: 17)

Read: Titus 3: 1–8; Romans 3: 21–26; Ephesians 2: 8–10.

JB

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Romans 12: 1

If our salvation is based solely upon God's grace and mercy, what then should be our motivation for what we do in the kingdom of God? The above verse gives us the answer. By beginning this chapter with 'Therefore', Paul is saying that because God is who he is, a God of infinite wisdom, knowledge and mercy, our response to what he has done for us should be to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. As living sacrifices, we then have the ability to please God.

Instead of trying to work toward our salvation, our motivation then becomes one of pleasing God, as a result of our thankfulness at already receiving salvation. What we are doing, therefore, is something we do for God, an offering given back to him. It is something that has an impact on him, it is pleasing to him. This ability to please the very God who created us should hopefully bring us joy and further motivate us to cultivate works in our lives that we can offer to him.

Paul goes on to tell us that this is the essence of worship. We often think of worship only as the time we spend singing hymns on Sunday morning. But Paul expands this definition. For Paul, worship includes everything we do on a daily basis when it is done as an offering of thankfulness to God. Yes, worship includes time spent in church on Sundays, but it also includes the time you spend working. So work, therefore, that you can recognise that what you are doing is pleasing to God, bringing him pleasure. Take joy in that fact, and allow it to motivate you throughout the day.

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4: 1–10; Hebrews 13: 15–16.

JB

'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' Luke 18: 38

There was a marvellous temple in the city of Jerusalem which hosted beautiful divine services and noble priests, and Jerusalem was very proud of what it had to offer. Little wonder it despised and scorned Jesus of Nazareth, who did not come in glory and with an army, but in lowliness. This was neither the sort of king nor the kind of kingdom they wanted.

And people's poor hearts still feel the same today. But just calm down, have yourself made small and have a heart bowed into the dust. Despise all that is in you that wishes to inflate itself and oppose your acceptance of Jesus. Then you will hear the call of the Holy Spirit that your King will come! So open your heart with pleasure for the Lord, and the King will come to you and reign in your heart.

'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in, and eat with him, and he with me.' (Revelation 3: 20) Dear colleague! Is the King of kings and Lord of lords in your heart? If he isn't – then ask him in now.

*O Jesus, Thou art standing outside the fast closed door,
In lowly patience waiting to pass the threshold o'er.
Shame on us, Christian brothers, His name and sign who bear,
O shame, thrice shame upon us, to keep Him standing there.*

William W. How (1823–97)

Read: John 1: 1–14.

BS

In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord ... He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' Micah 4: 1–2

The open idolatry of Thai and Chinese temples has affected me less than the ruined temples of Angkor Wat. Here, enormous carved faces of a long-dead king gaze out over his lost kingdom, representing the Hindu god Bodhisattva. Around 1,000 years old, they were created when European Christians were building great cathedrals to the glory of God. As I contemplated them, I asked myself:

- What is in the heart of man that causes him to reach out into the infinite and to long for eternity?
- To whose glory were these temples built? To honour a god or to honour a king?
- What of the slaves? Necks roped together, they toiled to change 'the glory of the immortal God' into 'images made to look like mortal man'. (Romans 1: 23) Could any slave or employer be found righteous?

God has 'set eternity in the hearts of men'. (Ecclesiastes 3: 11). Yet the heart of man is also 'deceitful above all things and beyond cure'. (Jeremiah 17: 9) We may find idolatry contemptible, but Paul warns us against passing judgement on others when we do the same things ourselves. We, too, have our professional and personal idols, including self-congratulation. Paul links self-seeking with rejection of the truth. (Romans 2: 1–3, 8)

Our God longs to meet the desires of our hearts and will finally be exalted above all others. Both in practice and preaching we should therefore remember this: 'Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.' (1 John 5: 21)

Read: Romans 1: 18–23; 2: 1–16.

RJH

'... I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy.' John 16: 22

The eleven disciples must have had little idea of what they were about to experience as they made their way from the upper room where they had eaten their last meal with Jesus. Walking towards the Kidron Valley Jesus gave his final talk, in which he warned them that he would soon be leaving them. Perhaps even at that stage they refused to believe that he was about to die. Yet mixed in with the sombre reality of his imminent suffering, to be faced alone in a garden, he spoke the above words of inexplicable joy. Our Lord chose to drink the cup of God's wrath and was arrested at the sign of a kiss from his friend. Three days later, it was in yet another garden that the most extraordinary conversation in history occurred – when Jesus, risen from the dead, said 'Mary' and Mary replied 'Teacher!'

Two thousand years of history separates us from that garden with its empty tomb. Yet the unambiguous reality of Jesus' mighty resurrection is as true today as it ever has been. 'Lo, Jesus greets us, risen from the tomb; lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom,' proclaims the hymn. Have we succumbed to the outbreak of incandescent joy which infected the remaining disciples and became pandemic in the ancient world? Can anyone take the joy of the risen Lord away from us?

Clearly there will be times when we struggle as Christians. Jesus warned us to expect trouble. Yet in the midst of suffering, in the thick of the hardest circumstances, we are reminded that the joy we have in knowing Christ's resurrection is something nobody, but nobody, can take from us.

Read: John 20: 10–18.

DP

'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' Micah 6: 8

Statistics and consensus are important in clinical decisions but we cannot manage by computer alone. Clinical judgement is always necessary. Similarly, this is true in the sphere of ethics and moral choices. The Bible is not a text-book of moral do's and don'ts, nor a series of calculations for godly behaviour. Even the ten commandments are broad statements setting out the limits of behaviour and needing interpretation and application, e.g. Matthew 5: 27–28.

The balance of truth and love, and of justice and mercy, runs right through Scripture as a golden thread to guide our decision making. (Ephesians 4: 15) They are seen in sharp silhouette at the cross with the vertical of the Father's judgement and the horizontal of the Son's outstretched arms of love. They will form the framework of my decision making with each patient today or tomorrow. What should I tell this patient? What should I say to this anxious parent? How much should I charge this man? Where should I refer this woman?

I won't get it right all the time, but I am more likely to if I can learn the last phrase of the text – 'to walk humbly with your God.' How often have I failed only to realise afterwards that I didn't ask for help. (James 1: 5) A careful daily attention to God's word and a prayerful attitude throughout the day is as important for good clinical practice as is reading the journals and listening to my teachers. And when things go wrong and I need to apologise? Read Micah 7: 18–19 to know that our God pardons sin and does not stay angry but delights in showing mercy.

Read: Micah 6: 6–8; Matthew 5: 17–37; Philippians 4: 4–8.

BDS

Jesus ... said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.' Matthew 22: 18–21

Paul states how we can do this: ‘... offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is ...’ (Romans 12: 1–2) How can we enter into the counter-culture of Jesus, so that we do not merely just become a product of the age in which we live but can make good choices for life? Two suggestions.

1) Make a positive choice about your standard of living. Decide where to be different from your peers – and how to achieve it. Private schooling, bigger house or car and expensive holidays all need extra money which takes time to earn. Yet different standards can be chosen. This results in less need to do extra sessions or see more private patients just for more money. It also frees time for family and church.

2) ‘Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work ...’ (Exodus 20: 8) It does not say that doctors are exempt, so we need to think carefully! We all need regular, planned time off work. This need is built in by the Creator and so it is of real benefit. Important personal dates should go in the diary well ahead of time so that they are protected and remembered.

Why not have a weekly date with your wife? Book a baby sitter to be sure of peace! Escape anywhere just to talk and have time alone together – after all, this is your most important human relationship which needs protecting at all costs.

Read: Matthew 22: 15–22; Exodus 20: 1–17.

BH

'My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions.'
Daniel 6: 22

The history of the Jewish race has been more turbulent than that of most nations. The Bible makes it clear that when they were deported to Babylon in 587 BC, it was God himself who stated that this was the consequence of their failure to keep the covenant which he had made with their forefather, Abraham. Sin always has consequences.

After a period of training to enable him to adapt to a foreign culture, Daniel, a man of substantial intellectual talent and moral courage, rose to a position of eminence and responsibility during captivity. This he did without compromising his allegiance to the God of Israel, with whom he had regular communication in personal prayer. Such indeed was his reputation for being a man of prayer that his Babylonian rivals used this very fact as a means of entrapping him and fixing a charge of disloyalty to King Darius. The gruesome punishment he knowingly faced was to be fed to lions. Undaunted, Daniel made no attempt to modify his daily routine of prayer. His confidence was in God. Inevitably, in due course he was arrested and condemned. The story moves to its well-known conclusion, but it is to be noted that God did not deliver Daniel from the lions' den, but in it! (Isaiah 43: 2 also affirms that God is with us in danger.)

Opposition, adversity, alienation and many other hardships have often been focussed on those who make known their faith in God. Take heart, Daniel's God knows all about your problems and still delivers in and through them.

*Dare to be a Daniel! Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm, And dare to make it known.*

Anon

Read: Daniel 6; Hebrews 11: 32–34.

JGra

'Speak, for your servant is listening.' (1 Samuel 3: 10) 'Here am I, send me.' (Isaiah 6: 8)

Here we find a child and a young man, both ready to listen to God and do his will. Perhaps it was because they were young that they could be so direct and uncalculating with God. Samuel, conceived after his mother's many prayers for a child, was dedicated to God from the womb. From childhood on, he developed total confidence in God. The best known of his rare prayers to be recorded is his fearless, 'Speak,' when the Lord addressed him as a young boy, but he grew up to become known as a man who consulted God on his nation's behalf (1 Samuel 7: 8; 8: 6–10; 16: 1–4) Isaiah, too, was totally devoted to serving the Lord, whatever it might cost. The lives of both young men were radically changed by their readiness to serve, and the years did not lessen their commitment.

God was able to use Samuel and Isaiah as reformers in Israel. They were used to overcome the Philistines and became high-ranking among God's prophets. We may not have had their dramatic encounters with God, but in one way or another he has still called us to be his messengers among health care professionals. It may be part of his purpose today to use us to bring about reform in our health services, or to take a stand against his enemies, or to tell forth to our own nation the consequences of disobedience to God's commands. In this, as in all else, God asks us to have total confidence in him and to be ever ready to serve him. In return, he assures us that he will be with us, and will provide all the strength we need to do his work.

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5: 24; 2 Thessalonians 1: 11–12.

MCh

NOVEMBER

'Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'
Joshua 1: 9.

November 1 Exiled! Imprisoned! Where is God?

'I the Lord do not change.' Malachi 3: 6

'It became distressingly clear that the foreigners working with the mission would have to leave ... not only for our own safety, but for that of our national colleagues.' So wrote a missionary doctor during a sensitive time of instability in her adopted country. Her last night was spent packing up and saying goodbye. Hoping to return, she requests prayer for oppressed national believers.

Back in Britain, awaiting his visa, a Christian doctor from overseas was suddenly arrested. With nothing more than he had with him, he was despatched to a detention centre for speedy deportation. Next day, 'a little mistake' was discovered and he was released, sure that this was an answer to prayer, but still greatly shaken. The story of Peter's release (Acts 12) was comforting.

Such stories could be multiplied worldwide. They cause shock and grief, with anxious insecurity afterwards. Some suffer long-term flash-backs. How can God be at work in all this? As well as Peter's amazing story, missionaries Paul and Silas were liberated by an earthquake! – and their jailer's household was converted. (Acts 16: 16–40) Joseph's exile and imprisonment lasted for years, but the experience matured his faith and personality, training him to become a responsible leader. (Genesis 45: 1–8) Jeremiah suffered imprisonment, and more, for being God's messenger, but his last recorded words are prayers for the restoration of his deported people. (Lamentations 5: 21–22) He would die before this happened, and we cannot always discern God's purpose within our ongoing trials. Yet to trust him wholly is to find him completely dependable, and well able to free us in spirit even when restricted in person. God always sees the end from the beginning.

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

Charles Wesley (1707–88)

Read: Passages cited; Hebrews 11: 32–40.

JGo

'Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.' Jonah 2: 8

As you read this devotion today I don't know what is facing you. Perhaps a lengthy ward round or busy night shift, amid mounting paper work and new responsibilities at home? Your mind may be full of concerns, lists of people to see and things to do. But when was the last time you asked yourself what are you aiming for ultimately, this day, this week or this year? Too often, as driven doctors and dentists, we tend to see ceaseless activity as a virtue in itself, and may be secretly proud of all we have managed to achieve in a short time. But Jonah realised from the belly of the whale: 'Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.'

Salvation comes from the Lord alone. When we forget this, our lives can take a subtly different course. The unspoken professional's motto, 'I do, therefore I am' needs to be reversed: 'I am (in Christ), therefore I do (what he wants me to do).' Jonah had to reach the point at which his 'life was ebbing away' before he remembered the Lord and his salvation. Then he was able to obey him. (Jonah 2: 7) If our ambition lies anywhere else, we will be unable or unwilling to do God's will.

Setting aside the list of worries, there are only two really important questions that need to be pressing on our mind daily. Firstly, how can I grow in my knowledge of Christ? Secondly, where can I be most effective for him?

'I consider everything as a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord ...' (Philippians 3: 8)

Read: Jonah 1–2: 10.

CA

The Lord is my shepherd ... Psalm 23: 1

My first assignment, soon after my medical studies, was to work in a leprosy hospital in the Himalayan region. My work involved extensive trekking on the high mountains. On one occasion we had to undertake a particularly difficult trek to a village which was at a height of 10,000 feet above sea level. After two days, on reaching the village we were told that the menfolk were high up in the mountains tending their sheep. Next day we climbed to 15,000 feet. Men and sheep lived together in caves for six months of the year when it was too warm for the sheep at lower levels. We had to stay in the same cave with the shepherds, sheep, shepherd dogs, the stench and smoke. The shepherds spend half their lives with the sheep away from their own families. It looked as though they just lived for the sheep, were totally committed to the sheep.

Psalm 23 begins with the statement, ‘The Lord is my shepherd ...’. The psalmist addresses God as his Lord. David responds to God, who unconditionally committed himself to his people. The Lord’s commitment is shown in the rest of the psalm: ‘He makes me lie down’; ‘he leads me’; ‘he restores’; ‘he guides’; ‘you are with me’; ‘your ... comfort’; ‘you prepare’; ‘you anoint’; ‘... will dwell in the house of the Lord.’ That is total commitment! We never need doubt his commitment or his love for us. This is something that he has unilaterally committed himself to. His commitment is not dependent on our faithfulness or love or character, nor anything else that we can bring to him.

But the world around us does not have any love for us. It does not value us. It often hurts us. Only when we are secure in the truth of the unchanging commitment of God can we go out with confidence and courage to face the world.

Read: John 10: 1–18.

VP

Love ... is not self-seeking ... 1 Corinthians 13: 4–5

As she waited for Salvatore to arrive, Marguerite was excited. They had known each other for years, and respect and friendship had deepened. Twice a week, between therapies, they spent much time together, looking at each other and speaking together. Sometimes his hand touched hers and their fingers intertwined. Everything is strong when there is little left, and both were quadriplegic. Salvatore had some movement in one hand and Marguerite could only use her chin to drive her electronic wheelchair, but they decided to live together. The rehabilitation team found them a suitable apartment and ensured that they had the necessary help. Their happiness was obvious to all.

Then the team gave Marguerite an electronic device which, controlled by her tongue, enabled her to open the door, choose her own TV programme or make a phone call. Gradually her new independence took away the tasks that Salvatore had been able to do for her. Without his previous role, he left. Self-sufficiency kills love.

The small daily tokens of love which we receive from others should not be taken for granted. This includes God's constant love for us, too easily overlooked if we are instead trying to manage independently, or looking for miracles. Without his wisdom we can lack sensitivity as we seek to help others. Acting as we think best, without listening enough or thinking ahead, we can turn our intended help into a disaster. It is most important for our patients to keep their role in the family, so any 'helpfulness' should still allow this. Love and care do not always mean 'doing something about it'.

Job's friends began well as they sat with him for a whole week without saying a word in his desolation. They were just there. In love.

Read: Proverbs 14: 12; Job 2: 7–13.

MCh

'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home.'

Luke 15: 4–6

We have all been lost, but the three parables of Luke 15 describe how God finds us. Unflattering as it may be to be compared to a sheep, a coin or a dissolute young man, there are some comforting truths in these well known stories. The parable of the lost sheep gives us a wonderful image of Jesus as the true Shepherd, persistently defending, protecting, guiding and caring for us.

The Lord's joy and delight in us is perhaps best exemplified in the incredible picture of God as Father of a lost son. It is easy to identify with the prodigal who took and squandered his father's money then, destitute, faced an uncertain reception as he turned back towards home. We, too, may rehearse our apologies as we approach our Father, only to be surprised by his welcome and the grace of his forgiveness.

Each parable in Luke 15 highlights the value placed on every one of us. We are worth searching for, turning the house upside down over, throwing a party for. The tasks of health care can seem demanding but not always appreciated and our self-esteem can sink. We need to enjoy again our first taste of salvation and, whatever our failings, remember the warm reception we receive each time we approach God's throne. We may still be in between what we were and what we will be, but in the end we will be made perfect, as we are brought home.

Read: Luke 15.

SR

But as for me ... I had nearly lost my foothold. Psalm 73: 2

We can often be caught off balance. An unexpected accusation, a suggestion of negligence, a challenge – can all take us by surprise, tempting us to respond in haste and anger. After this kind of confrontation with a patient or relative, how often have we asked ourselves, ‘Why did I say that?’ The psychologist would urge a pause before responding in a heated way, suggesting, ‘Count up to ten. It helps to steady you and gives time to cool the situation.’

Jesus was once confronted by an angry crowd. They challenged him. He simply bent down and wrote in the dust on the ground. One by one they went out, silenced and shamed. Jesus was left alone to deal with the cause of the trouble. (John 8: 10–11) Many suggestions have been made about what he wrote on the ground. Some have thought that it was the numbers one to ten, signifying the ten commandments, others that it was certain embarrassingly significant names. We’re not told and it doesn’t really matter.

When we are confronted or accused, pausing to count to ten is one option, but perhaps it would be more helpful to pause and consider, ‘What would my Lord have done here? How would he have handled this?’ To respond in this way would be doing what Paul suggested in Romans 13: 14: ‘Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.’

Jesus is the ultimate truth (John 14: 6) not only as expressed in his words, but in his very nature and character. To ‘clothe ourselves’ in him, therefore, is to let his truth govern our values and behaviour, in every situation and in all kinds of temptation.

Read: John 8: 1–11; Genesis 14: 17–24.

PCE

... your strength will equal your days. Deuteronomy 33: 25

Elderly people, including older health workers, can feel undervalued. When youth is favoured more than experience, some start to look forward to retirement with disturbing eagerness. Moses was different. At 120 years of age, still on call for God, he was asked to climb a mountain. (Deuteronomy 32: 49–50) From the summit he would see the promised land, but be denied entry to it. Instead, he was to convey God's message to those he was about to leave. Moses suited this role so well precisely *because* he was elderly. He'd seen life in the round. Like all old men, he was prone to say, 'Remember the days of old' (Deuteronomy 32: 7) but he could also look ahead. The alternatives of life and prosperity or death and destruction would depend on his followers' being careful to obey God. (Deuteronomy 30: 15–18)

Moses' wisdom in old age was rooted in lessons learned early in life. God's daily provision of manna had taught him to trust for each day as it came. Now, at 120 years, his eyesight and stamina endured. (Deuteronomy 34: 7) God had proved utterly trustworthy, both for the daily round and on their wilderness journey. His great age was irrelevant, except that long experience added weight to his warnings.

Moses still speaks to elderly carers and their ageing patients. To look ahead as he did, assured of God's love and faithfulness, is to gain strength for each day. It can also offer fresh wisdom to those who follow.

*What then? Shall we sit idly down and say,
‘The night has come, it is no longer day’?
For age is opportunity, no less
Than youth itself, though in another dress,
And as the evening twilight fades away
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day.
Nothing is too late. Longfellow*

Read: Deuteronomy 34.

DEBP

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Romans 12: 11

Yes, believe it or not I am still alive at 90, though why God has been so gracious in permitting such an extended life, I have no idea. I can but praise him.

It was about 53 years ago that the Lord called me to work in Zambia. We had been told of the need for a dentist by a medical friend. Some Christian dental work was already underway, but more than 500 miles to the south. There was neither Christian dental guidance nor professional help. In human terms we were on our own, but really God was in control. Selling our house allowed us to purchase basic dental equipment and materials. This was shipped via South Africa, followed by my wife, myself and three children.

Our temporary accommodation, in a mud brick thatched hospital building, lacked running water and electricity. Soon a surgery and dental laboratory were built, a small generator installed and, although in the first years I had no electrical equipment, it was amazing what could be done with simple tools. Efficient second-hand equipment came after my first furlough. Patients of all races came from far and wide, and soon I was also able to visit far off villages, relieving some of the grosser dental problems, and visit mission stations in Zaire and Angola.

After 12 years we came home, but returned to Zambia for short visits most years until the Lord arranged for the work to be taken over by other Christian dentists. Extensive surgery for cancer put an end to my African work and my wife and I were left marvelling at the Lord's guidance and provision, spiritually, materially and financially, over many years. Our God is indeed so good.

Read: Romans 12.

GBo

... conflicts on the outside, fears within. 2 Corinthians 7: 5

It has been a long day. Then another patient is carried in, bleeding massively from accidental injury. For a moment, you are alone. You are too young, too inexperienced. Quickly the years of discipline and training click in and, almost automatically it seems, you do what is needed and by the time more senior colleagues arrive the situation is stabilised. Someone quietly says, ‘Well done’! But for a moment you, like many others in life-threatening situations, had known stark fear, then the exhilaration of coping. In your mind you thank God, for had not he been there?

Paul, in Macedonia, was also tired, harassed, facing conflicts without and frightened within but he, like you, found God’s comfort in his time of need. There seems to be a line between immaturity and maturity that is crossed in coping, alone, with particularly stressful situations. There is, too, a line in the Christian life between dependence on self and on God, which is crossed when, for the first time, the new Christian faced with some crisis, spiritual or in everyday life, discovers God’s power to intervene, to give strength, and to provide a net through which his child cannot fall.

However, there is another fear, for the Bible leaves us in no doubt that we should fear the Lord. This is not fear that paralyses ability to act and think. Rather it is the fear that recognises the full majesty of God, creator, judge and arbiter and, by comparison, our comparative smallness and insignificance. It is holy fear that comes to those who know God, and that gives the believer insight to reverence him, obey his instructions and turn from evil. It is the beginning of wisdom. (Psalm 111: 10) It is within that fear that we find the strength to face every day fears that come our way in life’s situations!

Read: Psalm 34.

JHJ

I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land ... but I found none. Ezekiel 22: 30

How often have we had to fill in for someone on a clinic? Holiday, illness or plain carelessness has resulted in a clinic being understaffed and we are asked to stand in the gap. Perhaps it has happened often before and, unfairly, we again are asked to lose a session, which had been earmarked for some other necessary activity. Understandably we are angry. It is unfair. Will we refuse? But wait. We are Christian and others are watching. Regrettably, they may have seen Christians refuse to help before or help very reluctantly and with ill grace. What would Jesus have done? What does God require of us?

The sins of Jerusalem are described in horrendous detail in Ezekiel, chapter 22. The whole gamut of society, princes, priests, nobles, prophets and the ordinary people, had forsaken God's way and when God looked for a man who would stand in the gap, on behalf of the land so that he would not have to destroy it, he found no one.

As you read this, does not today's world resemble the Jerusalem of Ezekiel's time? Does not God still look for people to stand for him, adopting his standards and reflecting his love and service? So we do the extra duty, cheerfully and effectively, for we serve a master who, in his turn, gave his life for sinful humankind. Perhaps onlookers will see Christ reflected in us. He spoke of going the extra mile. His standards are quite different from the world's standards. But how can the world experience his standards unless we reflect them? It may be that today, too, God is looking for righteous people to stand in the gap so that he may withhold his wrath from a sinful world.

Read: Ezekiel 22: 17–31; Matthew 5: 38–42.

JHJ

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' Matthew 11: 28

She had been admitted with a stroke. Recovery of tone and power in her limbs had been quite good and there seemed to be no reason for her very slow response to rehabilitation. She was, certainly, depressed and on the ward round anti-depressant medication had been discussed.

After the round the ward doctor said to the consultant 'Could you have a word with Mrs Y? I think this might be a spiritual problem.' Later that day, in private, the consultant 'had a word' with the patient and, having discussed her progress, he asked, 'Is there anything else troubling you?' to which she replied, hesitantly, 'Yes! You see, my problem is that I can't be forgiven!' In response to the question 'Why not?' she went on to tell of something which had happened many years before, which she now deeply regretted, but the other people concerned were now dead, and, because she could no longer make restitution, she believed she could not be forgiven.

The consultant took the opportunity to speak of the free forgiveness bought for us on the cross of Calvary and later contacted the hospital chaplain who followed up the theme of God's grace. Her burden was lifted, the anti-depressant was never prescribed, and her rehabilitation progressed satisfactorily.

Physical, emotional and spiritual needs are often interconnected and in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, we are given resources to meet these needs.

Read: Ephesians 1: 7; Colossians 1: 10–14.

GLC

'I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.' Mark 11: 23

We stood on the Mount of Olives as our Israeli Christian guide pointed southwards to a conical hill about 15 kilometres away. 'That,' he said, 'is the Herodium, built by King Herod the Great as a fortress and eventual tomb for himself.' He suggested that Jesus was pointing in the same direction as he made the above statement. Herod's mountain represented all the godless, ruthless political power being represented by his dynasty. It is the same today. Jesus knew that the powerful message of the cross would outlast all such self-seeking political systems, in which God is excluded, and might counts for more than right. Now God was bringing in the 'kingdom that shall never be destroyed,' foreseen by Daniel. (Daniel 2: 44)

Jesus' kingdom will outlast all such powers, ancient or modern, political or medical, local or apparently universal. As we seek to live for him in 'a crooked and depraved generation' (Philippians 2: 15) we should not be discouraged. 'Have faith in God,' says Jesus. Just before saying this, he had cleansed the temple, and the fig tree – symbolising Israel – had withered at his command. Corrupt religious structures, no less than political ones, will crumble before his kingdom.

Nor should we neglect the corruption of our own hearts. If we seek removal of corrupt forces in our society or hospital out of vindictiveness or personal hatred, we shall not be heard, but must seek forgiveness. (Mark 11: 25) Gentle instruction was Paul's way. (2 Timothy 2: 24–26) This can be hard – but have faith in God!

Prayer: Lord, increase my faith. Amen.

Read: Ephesians 3.

BDS

So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and ... she said to them ... ‘The Lord your God is God ...’ Joshua 2: 1, 9, 11

Rahab would never have featured among the great and good. She was a prostitute, a liar and a traitor, whose betrayal of her people led to their mass destruction. She was a bad lot. Despite this, she became a forebear of Jesus and is featured amongst the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. King David, too, had many crimes to his discredit, including murder, adultery and betrayal, yet he still had a special place in God’s love and providence.

The biblical record tells us that there are no hopeless cases. There is no unforgivable sin except that of persistent, wilful unbelief and rejection of Jesus Christ. The one essential requirement is belief in God and, since his incarnation, trust in his Son for salvation. How extraordinary it is that, in her day, notorious Rahab came to believe exclusively in the uniqueness and might of Israel’s God. She was saved by faith, a principle which still holds.

Human nature seeks to complicate the issue, to look for salvation in something other than faith. Yet there is truly nothing but faith for us to offer or do to save ourselves and find forgiveness. Those engaged in compassionate care for needy people may be at special risk of imagining that their good deeds will earn them merit, but pride of place, profession or achievement only obstruct simple trust in Christ and his work on our behalf.

Dying patients are sometimes said to be beyond hope, but this is never true of people created and loved by God. His personal and self-sacrificial love offers the ultimate hope for any who might otherwise be reckoned as hopeless cases.

Read: Joshua 2: 1–14; John 3: 16, 17.

DEBP

'What do you want me to do for you?' Matthew 20: 32

'There are two things which contribute to our sanctification,' suggested Pascal. 'Pains and pleasures.' Health care professionals are all too familiar with pain, but how often do we consider how important pleasure is in shaping our lives, for good or ill? All the Christians I know who make believing attractive, love life and live it to the full. They are riotously happy people and laugh a lot, even though, outwardly, there may be no obvious cause for celebration. This contrasts with a popular view of Christians which presupposes Puritanical duties rather than many delights.

Yet the Puritan stereotype is not necessarily accurate. Recently I came across a reference to a 1675 Puritan church record about a husband who, to express penitence, intended to abstain from sex with his wife for a year. The church elders pointed out that he had no right to deprive her of their God-given sexual pleasure. In the Old Testament, God made lavish promises, both about forgiveness of sin and of endless pleasure – 'eternal pleasures at your right hand.' (Psalm 16: 11) Jesus came to fulfil these promises and for our souls to 'delight in the richest of fare'. (Isaiah 55: 2) In John 4, he addressed the Samaritan woman's thirst, not her reputation. As in his question to the blind man (Matthew 20: 32) Jesus unashamedly appealed to people's desires and wanted them to understand that he was the one who could meet them.

On a morning after rain, the air was clean and the trees heavy with moisture. A squirrel sat munching a nut, oblivious of my presence, and I felt a faint echo of God's pleasure, even in his marred creation. Such small delights can make us desire more of God, and so contribute to our sanctification.

Read: Psalm 16.

TS

'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ). John 1: 41

How do we feel when some great or famous person is pointed out to us? How do we go about getting to know someone of real importance? John the Baptist was talking with Andrew and John when Jesus passed by. 'Look' said John the Baptist, 'the Lamb of God!', the one all Jews knew would reconcile mankind to God.

Andrew and John went after Jesus but before they had caught up with him Jesus turned and asked, 'What do you want?' They replied, 'Rabbi, where are you staying?' Why did they answer in this way? Was this all they dared to say? Were they a bit unsure of themselves having suddenly taken off after him? Did they want to make sure where they could find him?

Well, it was a beginning, the sort of shy opening exchange that can be the unlikely start of a great friendship. I wonder what we would have said? We often have very small ambitions and limited horizons. All sorts of things draw us to Jesus in the first place and we need not be too scathing of others' motives or too ashamed of our own. The point is we must approach and look, for no one else holds the true answer to life's questions.

Jesus doesn't simply deal with little things, he meets our real and deepest needs. As the Lamb of God he offers forgiveness and new life, a new relationship with God and in place of enmity – friendship. And not only friendship but sonship – we can be sons and daughters adopted into his family and made heirs of the riches of heaven. No wonder Andrew quickly told Peter whom they had found! There are many others in our communities who would be glad to hear the same.

Read: John 1: 35–42.

RC

In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength ... Isaiah 30: 15

That night at the retreat camp, the abdominal pains were disturbing and relentless. I had eaten leftover unheated food at lunchtime and wondered if I had food poisoning. I could not sleep. Colic and frequent loose stools were associated with vomiting. Finally at dawn, I sought help and was admitted to hospital. Hydration, antibiotics and pain-relieving drugs followed appropriate testing. I had only two hours' sleep before my husband arrived. By then it was obvious I had appendicitis! Against the strong advice of the local medical staff, we decided to risk the 11-hour boat journey back home, and have my appendix removed there. By God's mercy, covered with prayer, suffering excruciating pain, and receiving intravenous fluids and antibiotics, we made it to our base hospital next morning. My abdomen was rigid and very tender.

At first after the operation to remove a now ruptured appendix, I wanted to be up and about. Then, as I began to realise that God was forcing a time of spiritual restoration and refreshment alongside the physical healing, I began to let go and submit. The twelve-day convalescence in hospital was good for my body, soul and spirit. What delight to commune undisturbed with my loving creator, healer and Father. My waking and sleeping hours were his. I longed to hear his still small voice as I drew close to him. Physically and spiritually, my strength improved daily as I feasted on the Lord's provision and presence. Pain forced me to rest. I was being reminded that God is in control and that he longs for me – the person – more than for my work.

*I am trusting Thee, Lord Jesus;
Never let me fall;
I am trusting Thee for ever,
And for all.
Frances Ridley Havergal (1836–79)*

Read: Matthew 11: 25–30; Hebrews 4: 14–16.

'It is not for you to know ...' Acts 1: 7

Why should we find it so difficult to say that we do not know, for example as clinicians in front of colleagues, or as teachers in front of students? We stumble over some pathetic explanation, which is soon exposed, and we are humbled. Is it pride that causes us to pretend knowledge we do not have, or ignorance? It is so hard to be silent. 'Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.' (Proverbs 17: 28)

Christians, particularly new Christians, are likely to fall in this way, believing that knowing Jesus gives immediate entrée to all biblical truths. Of course it is not so. It takes years of study and instruction before any overall knowledge of the Bible is achieved and even then the mature Christian becomes ever more ready to say 'I do not know' when that is the case. It is a matter of being truthful. Pretending knowledge one does not have is lying. More seriously the earnest enquirer may be misled or put off by untruths. Do we like playing at God? Do we not realise we are in mortal danger when we do?

What then should the Christian do? The first principle must be absolute truthfulness. Only speak what is known and never stray beyond biblical truth. Secondly we need to adopt Christ's attitude who, although God, humbled himself, making himself nothing. (Philippians 2: 7) How much more should we be humble? There are marvellous truths that even the newest Christian knows and tells with confidence. Experience will have demonstrated clearly to us that in all matters God is utterly dependable and that nothing can separate us from his love that is in Jesus. Today, let us proclaim the truths we know and speak of the new life we have found in Christ.

Read: Philippians 2: 1–11; Romans 8: 28–39.

JHJ

'Let my people go so that they may worship me.' Exodus 9: 1

Repeatedly Moses was instructed by God to tell Pharaoh that God wanted his people to be free to worship him. In Psalm 43: 3–4 we read ‘Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me ... to the place where you dwell. Then ... I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.’ There is a clear message here that if we will but follow his leading he will bring us to the point where true worship can occur.

God made man and woman in his own image (Genesis 1: 27), a status ‘a little lower than the heavenly beings’ (Psalm 8: 5) to control nature as God’s stewards. God intended that we would worship him through all we do, reflecting his omnipotence and wonder. But God has also intended us to worship him continuously in heaven where we will not be restricted by the shackles of earthly life, where we will bow down with countless numbers of every tongue and from every tribe, and worship the Lamb before the throne. (Revelation 5: 13)

We would do well to prepare for that place where ‘no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.’ (1 Corinthians 2: 9) Dante, Bunyan, Lewis, Augustine and other believers have given us word pictures of what it will be like. David Winter in *Hereafter* writes, ‘Our destiny in heaven (is) to be like Christ: not Christ limited, as he was on earth, to the confines of time and flesh, but Christ risen, the great, free, timeless Christ of Easter morning.’ So let’s be ready, for we know not the time nor the hour when he shall call us home.

Read: Psalm 8: 1 Corinthians 2: 6–10.

AJR

'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?' Matthew 18: 32-33

She was a beautiful girl, in her fourth year of medicine, but my heart was heavy. She was HIV positive. How had she got infected? She had no doubt, there had been but one man in her life, and he had just graduated as a doctor from the same school. She knew she would have to tell him, and that this devastating news would change his life also. She came a fortnight later, looking terrible, thin, dull, depressed. Through sobs she told me how, with fear and yet tenderness, she had tried to share the news with him, only to be cut short by his hostile reaction. 'I'm not surprised,' he said, 'I have been positive for a long time!' She felt so hurt and angry and betrayed. What would he yet do to others? What could she do about it?

She deteriorated quite fast physically but by God's grace, through counselling and through Christian contacts, she yielded her life to the Lord and rejoiced in his forgiveness. She knew now that she had to forgive this man who had done this to her, but how? It was only as we prayed for him, and on understanding through Matthew 18 how much she herself had been forgiven, that she eventually found the grace to forgive him. We hoped that one day he would be able to receive this forgiveness.

From that time on there was no stopping her! She went from strength to strength, finished her medical studies and worked in a mission hospital where she could serve her own people. The last I heard of her was that she had given birth to a beautiful HIV negative child. Could you forgive like that? Like Jesus does?

Read: Matthew 18: 15-35.

TG

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Philippians 2: 4–5

We are born with the inclination to care first about what happens to us. That is our natural tendency. You never have to teach children how to be concerned about themselves! With the same intensity that we look after our own interests, Paul tells us that we should also look out for the interests of others, remembering what our Lord gave up when he came to earth, and the servant attitude that he maintained while he was here.

Jesus himself modelled for us what he now wants from us, a servant's heart. Just as we have a built-in desire to look out for our own interests, we should cultivate an attitude that looks out for the best interests of others. This does not come naturally, and it requires some time and effort. Looking out for the interests of others begins by simply becoming interested in what is happening in the lives of those around you. How often we go through our days, weeks and months solely concerned about our own worlds, and oblivious to what is happening to those with whom we work or worship.

Becoming interested in others is only the first step, however. If we are truly interested, it will not be long before we become aware of various needs within their lives. Then comes the question of whether or not we should help to meet those needs, and if so, how can we do this? God does not call us to meet all the needs of those we encounter, but certainly he calls us to attend to some of them – and meeting need usually requires some sort of sacrifice.

Read: Matthew 16: 24–27; Romans 15: 1–6.

JB

Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’ Matthew 16: 24

So often today, as we read this verse, or talk about ‘taking up our cross’, it is difficult to understand the way this statement must have affected the disciples. Nowadays, we are used to talking about crosses, and in fact view the cross as a warm friendly symbol of the Christian faith. We have become desensitised to the stark reality it was to the disciples, where the cross was the instrument of a horrible and painful death. No wonder the disciples were often confused by this teaching of Jesus! What does Jesus mean when he says that, like the early disciples, we must take up our cross and follow him?

In this very statement Jesus himself gives us the clue as to what he means. He says, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself ...’ The path that Jesus wants us to follow is like his, the path of self-denial. In order to deny ourselves, we must in essence put to death a desire or need that we have at any time which is not in keeping with the mind of God. Note that Jesus says we should follow him after taking up our cross. We cannot follow his way if we are still wanting to please ourselves!

This self-denial is a process, a learned process. We do not suddenly become expert in denying ourselves when we become believers in Jesus Christ. When we first become Christians we are expert at looking out for ourselves! Self-denial comes slowly. It is only learned by the Holy Spirit bringing experiences into our lives that give the option and opportunity to deny ourselves, for the benefit of someone else.

Read: Matthew 10: 37–39; Mark 8: 31–38.

JB

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!
Philippians 4: 4

Throughout the book of Philippians, Paul over and over again reminds his readers to rejoice. He writes that he has experienced what it is like to be ‘well fed or hungry’ or to ‘live in plenty or in want’. He makes it obvious that his joy does not depend on his circumstances. (Philippians 4: 11–12)

How did Paul master the ability not to allow his circumstances to affect his joy? What was it that his joy depended on? I believe the answer is found in the one Paul tells us to rejoice in – namely the Lord. But the real question for us is, what does this mean? If Paul did not allow his circumstances to affect his joy, he must have been valuing something other than what was immediately happening to him. He tells us where his mindset was, ‘But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ ...’ (Philippians 3: 20)

Paul’s heart and mind were not set on the things of this earth, nor on his present circumstances. His heart and mind were focussed on heaven, and what was coming. God had given him a special vision of heaven, despite the tormenting handicap he would have to live with until he arrived there. (2 Corinthians 12: 2–10) His response was to rejoice in what was in store for him.

As fellow believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, we too know that the way ahead is not always going to be easy, but we do have in store for us the same inheritance that Paul had. Let us follow his example and rejoice always, whatever the circumstances.

Read: John 17: 13–19; Hebrew 12: 1–3; 1 Peter 1: 3–9.

JB

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will ... Ephesians 1: 11

As dentists and physicians, we like to be in control of things around us. Not only do we want to be in control, but we often make the mistake of thinking that we actually are in control! The fact is, the only thing we are actually in control of is our own actions, and even in those, we are influenced by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

It is often difficult for us to recognise that our lives are actually unfolding according to the plan of the Creator. Yes, it is true that we do have a freewill, but God is still able, in his own time, to accomplish his will. No matter what we think, God is sovereign, he is in control. God established a plan from eternity past, and ‘works out everything’ according to that plan, in his own timing. The whole concept of God’s sovereignty in relation to our freewill is a difficult one to wrestle with. No matter how you work out this concept in your mind, this and other verses within Scripture force us to recognise the reality that God ‘... works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will ...’.

There is nothing wrong with making plans. We need to do that in order to function in an efficient manner. The problem arises when, in one fashion or another, we ‘demand’ that our plans be followed. Instead we ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will ...’. (James 4: 15) In fact, it works out best if we make it clear to ourselves and to God that our desire is for him to change our plans, if that is his desire.

Read: Proverbs 19: 21; Luke 12: 16–21; James 4: 13–17.

JB

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4: 6

There is another side to the issue of the sovereignty of God. If God is really in control of my circumstances, and God is working everything out according to his plan, and he wants only the best for me (Romans 8: 28) then what good does it do for me to worry? Paul was able to come to the place in his life where he fully understood these concepts and was actually able to live them out. That is why he wrote the sentence above. He told the church members in Philippi that they should not be anxious about anything, but in everything they should present their requests to God.

All this is far easier said than done. The reality is, we do get anxious, we worry, and we get nervous about how things will turn out. But God also understands that, and loves us in spite of it. He knows that our ability to live without anxiety and worry will come slowly, as we learn to trust him. Paul knew that there was no reason to be anxious, because he had experienced the reality of God taking care of him. It was not merely an intellectual understanding, it was experience.

Someone reading this may be facing a big change in living or working, with a lot of unknown factors. Does this mean one goes into the unknown with blind faith? No; we need to present our fears and concerns back to the Lord, and learn to trust him. As you experience his care, your anxiety will lessen, your trust will grow and you may well find that this in itself is part of God's purpose for you in the changes to come.

Read: Luke 12: 22–34; I Peter 5: 7–11.

JB

... pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5: 17–18

Prayers are the power behind spiritual life. Those who don't pray – don't live either. For some people, of course, everything they do is an expression of prayer! For others, repetitive reading of phrases they do not understand and have never thought of understanding, is called prayer. These are empty phrases as their minds are with their business, their societies or parties, their place of work; they are thinking about their fields, their farms, their computers or whatever else it may be. But, that is not praying! At least, it is not praying in spirit and in truth.

Prayer is always marked by two things:

1. Taking time to speak to God the Lord. This means finding seclusion, somewhere quiet, bending and humbling yourself before him and opening your heart to him, to him who also sees what is hidden.
2. Praying is also keeping in touch with the Lord throughout the day. Keep looking for his face while working and let yourself be led by his eyes. Through his companionship let him guide you.

Both these things are necessary if you want to nourish the inner life, if you want to hold the objectives and meaning of life before your eyes. Also, dear colleague, sometimes fold your hands and pray with your patients!

*Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
the Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gate of death;
he enters heaven with prayer.
O Thou by whom we come to God,
the Life, the Truth, the Way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod:
Lord! teach me how to pray.
James Montgomery (1771–1854)*

Read: Psalm 63; 1 Timothy 2: 1–7.

BS

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. ... He gives strength ... Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint. Isaiah 40: 28–31

These words will strike chords of familiarity and hope in any doctor. They remind me that God is in control both within and outside this microcosm of a casualty department where I now work. It is often difficult for those outside medicine to appreciate how acutely the management of that endless stream of patients can sap the stamina of the hardiest doctor, and how before long a respected vocation can become an endurance battle leaving us cynical and jaded.

As Christians, we have a tremendous privilege in knowing Jesus our High Priest, who has gone before us and knows our frailties. (Hebrews 4: 14–15) The Bible describes cases of human weakness and exhaustion supremely sustained by the Lord's power. We see Elijah rescued from his death wish following the defeat of the Baal prophets; Peter counting on the Lord's strength throughout his stay in prison which culminated in a supernatural release. Even our Lord, though he was fully God and fully human, drew on his Father's power to sustain him through his agony in Gethsemane as he prepared to drink the cup of wrath against mankind. (Matthew 26: 39)

There are countless examples of this divine stamina throughout Scripture, together with many similar personal testimonies today of Christians knowing the Lord's sustaining power. So let us face mental and physical trials with increased vigour and assurance knowing that our Lord has promised to sustain us and will do so. (1 Thessalonians 5: 24)

Read: 1 Kings 19: 3–18; John 17: 1–26; Acts 12: 1–11.

LCC

'So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand ... Do not fear; I will help you.' Isaiah 41: 10, 13

Current position: Senior House Officer in Radiology, Singapore. Current location: Copper Kettle Tearoom, overlooking King's College, Cambridge UK. Current time: one day before the results of the examination for Fellowship of the Royal College of Radiologists Part 1 (second attempt).

The months since my failure have been numbing and to fail again would threaten my traineeship. I'm also involved in a medico-legal enquiry, uncertain personal relationships and the start of on-call duties. I have felt boxed in and abandoned by God. So, armed with the Bible and my textbooks, I have shut myself off from the intrusions of the outside world and rediscovered him.

I have realised that for the last few years I had kept God for the occasional Sunday when not on call. I'd been too involved with the attractions of the world: fine food and wine, frequent holidays, expensive purchases and non-Christian company. I realised that it was not God who had abandoned me, but I who had abandoned him. My countrymen claim to pursue the '5Cs': cash, credit card, car, condominium and country club. I'd attained these early on, but cannot deny that I still desire the good life. Wherever we are in our careers, affluence will make us vulnerable to losing sight of God. He always has to make the first move to remind us of his presence.

Whatever the examination results tomorrow, today I feast my eyes on the calm beauty of King's College and am reminded of God's steadfast goodness throughout my life. As I renew my daily relationship with him, the cares of this world can safely be left on his shoulders.

Read: Psalm 22

LSLT

'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' Mark 10: 45

Privilege confers responsibility, and to be a Christian and a physician or dentist is to increase that privilege and responsibility. How do we meet that challenge?

God, in the first chapter of Genesis, commissioned humankind to bear children and to be stewards of all in the created world, conferring on work the dignity of fulfilling his command. Are we then Christians who are physicians or dentists, or Christian physicians and dentists, seeing ourselves primarily as Christians? We may come to separate secular work from sacred duty, placing professional and Christian work in separate compartments, forgetting that professional work is God's work and his will.

Modern science and technology have given us almost god-like powers, but even these may be inadequate in facing certain ethical, legal and social problems. Advances in medical science impose unbearable costs in health care, which is increasingly complex and dependent on teams of health professionals. Patients face bewildering and uncomfortable investigations, costly and at times dangerous; sometimes even unnecessary had there been adequate clinical diagnosis in the first place. Impossible patient loads, and a loss of regard for the patient as a person, can damage doctor-patient relationships. We can prolong life but its quality is diminished.

Today's reading is relevant in such difficult situations. Jesus was addressing wrong attitudes among his own disciples, as they jockeyed for the most prominent places in his coming kingdom. They were not to be served. There is no place for pride of place and prestige in his kingdom. The person who wants to be great or first must become a servant or slave. Humility is an essential Christian virtue. By contrast his disciples serve, as we should in our professional lives, giving ourselves sacrificially, losing rest, sleep, time with family and recreation in the process. Serving and giving in this way we follow our Lord's example. Do we have this right attitude?

Read: Genesis 1: 26-30; Mark 10: 35-45.

November 29 The Word – present before time

'This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back again in the same way as you have seen him go into heaven.' Acts 1: 11

Our medical lives are totally governed by time. Scripture tells us that there is a time for everything, 'a time to be born and a time to die'. The obstetrician might be forgiven for arranging the next delivery to suit his timetable. Sadly, some in our profession are suggesting that the terminally ill patients could be allowed to choose their own time of death. However, time is not the lasting criterion of life. We need to remember the startling statement in John's gospel (ch. 1: 1) that Jesus, the WORD, was present before the beginning of time, and surpasses time.

What a lovely, suitable title for the Saviour of the world! We humans depend on words to be able to communicate our thoughts and feelings. To get anywhere in our medical work in North Bihar, India, we had to learn Hindi and also pick up some words in other local languages in order to communicate with and help all the patients from the surrounding areas. This was a lot for us – but how does the Almighty, the Creator, communicate with all the people of the world?

God communicates to all races, tribes and peoples through his having come, at the appointed time, in human form – in Jesus, the Word made flesh. More than that, the omnipotent and omniscient God laid down his life in Christ to communicate his love and desire to rescue mankind from sin. But he is not a dead letter. Christ rose from the dead, went back to heaven, is with us in the Holy Spirit and will be returning to earth at the right time. 'Hallelujah, what a Saviour!'

Read: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8; John 1: 1-14.

MLP

'Ask and it will be given to you ...' Matthew 7: 7

In the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) two requests merit our thought today. Jesus of Nazareth had a clear understanding of the tensions of domestic life. Jesus says that the younger son, having felt frustrations at home for long enough, first asks his father, 'Give me' In today's materialistic society such an attitude is encouraged. How often also is such a request reflected in our own prayers? It is natural enough. As we feel personal inadequacy in confronting life's daily demands, we recall our Lord's statement, 'Ask and it will be given to you.' But there is little to suggest that our Lord had only material goods in mind when he encouraged his listeners to ask, seek and knock.

The prodigal son's second request, 'Make me ...,' is born in circumstances of desperation and sheer despair. The benefits of material prosperity had proved short-lived and illusory. He was no longer motivated by selfish ambition, but by a desire to serve. As today unfolds, my opportunities for service can be God-given and sanctified in response to a prayer such as this:

*'Give me,' he prayed, the foolish wilful boy,
He thought that but to have was to enjoy.
A broken, sobered man, robbed, hungry, bare,
'Make me,' he prayed; and 'twas a wiser prayer.
Much wiser! My possessions may decay:
What I become can no one take away.
A man's true worth may be appraised the best
By what he was, not by what he possessed.*

James S. Tait

Read: Luke 15: 11–24.

JGra

DECEMBER

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Ephesians 3: 20–21.

'... I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you ...' Jeremiah 29: 11

What is our reaction to unexpected tragedy, whether in our own or our family's lives, in our patients' experiences, or on a national or global scale? Do we really believe God's promises, finding them relevant, reliable and precious – or does our faith falter?

On September 11 2001 calamity struck New York's Trade Centre. Unprecedented shock waves went around the world, bringing more suffering to already ravaged Afghanistan and murderous attacks on Pakistani Christians. So where was God? How could this possibly serve his purpose? My late husband and I knew both countries well and old friends still keep contact. Stories came through of departing expatriates leaving nationals with new and big responsibilities. Threatened Pakistani believers sent their children to safer areas, disrupting families and education and adding loss to loss. The workloads in hospitals, clinics, schools and churches throughout the land became difficult to carry, especially for those already enduring bereavement. One evil act led to untold and ongoing suffering in Afghanistan, too.

Yet the reports also told of Pakistani Christians growing stronger in faith and trust as they experienced the deep peace of resting in their heavenly Father's loving control. Many churches saw people converted and baptised, or restored to faith. The government started to offer Christians greater protection, aiming to curb religious intolerance. In troubled Afghanistan, too, more freedom emerged than the previous regime had allowed for Christians to enter, to work and to worship. Following the disaster, America and Britain both saw church attendance markedly increase.

God does not always stop the plans of evil men, but works out his purposes despite them. We can rely on his promises, come what may.

Read: Isaiah 43: 1–3; Habakkuk 3: 17–19; John 12: 24.

JMO

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’
Isaiah 30: 21

This prophecy of Isaiah assures us that our heavenly Father is really interested in our daily lives. He wants us to go the right way and to do the right thing. In John’s Gospel, the Lord describes himself as the Good Shepherd who leads his sheep by using his voice. Here we are told of a corrective voice when we are about to err. When we are considering some course of action, the voice often comes as a verse from Scripture, which springs to mind, unbidden. Verses you once memorised, or heard read or preached on; or that you have meditated on in your quiet time. As Jesus promised, ‘the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you ... and will remind you of everything I have said to you.’ (John 14: 26)

The voice may be less direct. Two Christian doctors were working on government service in an Asian country, where some Christians were being persecuted. They both were directed to leave their posts and go down to the local government office on the coast. No explanation was given. They had their doubts and did not immediately respond, but eventually they both started out. However, along the way, the sense of inappropriateness grew and they both turned back. Later on, they learned that this had saved their lives. If they had reached the government post they would have been killed. When we heard their story at a CMF camp, we all rejoiced that our heavenly Father had kept them safe by his inner prompting.

We do well to cultivate a listening ear by taking time to regularly read and meditate on God’s word. This will enable the Holy Spirit to remind us of how we should think and act.

Read: John 10: 1–4, 22–27.

DD

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Matthew 5: 3

As a young Christian doctor I was working in a leprosy hospital. Once while going round cottages where long-term leprosy patients stayed, an old man came up to me. He could barely see. His hands and feet were completely deformed. He told me that he had had a vision of God a few days earlier. He described in extraordinary detail something of what he had seen. I am not sure of the credibility of the vision, but I remember standing before this deformed, frail man and thinking: 'This man has experienced God in ways I have not even imagined possible. When the day of reckoning comes, this man is going to be on a much higher plane than me. There might even be role reversals in the kingdom of God!'

The only requirement for receiving God's mercy is to want it. God pours his love (as described in John 3: 16 and 1 John 3: 16) into a person who is learning to be humble and vulnerable. Whoever one is, and whatever one has done, there is always mercy and grace available to such people who are humble. The principle is seen in other relationships as well. In family relationships, friendships, etc. the person who makes himself vulnerable is the one who receives love. Love cannot be cultivated from a position of strength or even in a relationship of equality. For love to obtain a response it has to be given from a position of submission or vulnerability.

The leprosy patient whom I encountered, who was broken and poor, was better positioned than I was to receive God's love. I, with my own confidence and 'invulnerability' was not ready, was not open to receive such love.

Read: Psalm 51.

VP

Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men. Proverbs 22: 29

While waiting for a many-paged fax to go through, I noticed two workers carefully clearing the pavement at the tram stop below our office, of an unimaginable number of cigarette butts. Each had a totally new broom, pan and an empty plastic bag. However, most of the garbage did not end up in the bag, nor even in the pans. The two men cleverly used an ugly strip of ankle-high weeds, that ran along the whole length of the tram stop, to conceal the butts – until the next windy day! They threw bottles and cans between the tram tracks. They never gave their new brooms a glance!

‘Serve the Lord wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.’ (Ephesians 6: 7–8) Paul wrote to encourage slaves to be conscientious honest workers, in an age when slaves were often regarded as sub-human. At first I was shocked at the street sweepers’ careless work. Then I really began to think – could it be, that at this moment, God was wanting to get my attention and teach me through what I was seeing?

For us his Spirit is a new broom, providing a different way of working. It is God’s will that our daily tasks also bring glory to him. He wants us to provide for the peoples he has entrusted to us to the best of our knowledge and with the best possible care. Professionally, we need to have strong good characters and compassionate hearts so that we may be a blessing to patients and colleagues alike. Professional competency is valued in heaven.

Read: Ephesians 6: 1–20.

JGy

'But Lord,' Gideon asked, 'how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.'
Judges 6: 15

I often feel small, not just in the eyes of the world but in my profession and in the church. I am neither the best doctor nor the best Christian I could be, far less the best I know. There are days when I wonder if anyone sees anything of Christ in me. Then I look at biblical characters like Gideon, who was told by God to 'Go in the strength you have.' His 'But Lord ...' shows how small and weak he felt. He lacked faith and courage and knew that he was unworthy of the role. Yet in keeping with God's usual practice, exemplified throughout the Bible, he chose someone weak in order to demonstrate his strength. Although initially greeted as 'a mighty warrior', Gideon would not become one by his own effort. He was drawn into the work that God was doing before becoming a successful military leader.

It is comforting to remember that the creator of the universe aligns himself with the poor and insignificant, with sinners and outcasts. Respected in our professions as health workers, we may not often see ourselves in these terms. Yet they do not seem so foreign when we take an honest look behind the professional image. Spiritual poverty is the inability to attain salvation, or improve our spiritual condition, by ourselves – and to admit this is to find blessing. (Matthew 5: 3)

Acknowledging our weaknesses to our Maker allows him to strengthen us to do his work in the world. What greater foundation for self-image could we have than that the living God thought us each worth dying for – and living through?

Read: Judges 6: 11–16; Matthew 5: 3–10; 2 Corinthians 12: 9–10.

SR

'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son ...'
Matthew 1: 23

There used to be notices at London Underground stations: 'If you're pregnant and happy, fine. If not, phone our clinic.' But what about a young girl who is told that she *will* become pregnant? If she knows that she has not exposed herself to risk, she will dismiss the remark as nonsense. This was Mary's reaction when told that she would become pregnant. Knowing the facts of life, she immediately said, 'How so? I have not known a man.'

Yet she was worried. The circumstances in which she had heard this news had been somewhat unusual, to say the least! Had the angel just been a dream, or a delusion ... had she imagined it all? It troubled her, so she went to see her cousin. That would settle it. After all, the angel had given her one other fact to go on – that, miraculously, Elizabeth herself was six months pregnant.

Think about it. Mary journeyed for about 100 miles, evidently all on her own, and through some territory which would have been hostile to a Jewess – all to see an intensely religious elderly woman. It was either a crazy, bizarre act ... or, if Mary's story were true, it was a most reasonable and predictable response to the angel's message. Why then the three months' stay with Elizabeth? Surely, Mary delayed until signs of her own pregnancy had appeared, and until she had formed enough resolve to face the suggestive remarks of neighbours ... and a fiancé who could not be expected to believe her story.

The whole account of the virgin conception has a ring of truth, based as it must be on Mary's personal testimony. It does not take blind faith to believe it.

Read: Luke 1: 26–56.

PCE

He called his twelve disciples to him ... Matthew 10: 1

Inevitably, seniority is accompanied by service on more and more committees. Some make policy, others allow representation of various groups and some are working parties. There are discipline, appointment, promotion, audit, hospital, university, joint committees and many more. There are councils, and boards, and other bodies; some being executive and others advisory. They report to each other, keep minutes and receive reports. It is all very confusing and time consuming, crowding clinical time and leaving little space for leisure and family. Some people work the committee system to their advantage, while others are increasingly bored and frustrated.

Surprisingly, in view of the seeming importance of committees, I can find no reference to them in the Bible. Certainly the twelve disciples never functioned as a committee. They neither questioned Jesus' actions, nor did they feel his statements were open to discussion. It wasn't that Jesus behaved as a dictator. He never challenged the principle of free will. His parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11–32) is an excellent example of free will, its consequences, and God's willingness to seek after the wayward, receiving them back when they return to him. Committees are, I suppose, society's best-shot method of functioning in an imperfect world, and our duty as Christians is to ensure that those we serve on act honestly in fulfilling the duties assigned to them.

However, I am keen to know how God intended us to function! Looked at in the grand scale, committees are unnecessary in a universe, which as God's creation, works according to his design. He, the embodiment of wisdom and knowledge, provides through belief in Jesus the opportunity for individuals to fit in to his design, revealing to them in the Bible his truth, and giving them his Spirit to guide and comfort. In that light, committees are pretty unimportant!

Read: John 14: 1–14.

JHJ

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4: 15–16

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to seek Jesus as the one who can meet our needs, the resurrected and glorified Son of God, who on the cross was a sufficient and acceptable offering for sin. However, this Jesus is not a distant God unable to relate to the pain and difficulty of the human experience. He is very able to sympathise. He too struggled with competing demands and time pressures. He too faced temptation. He too felt lonely and was misunderstood.

So come to Jesus with confidence, with boldness as one translation puts it. But how, when so aware of failings and struggles can we boldly approach? We do this by trusting in Christ's work upon the cross. We approach a throne of grace, not the throne of judgement we deserve, and we receive mercy and find grace in our 'time of need' – during times of failure, when we have sinned and when our witness has faltered, and also when seeking and striving not to fail. Then we need mercy and grace to be strengthened and made able to do God's will, to walk in holiness, to sin – less. As we continue to exert the effort that holding firmly to our faith implies, let us recognise our 'times of need' and boldly approach his throne.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for your sacrifice on the cross that opened the way to your throne of grace. Help me to recognise my times of need and to seek you in them. Thank you for the mercy and grace I receive. Amen.

Read: Hebrews 10: 19–39; 1 Peter 5: 6–10.

JFT

When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Exodus 17: 12

My, but I was tired! It had been a particularly busy day during which, it seemed, everyone had needed my attention. Then I had to drive 50 miles to provide further training for junior colleagues. There would, I knew, be no let up the next day which promised to be impossible again, as had every day in the past month since the senior colleague with whom I shared my duties had become ill. Well, I guess you have experienced similar times! Then, for some reason, I remembered Moses. He had ordered Joshua to fight the Amalekites, but the battle only prospered as long as he held his hands high. He, too, grew tired. Very simply a stone seat was provided and with help he was able to continue holding up his hands. Perhaps I could look for simple solutions. I could rearrange my schedule. I could ask able colleagues to take over some of my duties and, above all, ask close friends to support me in prayer.

How different we are from God. He will neither grow tired nor weary. (Isaiah 40: 28) He is everlasting. What an impossible concept to the human mind. Every person has experienced tiredness, quite often to the extent of inability to continue. Each one of us has, I guess, been let down by friends or by colleagues because, exhausted, they have asked to be excused some appointment. Not so with God. He has promised never to leave nor forsake his people. He is wholly dependable, wholly faithful. Read today from Hebrews 13, and as you follow the good advice given therein, you can know with confidence that the Lord is your helper, so how can you be harmed? Just as God is everlasting, so his servants will know his presence in this life and through eternity!

Read: Hebrews 13: 1-21.

JHJ

'But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'
Matthew 5: 28

The internet has burst into our educational and personal worlds phenomenally over the past decade. Never before have we had so many resources and nuggets of information at our fingertips. Yet there is a dark side to this technological advance. Increasingly, the porn industry is using this medium to display sexually explicit images to millions of willing viewers worldwide. Christian doctors of both sexes may be closer to falling prey to this activity than they might like to admit.

There are several reasons why as Christians we should shun pornographic material in any form. First, pornography stimulates lust, and lust is sinful. (Colossians 3: 5) Secondly, pornography presents a false picture of sex and people, showing sex without love and intercourse without relationship. Thirdly, pornography takes human sexuality – something that is beautiful and God-given for his glory (Matthew 19: 4–6) – and turns it into cheap, self-indulgent amusement. People are given to us to be loved in deep, self-giving relationships, not as objects for our sexual fantasies. Finally, being hugely addictive, pornography has far-reaching psychological and sexual effects.

What about Christians who are struggling with pornography? We need to be very clear about the unacceptability of this matter for Christians. Those who have used porn must reach a point where they repent of their sin to God and seek his forgiveness through the power of the Holy Spirit. Prayer ministry may well be appropriate. (James 5: 16) The parable of the driven out spirit (Luke 11: 24–26) may also be used in order to help the person find ways of replacing the role played by pornography with things that are good and pleasing to God. Above all, don't condemn the individual. (Romans 8: 33–34) We are all sinners, undeserving of God's grace.

Read: Malachi 2: 13–16; John 8: 1–11; Galatians 5: 16–26.

News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed, and he healed them. Matthew 4: 24

When we are given details of Jesus' acts of healing during his earthly ministry, his concerns are always focussed on the people involved rather than on the condition from which they were suffering. It is, indeed, often quite difficult to make a specific diagnosis.

He would touch the leprous, whom no one else would touch, to reassure them of his care for them. For one blind man he anointed his eyes with clay, for another he simply spoke the word. To the man let down through the roof he spoke first of the forgiveness of his sins before he showed his power over his paralysis. When he healed the deaf man with the speech impediment, he took him away from the crowd and literally put his finger on the problem, as he touched his ears and his tongue, and pointed him to the source of his healing as he looked up to heaven. Then he spoke the specific word of healing which a deaf man could most easily lip-read, 'Eph-phatha'.

When Jesus calls us to a ministry of healing, even by conventional, main-line, medical means, he teaches us by his example that the person's needs are often of greater significance than the disease or its pathology. The word 'healing' is used to translate the same Greek word as is used for 'salvation', and as we practise one kind of healing we need to be aware of the person's need to be made whole in spirit, as well as in body.

Read: Matthew 11: 28–30; Mark 7: 32–37.

GLC

Do your best to present yourselves to God as one approved ... who correctly handles the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2: 15

To keep up to date and to maintain good standards, our basic studies need to be built on throughout a professional career. Many doctors engage in Continuing Medical Education (CME) and most would agree that this is a ‘must do’ activity. Should continuing spiritual education (CSE) be any less of a priority? Sadly, the way we order our lives suggests that many of us think not. There are not the same obvious incentives as for CME, which can improve our income as well as helping us to avoid malpractice.

But to present yourself to God, as in our text, is soul-searching. He sees our secret choices and our hidden motives. Just as it is no easy task to keep abreast in medicine, so it is no light thing to keep in tune with God’s purposes for my life. Our textbook is the Bible, but study requires effort and effort requires time. Paul’s word for how we are to handle Scripture is ‘orthotomeo’, the same Greek root as ‘orthopaedics’ and ‘osteotomy’. We are to ‘cut a straight path’, becoming Bible explorers. This means more than merely reading the Scriptures. It means giving time to comparing scripture with scripture, and applying what we find to our lives. In John Stott’s words, such a person ‘handles the Word with such scrupulous care that he both stays on the path himself ... and makes it easy for others to follow.’ We cannot afford to be slack. We must be as diligent about CSE as we are about CME.

*Lord, Thy word abideth,
And our footsteps guideth,
Who its truth believeth
Light and joy receiveth.
O that we, discerning
Its most holy learning,
Lord, may love and fear Thee,
Evermore be near Thee.*

HW Baker (1821–27)

Read: 2 Timothy 2: 1–21; Hebrews 4: 12–16.

BDS

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. Psalm 84: 5–6

God is a transforming God, through whom ‘the wilderness will rejoice and blossom’. (Isaiah 35: 1) I know that he has brought much fruit out of desert-like periods of depression in my own life, and countless believers have seen that times of illness or difficulty have brought learning and growth. There are, of course, many examples in the Bible of God bringing good out of bad, such as the lives of Joseph, Ruth, Job, Paul, and ultimately Jesus, whose ugly and painful death brought forgiveness and new life.

The interesting thing about these verses from Psalm 84 is that God’s people are called to be transformers too, as we reflect his likeness. ‘Baca’ means weeping, so the psalmist is drawing a beautiful picture of God’s people transforming a desolate valley of weeping into an oasis, turning the very tears of sadness into springs of life.

The hospital where I work in Malawi is often a place of tears. Never a day goes by without a sad procession passing down the corridor; a body on a stretcher followed by a crowd of mourners, weeping and wailing. What challenge we have as Christian clinicians in our hospitals, clinics and surgeries, to turn them from places of desolation and hopelessness to places of restoration and peace. Of course the tears will still be there, but our transforming God is able to bring good things out of sadness. We are called to be part of that transformation, turning the valley of tears into a place of springs.

Prayer: Please, Lord, inspire me to be a transforming presence in the place where I work.

Read: Isaiah 35: 1–10; Genesis 50: 19–20; Philippians 1: 12–14.

VL

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him. 1 Corinthians 2: 9

Her name was Annie. Slow, fat and schizophrenic, she sat alone. Her speech was monotonous after long use of the anti-psychotic drugs that enabled her to live in society. This is what she said:

'Doctor, I went to heaven. The sky was a beautiful blue and the grass a lovely green,' ... pause ... 'Who do you think showed me round?' Another pause and then, with a satisfied smile, she twice repeated, 'Jesus did.' That day I gained a new insight into the spiritual awareness of a mentally ill and marginalised person, yet one still precious to God.

As medicals, we are used to coping with other people's death and dying. It wasn't until many years later, when I was faced with sudden bereavement and overwhelming loss, that I remembered Annie's words. How little we really know about heaven, and of what we do know, how much do we really believe? In those early days of loss, I cried out to God again and again, 'I just hope that it is all true.' It was then that Annie's words came back to me with some kind of comfort.

So what do we know about heaven?

- Life after death is certain. We have the clear promise of Jesus Christ. (John 14: 1–3)
- Heaven is a place where the desires of our hearts will be satisfied. 'You will fill me with joy in your presence.' (Psalm 16: 11)
- The central figure will be Jesus Christ. We shall see him face to face and be welcomed as Annie described. (Acts 7: 55–59)
- Admission depends on our present relationship with Jesus Christ. (Revelation 21: 27)

Loss – and death – will come to all of us; we need to prepare for them now.

Read: Job 19: 25–27; Revelation 21: 1–4.

RJH

... we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Hebrews 4: 15

Health care workers are given unique responsibilities. A young nurse is left in charge of an acute ward, a junior doctor faces yet more crises when already exhausted, a pathologist studies the histology, knowing the implications of the report – we can add our own worst scenario, and feel that no one appreciates us. Even our church friends do not truly understand what burdens we carry. This may be true, yet most jobs (as well as being without one) include particular trials, including those which health professionals rarely experience, such as the boredom of repetitive work.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ became man to identify with the human condition. He is not a remote high priest, unable to sympathise with our troubles. He, too, underwent every trial – if not in experience, in essence. Though he never grew old, he lived through emotion, pain, loneliness, weariness and all other such universal and timeless sensibilities. He died as a man, despised, rejected and forsaken, on behalf of our sin and suffering, though as God this was utterly abhorrent to him. He met death, this last enemy, and defeated it.

When we are overtaxed, or tempted to complain, our Lord Jesus is an ever present help precisely because he has suffered in just the same ways. (Hebrews 2: 18) Does nobody understand? Yes, he understands perfectly! So let's stop feeling sorry for ourselves, but rather be thankful that he always has more lessons to teach us. One that can only be learned under stress is that he not only understands, but he also enables.

*Soar we now where Christ has led,
Following our exalted Head;
Made like Him, like Him we rise;
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.*

Charles Wesley (1707–88)

Read: Hebrews 4: 14–16.

DEBP

'... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable ... think about such things.' Philippians 4: 8

I had been invited to help run a medical clinic in a village of the former Soviet Union. A middle-aged woman had developed a lump in her right breast some three months before. She had wanted to visit the city diagnostic centre, but could not afford the consultation. Now the lump was accompanied by the signs and symptoms of metastatic disease.

The lady enquired as to whether I thought the lump was cancer or not. I was in a dilemma. Should I voice my clinical suspicions knowing full well that she may never get the appropriate treatment? It would have been more convenient for me to keep quiet and calmly send her on her way. But I couldn't let her die in ignorance and so, despite the insistence of my translator that this wasn't the done thing in her country, I voiced my feelings. She then thanked me for my honesty, telling me that deep down she had known all along. She left, clutching my referral slip to an uncertain future.

This is a unique story but there is no doubt that many Christian doctors will have found themselves in circumstances where truth-telling issues are at stake. How important is it that we strive to uphold the truth at all times? The whole notion of truth was exemplified by Jesus who in himself was the ultimate personification of it. (John 14: 6) Jesus always spoke the truth (John 3: 3) knowing well its liberating powers. (John 8: 32)

As Christians we are to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5: 1), so speaking the truth in love is a command rather than an option. Let us not shy away from truth-telling to patients and colleagues, whatever the consequences.

Read: The verses in their context.

LCC

‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ Matthew 25: 40

So many patients in our emergency unit were regular patients with trivial complaints, often self-imposed. Many were dirty and abusive. Often these were of the less-privileged members of our society. Most of the staff saw them as time-wasters, a drain on the already pressured health system and I found myself thinking the same.

However, one night I was finally convicted of this sin. One particularly vocal staff member stated that he had not chosen to live with the great unwashed so why did he have to share his workplace with them? Something inside me snapped as I envisaged Jesus the ‘image of the invisible God’ whom we serve (Colossians 1: 15). He didn’t seem to share my problem with impoverished people. His whole earthly life testified to this fact. On an average day, he mixed freely with those regarded as the scum of the earth, even going so far as to touch and heal an unclean leper and to choose an outcast tax collector, Matthew, as one of his first disciples.

In Jesus’ kingdom of heaven, exemplified by the Great Banquet parable (Luke 14: 15–24), the important guests were not in the rich strata of society concerned only with worldly needs. Instead, it was the poor and disfigured who shared the Master’s glory!

As Christian doctors, we have a duty to imitate our Lord and to show love and service to those less fortunate than ourselves. It is a command echoed throughout the Old and New Testaments, applicable for us as impoverished sinners ourselves, saved only through grace. (Ephesians 2: 8) In a world where ‘more is power’, such imitation is true counter-cultural behaviour and is the perfect recipe to glorify Christ before an unbelieving generation.

Read: Isaiah 58: 6–10; Mark 10: 42–45; James 1: 26–2: 17.

LCC

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Psalm 118: 24

Why don't we do this? The psalms of praise are not just full of praise 'in the day' and 'in the night', but especially for the word of God. 'In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise' (Psalm 56: 10) – even when the psalmist felt everyone around him was plotting his destruction. It is easy to praise God when all is going well. It is not so easy to be full of praise when troubles abound, and proclaim, 'When I am afraid I will trust in you.' (Psalm 56: 3)

Some years ago when I was having a particularly hard time at work, more difficult than any other in my professional life and I was depressed, my dear wife exhorted me to praise and she turned me back to the psalms. It is at times like these when spiritual warfare can become an ominous reality. It is when we are tired, feel defeated, when despair closes in or the veil of depression descends upon us that we are most vulnerable to the overtures of Satan. We need, like David, to recognise that even then, 'Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.' (Psalm 54: 4) We have no idea what may be the result of such times of praise not only on ourselves but on others. Just look what happened to the extension of the Kingdom when Paul and Silas turned to worship when in jail! (Acts 16)

And in deliverance, when the heat is off, we must not slip back into day-to-day activities without any recognition of his grace, but acclaim, 'Be exalted , O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.' (Psalm 57: 11)

Read: Psalms 56, 57 and 118.

AJR

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
Ephesians 2: 10

A senior Christian colleague, retiring as head of a department, was finding it difficult to decide on which job opportunity he was being offered. ‘Oh well,’ he said to me, ‘Isn’t it good to be a doctor? Whatever I decide, I’ll be doing good somewhere.’ I was startled! Is working as a doctor, anywhere, necessarily doing good, in the Christian sense?

The truth of the above verse is impressive. It suggests a master craftsman, creating through Christ special instruments for the special jobs he has in mind. Not just any job, certainly not just doctoring, and not just anywhere! What a privilege for all Christians to know that he has included their particular personality and skill in his great purpose! He gave us our particular genes, our spiritual gifts, our medical training, and uses the events of our lives, both good and bad, to mould us through Christ into individuals with a unique part to play in his loving plan for mankind.

Medicine in itself is not good, and you do not need to be a Christian to be a competent doctor. In fact, medicine can be diabolical, destructive of you and your family. It can be an idol displacing God, a taskmaster, a mistress seducing you from your spouse. Disguised as good works, medicine can be used to demean and dehumanise the very people it is meant to serve!

Yet medicine can glorify God, but only if, like any other activity or interest we are involved in, it is offered to him and done to please him – with him and for him! To quote C. S. Lewis, ‘The work of a charwoman or of a poet becomes spiritual in the same way and on the same condition.’

Read: Ephesians 1: 3–14; 2: 1–10.

TG

'He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.' Malachi 4: 5–6

Prophecy in Scripture has a threefold relevance: it is a light revealing the future, clarifying the past, and showing us the way to go in our present situation. Our text looks back to the past, focussing on estrangement. The emphasis is on the need for reconciliation. Lack of reconciliation calls down divine judgment. This is true not only of families living in strife but also of feuding ethnic groups and nations. (Ephesians 2: 16) In Christian circles there is a growing awareness that broken relationships at every level of the church – from the leadership to ordinary members – are the cause of major problems. In the medical world also this is highly relevant, not only among staff but between staff and patients. A forgiving spirit and sympathetic understanding should mark all our dealings. How many patients come from broken homes, exhibiting not only physical but also emotional symptoms, because of the need for reconciliation?

Strife carries considerable blame for ineffectual preaching of the gospel. Only if Christians practise living in reconciliation on a daily basis will their witness have an impact on a society alienated from God. Our problem is not a reluctance to obey and serve God, but the lack of reliability to respect others as individuals, loving each one regardless of circumstances. As a disciple of Jesus, I am called to live a life of reconciliation daily (2 Corinthians 5: 18) – not by my own strength but by his, who has reconciled everything by making peace through the power of the cross. (Colossians 1: 20) Only with this attitude can I approach the future judgment of God, as in the Lord's prayer. (Matthew 6: 9–15)

Read: Malachi 4: 1–5; Matthew 5: 23–26; Romans 5: 9–11.

ES

... he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.
Hebrews 11: 27

We all know temptations – enticements as well as threats and oppressions – which may occur in our daily life, and which very often start to undermine our faith. Endurance, steadfastness, holding out to the end – this is what we need, but where do we get them from? In difficult situations I always remember a wonderful sermon by a Swiss theologian which I read some years ago.

Moses, of whom the above verse from Hebrews speaks, was a man who was tempted in many ways: he faced the chance of a wonderful career as the adopted son of the daughter of Pharaoh: he was confronted with the anger of Pharaoh, and later had to face the opposition of his people during their journey through the wilderness. He endured! From where did he receive the strength he needed? What was his secret? Moses had learned to keep the Lord always before him. He lived with God as seeing him face to face. He did everything in the knowledge that God was there beside him.

Have you noticed that people change their behaviour when aware of the presence of the person who is most important to them? Moses believed that God was standing between him and the world around him and this belief gave him the strength and steadfastness he needed. So with us today. Jesus has promised to be near to us every day in every situation and he keeps his promises. Let us therefore learn from Moses to live every day anew in the presence of our gracious Lord Jesus Christ, being convinced that ‘the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.’ (1 John 4: 4)

Read: Psalm 16.

FT

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge ...
Proverbs 1: 7*

Every beginning is difficult. As a resident you are, or were, probably aware of this! Solomon also knew it. And, being a young king, he must have felt it deeply. But he also knew the importance of a good foundation. When, tired after a day of service he fell asleep, he heard God saying to him, ‘Ask for whatever you want me to give you.’ (1 Kings 3: 5) Solomon’s answer clearly shows what his burden was and he asked God for a ‘discerning heart’, by which to govern the people and to distinguish between right and wrong. God clearly was pleased with this answer and promised Solomon the thing he asked for and also things he did not ask for, both riches and honour.

As a result King Solomon tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Knowledge in the Eastern world and Biblical sense is more than just knowing facts or data. (The word can be translated as ‘wisdom’.) Knowledge has also to do with insight, and knowing ‘how to’ – how to lead a right life, know the right word, do the right thing and take the right decision. It even goes deeper than that. When a person has knowledge, he understands the days in which he lives; he not only sees, but ‘sees through’.

In the Western culture, knowledge is defined more in materialistic terms, with the emphasis on merely factual knowledge and data, with man as the centre and goal of the universe. Medicine has not escaped this God-less concept. As Christians in medicine and dentistry, what kind of knowledge are we striving for? The wisdom of the material world only? Or the wisdom of God? What is your basis or objective in seeking knowledge?

Read: 1 Kings 3: 4–14; James 1: 5–6.

RP

'Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.' John 4: 36

It is not unusual for us not to see the fruit of our labours. Perhaps this is the Lord's desire for us in order that we do not develop spiritual pride. Whatever the reason, having established that it is God who is in control, and that our only response should be one of obedience, we should not evaluate how things are going by any 'fruit' that we may or may not see.

Rather, Jesus is mostly concerned with the overall picture. He is the reaper, and he allows us the honour of serving at his side as someone who 'sows the seed'. Imagine a father out sowing grass seed to plant a green garden at a new home. He does not really need the help of his six year old son and daughter to get the job done. But then, they would have no part in the finished lawn, and they are terribly excited at the prospect of actually being able to 'help' their father. Just as it brings this earthly father joy to have his children help in planting a new garden, God our Father allows us to participate in the planting of his eternal seed.

Jesus tells us that the sower and the reaper will be glad together. He has included us for his own particular reasons. Let us rejoice in the fact that this is so and we are serving at his side. This is truly where our joy should come from, not from our earthly belongings or our professional success. We now have before us the opportunity to serve the Creator of the universe. Who better to be working alongside?

Read: Matthew 9: 35–37; Galatians 6: 7–10.

JB

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Proverbs 4: 23

A lot of war is going on in this world and hardly a day goes by without this fact being brought to our attention. Journalists do their utmost to give us all the details of the action, and the danger. But there is another aspect of a soldier's life which gets much less attention, but which is almost as difficult as actually being involved in fighting – it is to be on guard. To be alone in a dark night, walking back and forth, looking for an enemy who may or may not be approaching, and to be responsible for the safety of the camp, can be a heavy burden.

As Christians we are called to be guards, not of a soldiers' camp but of our own heart. The heart is described in the Bible as being the centre of all that one feels, thinks and wants. It is the wellspring of life. No wonder Solomon tells us to guard it. If the heart is right, our feelings, thoughts and desires will be right.

The task we are given here is not for a day or a week, but for a life-time. It is a difficult task, because guarding our hearts is so much more important than guarding our deeds. It is even more difficult because sinful things come forth out of the heart itself: we have an enemy within the gates. However, it is not an impossible task – if we ask Jesus to clean our heart and take over as guard. Have you asked him to take over?

Read: Revelation 3: 19–22; I Timothy 4: 7–16.

RP

'... Immanuel' – which means 'God with us'. Matthew 1: 23

In writing this Christmas greeting, we have no means of knowing what situation you are in. Excited children in a happy family will surround many readers. Others may be lonely through lacking a family, or perhaps because they must work. Some may be serving the Lord far from home in unfamiliar surroundings, or in areas of natural disaster. Others may fear persecution because of their Christian beliefs. For most of us, we are constantly open to political and ethical challenges, which can be disturbing, and at times, frightening. To all, our hope and prayer is that you will have a heart-warming Christmas day.

The real marvel and excitement of Christmas is that God came to be with us! The birth of Christ some 2000 years ago is no myth; it is a fact of history. What is more, he was born in that place and into that family, which had been forecast hundreds of years before.

The holy child was named Jesus because he would be the Saviour from sin, and called Immanuel, which means 'God with us'. Forget the distracting tinsel and artificial cheer; God is with you wherever you are and in whatever situation. This makes today very special, and every day that follows, for that gift embodied in Jesus whose other name is Immanuel remains throughout life and for eternity. Just wonder at what this means ...!

So, whatever your situation, we wish you peace and joy in Jesus, our Immanuel, this Christmas time.

Read: Matthew 1: 18–25.

The editors

'I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes.' 2 Samuel 6: 21–22

Few doctors ever wish to appear to be undignified. Yet in the above text, we hear King David's words of protest to Saul's daughter as she chastised him for his undignified and emotive behaviour as he celebrated the arrival of the Ark of the Lord at Jerusalem. David was unperturbed by this opposition to his leaping and dancing in praise of his Lord. So it should be with us.

Such public devotion to the Lord in the face of worldly criticism sets a challenging example to Christian doctors today. Are we outspoken about our views or are we closet disciples of our Lord? Do our colleagues know what we do on a Sunday, or what we think about abortion and euthanasia? Maybe it is easier to keep that part of our life out of the public arena? You never know, they might think you a bit weird, perhaps withhold an invitation to the next dinner party or even withdraw that job promotion you had worked so hard to get ...

Jesus himself tells us that we must expect rejection from the world if we are to go his way. (Matthew 10: 22) Paul goes on to reinforce this fact in his letter to Timothy. (2 Timothy 3: 12) As doctors we are fortunate to enjoy a privileged and dignified position in society, but woe to us if we ever feel that we have no cause to come down off our pedestal, throw away our dignity and humbly serve the cause of Christ. (Micah 6: 8) By doing that where necessary, we will be following the example of our Lord who, though being God, humbled himself to become a servant and, ultimately, to die for our sins.

Read: Philippians 2: 6–11; Titus 3: 1–8.

LCC

... he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. Deuteronomy 7: 9

A letter from my grandfather, dated 1917, summarises a talk on 1 Corinthians 13 which he'd heard given by a certain Dr Graham Scroggie. Grandfather wrote:

'Zeal without love may act with no regard to the feelings of others, and thereby do much harm whilst seeking to do good: but love is never discourteous, disorderly, erratic or lacking in propriety, never puts anyone to the blush. The etiquette of Christian life is known only to love and no "perfect gentleman" exists without it. For each of us, each hour, each day, there is one best way, and love alone leads into it.'

Love is not selfish nor peevish nor vindictive – quickly passes the sponge over the slate, and not all favourable to others is expunged! Love writes injuries in water, ignores slights or is too humble to feel them – bears all things.'

In 1950, I, too, heard Dr Scroggie speak, this time about Joshua. My notes were briefer:

'Joshua's call to leadership began with God's reminder that success would depend on his daily meditations on God's word, with total obedience to the guidance thus received. God would be with him to strengthen him, so battles ahead need not worry him, though he himself had to take in before he would be enabled to lead on to victory.'

In their day, two Christian men committed themselves, in love and obedience, to God's covenant love. Their lives spoke for him then and their words do so still, being a legacy of encouragement to us today to keep on loving God and obeying his word. In return, God's faithful love is guaranteed to endure, not just for a few generations, but for a thousand.

Read: Deuteronomy 7: 6–11; Galatians 5: 13–14.

JGo

'Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' John 8: 32

Whatever we tell our patients or colleagues, we must tell the truth. This is not always easy, as any of us knows when facing tragedy or death, whether for ourselves or for others. How we convey the truth in circumstances of stress is of course very important, but we know that only where the facts of the situation are known can a reasonable assessment be made of plans for the future.

News is perceived differently by different people. These differences of viewpoint may affect the way bad news is transmitted and especially the way it is received by the patient. So, we not only need to communicate the truth, but to do so in a way which reflects our Christian concern for those involved. We should do our best to provide adequate time to talk, and not be in a hurry with our thoughts elsewhere. It is good to have relatives present and a quiet place to talk, making it easy for them all to ask questions. Time is necessary to make sure the situation is understood. Hopes and fears are best expressed openly. One must be prepared to meet differing reactions to bad news and for this the Christian can draw on resources in Christ.

Inevitably the future, beyond death, has to be faced. This provides the opportunity to share what Christ said about going to prepare a place for us in his Father's house and coming back again. With the compassion and tenderness of Christ we can express this truth, which can free all from the fear of death as they put their hands in his. We can encourage trust in Jesus for he said, 'In my Father's house are many rooms ... I am going there to prepare a place for you.' (John 14: 2)

Read: John 14: 1–14.

EV

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. John 1: 10

This verse relates to three wonders of our world. First, the invisible God came visibly into the world. A miraculous birth defying natural physiological laws, yet the infant – laid only in an animal's feeding trough! Later, the religious leaders are amazed at the understanding of the twelve year old boy. For days his parents had been searching for him frantically, and when at last he was located in the temple they were astonished at what was being said about him. (Luke 2: 48–49) ‘Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.’ Mary exclaimed. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ came the mysterious reply. This boy, later to become an itinerant preacher, so stirred up the religious establishment that it was decided to arrest and execute him.

Second, this one who came into the world had created everything, out of nothing. Nowadays many are grappling with theories which might explain how the universe came into being. Today we marvel at the beauty of our world. The telescope and the microscope continue to reveal new wonders. His creative powers are not restricted to what is visible. Scripture enlarges our understanding by informing us that he is the creator of everything – things visible and invisible. (Colossians 1: 16–17)

Third, the Creator, who came into the world, who appeared in a body, was not recognised by his own people! On that momentous day, about two thousand years ago, the rulers sneered, ‘Let him save himself if he is the Christ of God’. (Luke 23: 35) Most Jews still do not recognise him as their Messiah. What about the rest of society? To the vast majority, the Galilean prophet remains an unknown stranger. There is a day coming, however, when every eye shall see him and recognise him. If we know him today, let us rejoice, and tell others.

Read: Genesis 1: 1–5; Psalm 19: 1–6; Luke 24: 13–32.

MLP

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. Hebrews 6: 19

As the year approaches its end there is, inevitably, a tendency to look back. Perhaps with a feeling of sadness one realises that, although hopes were high at the beginning of the year, little has been achieved. There have been failures and for some the year has been disastrous! Alternatively, you may feel well pleased, having fulfilled many dreams and with bright hope for tomorrow. Good! Most people will fall somewhere between.

It is so with life. As we approach life's end we think of actions we didn't take that we should have taken and things that, quite definitely, we should not have done. We remember the good times and the bad! But for the Christian there is hope, certain hope, and an immovable anchor in Jesus. When I was younger I had no realisation of the magnitude of this hope. But as I grow older it became stronger, with a sense of excitement as one anticipates the joy of one day being in God's presence, all sins and faults cancelled through Jesus' death on the cross, the slate wiped clean with just the certainty of the hope left. Marvellous!

Christians of every age have reason to hope, for they share in the abundant life we have in Christ here and now. There is so much to look forward to, as the exuberance of youth leads into increasing maturity and commitment, so much to do and so much to enjoy, so many opportunities to serve him. Even in the very darkest days, and who can escape those, there is hope in the comforting presence of his Spirit, but always with his peace comes the call to fulfil his purposes in our lives. Let us, joyfully, grasp the hope we have in him and let us with every fibre of our beings praise the Lord for it!

Read: Psalms 23: 103.

JHJ

December 31 A promise for New Year's Eve

*... his compassions never fail. They are new every morning
... Lamentations 3: 22–23*

In the middle of a catalogue of his afflictions, Jeremiah calls to mind the best reason for holding on to hope: God is consistently faithful. As the old year ends, whatever our circumstances, it is a time to look back, sorry for recurrent failure but so grateful for his unending faithfulness.

Each new year, each new day and every moment of our lives, he hears us when we call on him. Again and again he reassures us with his faithful promise, recorded in the scriptures as many times as there are days in the year: ‘Do not fear.’ (Lamentations 3: 57) So often there is a complementary promise alongside this one: ‘... for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.’ (Joshua 1: 9)

Whatever faces you at the start of another year, whether you look forward in tranquillity or anticipate trouble, there is one certainty amongst all the possible uncertainties: God’s compassion never fails. There will always be grace to help you in your times of need. (Hebrews 4: 16) None of us can know what the future holds, but we can be assured that our God and Father holds each of us securely in his hand, and nothing can dislodge us. (John 10: 29) ‘Do not be afraid ... For I am with you ...’ (Acts 18: 9–10)

*I, the Lord, am with thee,
Be not thou afraid!
I will help and strengthen,
Be thou not dismayed!
Yea, I will uphold thee
With My own right hand;
Thou art called and chosen
In My sight to stand.*

...

*He will never fail us,
He will not forsake;
His eternal covenant
He will never break!
Resting on His promise;
What have we to fear?
God is all-sufficient
For the coming year.*

Frances Ridley Havergal (1836–79)

Read: Numbers 13: 17–30; Isaiah 43: 18–19; 2 Peter 3: 11–14.

JGo

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The International Christian Medical and Dental Association

Societies or meetings of Christian health carers have existed in some countries for over one hundred years. Personal contacts led to the first International Congress of Christian Physicians (ICCP) in 1963. The International Christian Medical and Dental Association (ICMDA) developed from these beginnings, seeking to develop and strengthen bonds between Christian physicians, dentists and clinical students worldwide. It is composed of autonomous national Christian medical and dental associations and it assists these national movements in achieving their aims.

The Association provides a regular means of exchange of views, information and experiences in the medical and dental sciences, particularly where these concern Christian faith and ethics. It seeks to maintain the spiritual life of Christians practising in the medical and dental professions; encouraging them to share their faith within these professions and to apply Christian principles in their professional practice and ethic. It also supports the work of Christian medical and dental missions.

Contributions to this *Doctor's Life Support 2* have come from a great many countries, illustrating the unity of Christian belief within the diversity that is the world.

Notes

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