

# Study 3: The Experiences of Life

Acts 16:25

*'About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.'*

## Starter discussion

Q) We are not all going to face the same struggles as Paul and Silas, but how difficult is it to keep singing and praying through the difficulties and crises we face in our lives?



Rembrandt, 1627, St. Paul in Prison

## A Purpose to Everything

(Read Acts 17:24-28; Romans 8:26-28; 2 Cor 1:3-6)

When Paul is talking to the philosophers in Athens, he offers a critique of the many gods represented in statue form in the city, and then focusses on the God he knows, the Creator of all things, the Lord of heaven and earth who gives 'life and breath and everything else'. God does not live in man-made structures but is everywhere, waiting for human beings to open their eyes and see him, 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'

Paul was no stranger to suffering for his cause, but in Romans 8:18 he says, 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.' Even in our weakest moments faith-wise, God hears our prayers, be they articulate or wordless groans. And Paul tells his readers that we cannot label all we endure in those darker moments as wasted time and suffering,

as God uses everything in our lives for his purposes. Your previous experience of, for example, bullying, pain, unemployment, loss, and other difficulties helps you empathise and minister to others, just as God used Paul's own struggles with health and time spent in prison.

Paul picks up this theme in his letter to the Corinthians, explaining that experience of God's deliverance and comfort in the past is his confidence for both present and future, not only in his own ministry but for all believers. The word translated 'troubles' in verse 4 refers both to the pain and distress caused by physical and mental issues, and in the following verse the word 'suffering' may refer to misfortune, physical pain or even death. There is a comparison here with the sufferings of Christ.

Q1) What are the most visible gods of today?

Q2) Is there still a tendency for many to think that we only come into God's presence in a building, be it a chapel or cathedral, and how do we get around that potential issue?

Q3) In your own life, have you found faith being strengthened through adversity, and your own experiences help you empathise with others going through similar experiences?

# Strength through experience

(Read Hebrews 11:17-19; Romans 8:35-39, 2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

In Hebrews 11, the author waxes lyrical about the faith of Abraham, who was obedient from the start of his call, leaving everything and travelling toward a promised land, living in a tent, and then only seeing that which was promised from a distance. But in that time, his strength was undimmed because he trusted God even when tested to the limit, with a request to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, as it was to be through this boy that God would deliver his promise.



Francesco Bassano c. 1570, Abraham leaves Haram

The author's thinking is that 'Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead', which would be the only way for God's promise to be fulfilled. And figuratively speaking, Isaac came back to life, because Abraham had reconciled himself to the death of his son, and to be given him back was like receiving someone back from the dead, vindicating his faith in God.

Paul accepted his call to mission, knowing full well that the task would not be without opposition. His strength came through knowing that with God on his side, he was both well-armed and well defended. Believers may face suffering, as did many saints of the past, but nothing 'can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord', and in that truth lay Paul's confidence. He reminds the believers in Corinth that he and his team had recently suffered for their faith, indeed seeing it almost as a death sentence. But that was not part of God's purpose, rather that Paul should reach the end of his life knowing his reliance on God's grace had been fully justified.

Q4) Do the Bible stories of people like Abraham help you on your own journey of faith?

Q5) The charity Open Doors says, 'Over 340 million Christians are living in places where they experience high levels of persecution and discrimination\*.' What should our response be?

Q6) When you began your journey of faith, did you have any idea where it might lead you, and looking back, how has it been?

# Our Response

(Read Philippians 4:4-9; I Timothy 4:4-8; Proverbs 3:5-6)

Knowing they were suffering opposition, in Paul's closing words to the Philippians he urges them to follow his tried and tested example, of staying positive, not being anxious, offering worship and prayer, and simply getting on with their call to spread the message of God's love and grace. In return, says Paul, God will bless them with that peace 'which transcends all understanding'.

Experiences are not all to do with life getting tough. We can worry about many things, and Paul speaks to Timothy about an issue of what was good or bad food-wise. That was an important question for a Jew, but Paul has an all-embracing answer, which is that anything created by God is good and to be received with thanksgiving. He carries on by stressing that Timothy should remember the good teaching he has received, alongside the 'truths of the faith.'

The wisdom of Proverbs builds on this, telling readers to put their trust totally in God, and 'he will make your paths straight, or remove the obstacles along the path you walk, and bring you to your appointed goal.'



Charlotte Reihlen Paul Beckmann, 1866, 'The Road and the Narrow Way'

SAMPLE

Q7) What is the best advice you can offer someone struggling today with daily life and faith?

Q8) Paul says all things created by God are good, to be received with thanksgiving. How can we translate that into our daily lives?

Q9) Thinking of the passage from Proverbs, how easy has it been following the path on your own journey of faith, and have you needed a measure of divine help?

*"The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury"*  
(Marcus Aurelius)

## For Further Thought & Prayer

Through the coming days think back through your life, and maybe some of the difficult times you have been through, with both situations and people. Is there still a need of healing or forgiveness, and is there the opportunity to pray and see this through - to release you from any burden you might still be carrying from the past?

SAMPLE

Our walk with God  
is never a lonely walk,  
it is a family occasion,  
if taken in the company  
of God's children.  
If we lag behind,  
there are those who will turn  
and offer words of encouragement,  
hold out a hand, offer assistance  
over stiles and other obstacles,  
share refreshment,  
help us from our knees  
when we stumble.

Our walk with God  
is never a lonely walk.  
It is a joyful experience,  
as along the path others join us,  
attracted by the company  
of God's children,  
singing the same songs of praise  
that angels sing,  
following a path  
worn down by tears and joy,  
and sacrifice.

Our walk with God  
is never a lonely walk,  
for He walks with us,  
on a track that leads  
to a glorious destination,  
and for this we bring  
our grateful offering  
of praise and daily life.

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"I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that still remains."  
(Anne Frank)

"You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right."  
(Rosa Parks)

"To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else - means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."  
(e. e. cummings)

May the peace of God  
calm your fears  
through storms of night.  
May the love of God  
warm your heart  
and bring you light.  
May the word of God  
give you strength  
when the body's weak.  
May the grace of God  
flow from you  
to the world you meet.

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