

release:potential

BASICS

back2

A FRESH LOOK AT
DISCIPLESHIP





release:potential

TO CHOOSE TO FOLLOW JESUS TODAY IS AS
RADICAL AS IT WAS 2,000 YEARS AGO.

THE BIBLE SAYS YOU WILL FACE OPPOSITION,
YOU WILL STAND OUT IN A CROWD.

BUT THE QUESTION IS, ARE YOU READY TO LIVE
A DIFFERENT LIFESTYLE?

WHAT COMES INTO OUR MINDS WHEN WE THINK ABOUT GOD IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT US.

A W TOZER

RELATIONSHIP

Throughout our lifetime we have many different relationships; with colleagues, with friends, with boyfriends/girlfriends and with our families, and when we start our relationship with Jesus, the Bible tells us that we become part of a new family, with God as our Father, and the Church as our family. As with most families, there can be ups and downs with our Christian brothers and sisters; we might get on better with some people and worse with others. But for most of us, loving the Church isn't always easy.

First, we need a right perspective of who God is and how He sees us; only then can we begin to see others in the same way. Loving the most difficult people becomes easier when we understand that God loves us despite all our flaws. Secondly we need to take action; by reading, praying and listening to God we deepen our relationship with Him. This allows us to grow to be more like His Son Jesus in how we think, act and respond to God's voice and to those around us.



Pastor Augustine with the remains of the Amazing Grace chapel in Nigeria

real life

A Nigerian pastor whose church was torched by rioters described how a young Muslim man saved him from an angry mob. Pastor Augustine's family were threatened with murder. Yet he chose to forgive them.

Pastor Augustine described the events of that day. 'Churches were burnt and pastors and Christian houses were targets. In some houses the Muslims were removed and Christians beaten and burnt. At the end of the day,' he says, 'we have no doubt that this is completely a war on Christians.'

A team from Release went to Maiduguri and uncovered clear evidence that the attacks against Christians were highly organised, with militants despatched to locations around the town and instructed over mobile phones which churches to destroy and whose homes to target.

Hundreds of people attacked Pastor Augustine's house, before breaking in, determined to kill. He believes it was only the power of prayer that saved him. 'They met me with daggers drawn and other dangerous weapons. I was asking them, "Why will you kill me? We have lived here together for over 18 years." And their leader walked up to me with his dagger hand up to strike. But as they got in front of me Almighty God intervened and He brought the hand of the leader down.'

The mob demanded money and left. And then another group turned up, then two more. Each time Pastor Augustine confronted them, and they left.

But the fourth time a young man came between the mob and the pastor and begged for his life. He told them, 'If you want to kill them, you must kill me first.' The young man was a Muslim. Pastor Augustine's wife Ruth describes what happened.

'This young man stood between my husband and the crowd. He was begging and pleading that he should not be killed, that they should please spare his life, that he was his friend.' Pastor Augustine admits he found it difficult to forgive those who destroyed his church and threatened to kill his family. 'At first I was bitter and angry, because over 18 years, this was the crown of my work, but after a while I prayed that God will forgive them...They may have destroyed the building, but we are the church and we cannot be destroyed. We pray for those who persecute us.'

a fresh look at the Bible

Okay, let's start with a basic fact. Our relationship with God affects our relationship with other people. It's as simple as that. If we have a strong, solid relationship with our Father God we can love people better because we understand how much we're loved. We can have more patience with people who we might normally find quite irritating and we can try to put other people first instead of focusing on ourselves.

We are often aware of our own failings and shortcomings, but we are learning that God loves us anyway. This is grace. It is grace that the Church wants to offer to other people. The Church is full of broken people, trying to love other broken people.

A lot of the books in the New Testament (such as Galatians, Colossians and Ephesians) were actually letters that the Apostle Paul had written to churches in different places. It would be like someone today writing to the Churches in Oxfordshire, the Churches in Newcastle and the Churches in Swansea.

The thing I like about Paul's story is that, really, no one knew better than Paul what it felt like to receive grace from God. I mean look at it like this: Paul was living a life where he gave orders for Christians to be killed because of their faith, and yet God still decided that He could work with Paul. God didn't see a lost cause, someone who'd gone too far; He saw the potential for an extreme transformation. And boy did God get Paul's attention in an extreme way (take a look at Acts 9). Paul was literally knocked off his feet. He had no choice but to follow Jesus; after all, he'd just discovered that Jesus was real. From that point on Paul knew that he had been spared the punishment he deserved, and instead he'd been put in a position of responsibility by God.

His responsibility then is the same responsibility that we have now; to love God and to love the Church – the exact opposite of what Paul had been doing before he became a Christian!

Paul personally experienced God's love and grace, and from his experience he was able to show love and grace to the churches that he wrote to. You can almost feel his sincerity as he writes to the Church in Rome: 'First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world... I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong — that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.'



Paul's love for and desire to meet with these churches didn't come from the off-chance that they might have offered him tea and biscuits each time he arrived, or that he 'got on' with every single person in their church. It came from his knowledge that they all belonged to the same family. And he wanted to see them be the best that they could be for Jesus.

Paul's attitude towards the New Testament churches could have been summed up as: 'If you win; we win. And if we win; God is glorified.' Paul wanted to encourage these churches to live like winners and behave like a team. We can be encouraged today by Paul's letters. His message hasn't changed. He is speaking to us just as much as he was talking to them.

have your say...

How is your relationship with God?

How would you improve a relationship with a person? How can you apply this to your relationship with God?

What do you think about the idea of Church as family? How is Church different to your family? How is it the same?

What practical actions could you do this week to show love to your family?

prayer points...

Pray that we would grow in our relationship with God. We can ask God to spark an excitement in us about the prospect of knowing the Creator of the universe!

Pray that God would give us the ability to extend the love and grace we have received to those around us.

Pray for our persecuted Christian family around the world who are not allowed to meet like we are; pray that they would be encouraged in knowing they have brothers and sisters praying for them right now.

CHALLENGE 1

You each have been given a back2BASICS wristband. On the inside of your wristband use a permanent marker (not a fountain pen, biro, crayon, pencil or stapler – cos it won't last!) to write the name of someone you are choosing to extend God's love to while doing the back2BASICS course. It could be someone you find particularly hard to get on with or someone you know who is in need of a friend or someone you want to bless. When you show God's love to someone they cannot help but be touched by it, whether they show it or not. You don't have to tell anyone who it is; this is between you and God.

GOD LOVES YOU JUST
THE WAY YOU ARE, BUT
HE REFUSES TO LEAVE
YOU THAT WAY.

MAX LUCADO

BE DIFFERENT

It can be difficult to stand out in the crowd, to be noticed as different or unusual. Most of the time people just want to be accepted and blend in.

Jesus, however, stood out. Whether He was worshipping with the Jews in the synagogue, was round His mate's house having dinner, or just walking down the street, He was always doing something or saying something controversial.

Jesus repeatedly said that if you want to follow Him, the same will be true of you. You will stand out, do something, say something that goes against the norm.

The way we act, how we carry ourselves, what we say shouldn't be an attempt to conform, but should reflect the values and sense of justice we gain through our relationship with Jesus.

The teachings of Jesus were considered highly counter-cultural in biblical times and the truth is they are still just as radical to the societies of today.

real life

'Abigail' says Christianity is spreading in Laos, despite persecution, and Christians are growing strong in the faith. The Laos authorities have arrested or detained many Christians following systematic raids.

In one incident villagers killed a Christian. When family members buried him and put a wooden cross on his grave, village officials accused them of 'practising the rituals of the enemy of the state'.

Abigail speaks out about forgiveness even though her husband was brutally murdered



During a fact-finding visit to Laos, Release met Abigail whose husband was murdered for his faith. Abigail is continuing her husband's work, looking after churches that he set up. He was away for longer than expected on church business when news came that his body had been found. He had been brutally murdered.

Before he left, Abigail sensed a dread that something like this could happen. She told Release: 'I always said, please don't come home late because you have enemies who will try to kill you.'

But what she feared most happened. Her husband had been missing for several days before his body was found. To begin with Abigail was distraught. Abigail's children were angry and wanted revenge, but she explained to them: 'The punishment is up to God and not up to us.'

But what if Abigail were to come face to face with her husband's killer; what would she tell him? She said, 'I would tell him about God's love, that even when I do something wrong God always forgives me, so I would tell him I love him, because God loves him, and God will forgive him.'

Even today, Abigail does not know who killed her husband, though she believes the killers' motives were clear; it was to stop the church. 'The reason I believe he was killed was because he served God. The church is growing. We are training and making more Christian disciples and leaders.'

Now Abigail continues the work her husband started in caring for those new to the Christian faith. Christians in Laos face a choice - of worshipping in churches heavily restricted by the state, or going underground. The stakes are high. They risk

being seen as enemies of the state, of coming under surveillance, being arrested, imprisoned without trial - and tortured to renounce their faith.

But the harder the authorities stamp on Christianity, the more it spreads. The work Abigail's husband began will continue. 'I know that God has a plan for the church, says Abigail, 'especially for the people to grow up and become strong in the faith.'

a fresh look at the Bible

Here's a little experiment to try with some of your mates. Ask them, one at a time, this question: 'If there was one thing you could change about yourself, what would it be?' You might get all kinds of answers such as:

I'd like to change my nose
I want to be able to sing!
I wish I had a girlfriend
I'd like to BE TALLER
I don't like wearing glasses
I wish I had more money

Like I said, I bet you get all kinds of answers.

But for all the answers you get, do you know what most of them have in common?

They are mostly external. The first answer that most of your friends will give you will be about their appearance, or their abilities, or possessions, or maybe their relationships. But it's very rare that they'll answer the question by talking about inside changes, such as changes of character. Who we are on the inside will determine our attitude or desires. Which is understandable, I suppose. After all, people can't see inside us. And whether we like it or not, most people's assessment of us has to do with what they see.

But here's a question for you; what if your appearance or abilities or possessions aren't the most important things about you? What if what's on the inside, your heart, your desires, and your character are the most important things about you? I know it might sound clichéd, but hear me out...

A couple of thousand years ago, there lived a man named Jesus. And you need to know that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus had a lot to say about being human and very little of it had to do with outside appearance.

Jesus once gave this amazing talk that is recorded in the book of Matthew. In fact, it takes up three whole chapters (take a look at Matthew 5 through to 7).

This talk is often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. Why? Well, it was a sermon Jesus preached whilst on a mountainside.

Anyway, it seems to me that the basic message of Jesus' talk was: behaviour follows character, who we are on the inside will dictate what we do on the outside. If that's true, which I think it is, then that means the most important question that you or I or anyone can ask is not 'How am I doing?' but 'Who am I becoming?'

The beginning of Romans 12:2 says 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' Being transformed is Jesus' major theme in His talk on the mountain. To be transformed means to change from the inside out. It can be easy to change what's on the outside. We can change our appearance, our clothes, and our hair; but to change on the inside, to change our character, that takes work.

When we put our faith in Jesus and begin to follow Him, He sends the Holy Spirit of God to live in us to begin the work of transforming us. As we ask God to fill us with His presence and as we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit changes us more and more.

Jesus taught that there are some clear indicators that we are being changed from the inside out, that we are being transformed. First, in His message He taught that we will be more generous. Instead of trying to get, we will give. We will be more generous with our words, more generous with our money, even more generous with who and how we forgive.

Secondly, we will value integrity. We won't spend much time drawing attention to what we have done. We won't do things simply to be seen, but we will do our best to honour God. We will do stuff simply because it needs doing.

And thirdly, as Jesus transforms us and we listen more carefully to what the Bible says, we will find it easier to live the kind of life that Jesus teaches us about.

The beauty of following Jesus is that at any point in time you can become who you were always meant to be.

So let me ask you a simple question. Who are you becoming?

have your say...

Having gone through the *fresh look at the Bible* teaching, is there anything you think you would like to change about yourself?

How do you think changes to your character happen? How much of it is willpower, how much of it is God?

prayer points...

Pray that God would highlight to us where we need to make changes to our attitudes or desires so that we can become who God always intended us to be. What area of our character are we holding back from God that we can privately or publicly pray about?

Pray for the safety of Christians in countries such as Laos where choosing to be different can result in prison or even death.

CHALLENGE 2

With the help of your leader plan an event in your community that will bless others. For example, a free car wash, or a free present-wrapping stand in the high street. These things will bless people, but the real fun comes when they ask you why?

Why don't you want money? Why are you different?

NOW WHEN THEY SAW THE BOLDNESS OF PETER AND JOHN, AND PERCEIVED THAT THEY WERE UNEDUCATED, COMMON MEN, THEY WERE ASTONISHED AND THEY RECOGNIZED THAT THEY HAD BEEN WITH JESUS.

ACTS 4:13

BOLDNESS

As Christians we should get really excited when we hear this verse from Acts 4 (see quote). How amazing is it that when these two common men spoke they 'astonished' priests, military officials and religious rulers with their boldness. It seems that it wasn't just the words that they spoke, but the fact that they delivered their message with such boldness and confidence that caught the attention of the rulers and elders.

It is encouraging to know that you don't have to be an expert theologian or a wise scholar to have the confidence to be bold when you speak about Jesus.

It is possible to muster up boldness without knowing Jesus, but in contrast, if you truly know Jesus you cannot help but be bold in your speech and actions. It is a direct effect of spending time with Him.



A busy marketplace in Egypt

real life

As a young man 'John' joined an extremist group intent on establishing a strict Islamic society in Egypt. While studying about Islam he was burning down Christian properties. His group also destroyed a church. 'I was jailed because of that. We burned the church from the roof so I am not sure whether there were any people inside or not.'

After his release from prison John and the extremist group found a newspaper article that was to prove a turning point in John's life. 'We read that some Christian missionaries had come to Egypt to convert people so we decided to write a book showing that God is the God of Islam not Christianity and I was chosen to do the research. I didn't want to but my leader insisted. When he brought me a Bible I couldn't even take it in my hands and one day deliberately left it on the train, but as I left the train a man handed it back to me, saying "you forgot your holy book".'

As John read the New Testament he found himself attracted to the God within its pages. 'It was very confusing. The Koran and the Bible were not saying the same things. How could they both be from God? There was no way I was going to worship two different gods but I was sure God would lead me to the answer.'

As John researched more, and as God appeared to him, he concluded that Christ must be God. 'Once I was in my room I saw a very bright light coming to me, telling me "Jesus wants you". I was really afraid and I called out to my family and I said "Come and see. Jesus is here." They came but didn't see anything and the light I was seeing disappeared. My family thought I had gone crazy and sent me to a psychiatrist and when my leader learned that I had written about the divinity of Christ, he tried to strangle me.'



Churches were understandably sceptical about John's conversion but eventually one person agreed to meet him and from that meeting John was able to start attending a church.

His family also began to accept the change that had occurred in his life because instead of imposing strict rules on them he was instead able to show them a new-found love. 'My mother told me: "Whoever would do that to you, I will believe him."' "

God is now using John to speak to Christians who want to leave their faith. 'Pray for me because God is using me to open their minds and convince them that this is not the decision to take.'

a fresh look at the Bible

Most of us confuse courage with fearlessness.

We think that the only really brave people are those who aren't afraid of anything.

But even Nelson Mandela, who has faced many trials and hardships, believes that 'Courage is not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear'.

When we look at the heroes of the Bible, we tend to think of them as larger than life. They're superhuman. They're like a cross between Wolverine and Jesus, but with a toga. But you know what I mean, right? Take Paul for instance. It's easy to think of him as fearless. He stood up against mobs. He was beaten, whipped, stoned, abused, and even ended up in prison. And even after going through all this, he still stood firm in his faith. The man must have been bullet-proof!

You can see how it'd be easy to assume that because of what Paul had been through, and how his faith and perseverance were unshakeable, that he was simply fearless. But I don't think that's true.

Ephesians was a letter written by Paul to the followers of Christ in a city called Ephesus. Paul was a prisoner at the time. (Some think he was a prisoner in Ephesus, others think he was a prisoner in Rome. No one is really certain where he was a prisoner, but we know he was definitely in prison). In this letter, Paul writes a couple of sentences that might be seen as 'throw-away' comments. You know, the stuff that comes between the important scripture. But these couple of sentences tell us something important about Paul and clue us in to something significant about our lives with Christ.

He wrote: 'Pray that I will be given the message to speak and that I may fearlessly explain the mystery about the good news. I was sent to do this work, and that's the reason I am in jail. So pray that I will be brave and will speak as I should' (You can find that in Ephesians 6:19 – 20). They are important sentences if you ask me. Listen again. 'So pray that I will be brave and will speak as I should' – Does anything there strike you as surprising?

If Paul is fearless, as so many people assume, why would he ask the people to pray that he would communicate God's message fearlessly and bravely? If Paul lives without fear, then he wouldn't need to ask that, would he? Seems to me that the reason Paul asked them to pray for him (to pray that he might be brave, courageous, and bold in communicating God's message) was because like all of us, Paul had to deal with fear.

All of us, even Paul - when we know what the right thing to do is, when we want to honour God, when we want to speak up for our faith – we all have to deal with fear. For some of us, it is the fear of being seen as weird, silly, weak, foolish, or worst of all, different. For others of us, it is the fear of sounding stupid, not knowing what we are talking about, getting in over our heads. For others still, we fear speaking boldly about our faith because we're scared of people laughing at us.

Truth is, there are plenty of reasons why we might be afraid. And although we're only human and get scared sometimes – we need to remember that God is God. He wants us to come to Him with our fears because nothing is hopeless or unachievable with Him. Look at what God did through a man who knew he needed to ask for prayer about his fear. That man wrote much of the New Testament! Just think what God could do through you if you don't allow fear to control you.

have your say...

If you had inside knowledge that Jesus was going to return at 2:45pm this Wednesday would you do anything differently between now and then?

Can you think of an example when you or someone you know has had to be brave in a situation?

prayer points...

We can pray for opportunities to be bold. This may not mean we immediately feel brave but God can give us opportunities to choose to be bold.

Pray that God would give strength to those who will need to be bold, especially for those who live in countries where Christians are mistreated.

Pray that boldness would sweep over the young Christians both in Egypt and in the UK; pray that we would not be ashamed of our faith.

CHALLENGE 3

Imagine being detained without trial, perhaps even tortured, unable to see your family for months, or years, and enduring often terrible conditions.

For many Christians in countries such as Burma, China, Eritrea, North Korea, Pakistan and Vietnam (to name a few!) that is a reality.

Release gives pastoral care and practical support to Christians imprisoned for their faith in Jesus Christ, and their families.

You can help these prisoners to persevere by writing letters of encouragement. To complete the challenge see page 28.

EVEN IF WE MAY NOT ALWAYS UNDERSTAND WHY GOD ALLOWS CERTAIN THINGS TO HAPPEN TO US, WE CAN KNOW HE IS ABLE TO BRING GOOD OUT OF EVIL, AND TRIUMPH OUT OF SUFFERING.

BILLY GRAHAM

SUFFERING

Because we live in the West, we are not faced with severe persecution on a daily basis; most of us won't even face it in our lifetime. But how would we react if persecution did come to us?

Most of us would like to think we would stand strong for God but it is hard to say how we would respond when faced with the immediate threats of torture, prison or even death.

For many Christians today persecution is a reality. The challenging thing about it is that the Bible warns us that Christians will be persecuted as a result of our relationship with Jesus. There is not a quick-fix or a 'get-out' button, but we do have a God who hears our cries and feels our pain, who refuses to leave us when we face trials.



Christian girl removes ash from the ruins of her home in Bahmani, Pakistan

real life

A man was seriously injured when Islamist extremists bombed his shop in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan because he stocked The Jesus Film (an evangelistic film about the life of Jesus).

Muhammad continued to stock The Jesus Film in his shop in the Saleem Commercial despite ongoing pressure and intimidation. He knew that many people would not be happy with his choice but he decided that it was more important to keep supplying these Christian films than to back down to intimidation. One day Muhammad received a warning letter, hand-delivered by a child to his shop. The letter urged him and other local business people to teach the Koran instead of 'attacking Islamic values'. Half an hour after Muhammad received the letter a bomb went off in his shop.

'It is evident from the letter that I was attacked for keeping the Jesus film in the Pashto and Urdu languages, as well as Islamic and Christian films about Abraham, Isaac and Adam and Eve,' Muhammad told BosNewsLife news agency. Muhammad was seriously injured and thirteen other shops were damaged in the blast. He paid a price for choosing to freely supply people with access to The Jesus Film.

a fresh look at the Bible

Suffering isn't fair. That's the truth of it. You don't have to live very long to realise that some of us suffer more than others in this world. And we can suffer for lots of different reasons.

People can suffer because of who their parents are; because of what their parents do or don't have. People can suffer because whoever is caring for them has an anger problem, or an alcohol problem or a sex problem, or some other destructive or abusive problem. People can suffer because of where they come from or because of the colour of their skin. People can suffer because of their religion and what they believe. Like I said, we can suffer for a lot of reasons.

About two and a half thousand years ago, there lived three Jewish guys. If we know them at all, we know them by their Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Now these three guys loved God. I mean they seriously loved God. Their country was conquered and they were taken as slaves to a different nation called Babylon. Even so, they stayed faithful to God.

So, when the king of Babylon, who went by the name of Nebuchadnezzar, decided that everyone in the land should bow down and pray to a 90 ft statue of him, you can imagine how well that went down with these three Jewish lads. No matter what happened to them, no matter what they had to go through, they were going to stay faithful to their God.

Word came back to Nebuchadnezzar that these three guys weren't worshipping and praying to his statue; everyone else was, but these three refused to bow their heads or bend their knees. They just said 'No'. Even when Nebuchadnezzar threatened to have them burned alive.

They said: 'You know what? God can save us. But, even if He doesn't, we're not going to change our minds. We will not now, nor will we ever bow down to your statue O King'.

As you can imagine, this really fired up King Nebuchadnezzar. He was the king! He wasn't used to anyone saying anything to him except 'Yes sir. Whatever you want sir.' Now all of a sudden he had these three rebels who weren't giving him the respect he thought he was due.

So, to show his anger and prove his authority he had his furnace stoked until it was hotter than it had ever been before. He had the three men tied up and thrown in the fire. This fire was so hot that the guards who threw them in were killed because of the heat.

Now, get this: when Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace I'm sure he expected to see a pile of ashes (after all remember what happened to the guards), but instead he saw men. Standing. And not three men, but four men, unbound and walking around in the middle of the fire. And here's the best part. Are you ready? The fourth man looked like the Son of God.

How deep is that? God saved those three! And then He sent Jesus to be with them and protect them. All because they stood firm and refused to compromise.

So here's my question. What do you suppose God would do on your behalf if you stood firm for Him? Can you be like those guys and say, no matter what happens I won't compromise? I won't bend. I won't break. I will refuse to give an inch. God is my God. And I won't ever apologise for that. Do your worst, because here I stand. So help me God.

have your say...

Check out the quote on page 13 from Billy Graham. Do you agree with what he says? Have you ever seen God triumph over suffering?

Why do you think Christians are able to praise and worship even when they are suffering?

How do we know God is faithful even when circumstances seem bad?

prayer points...

As we sit together in this group we can pray for the Christians who are suffering for their faith at this very moment. Some may be in prison, or in labour camps, or in hiding. Our prayers can make a difference.

We can thank God for our religious freedom in the UK and our physical freedom. We can ask God to help us appreciate the things we have.

Pray for Christians in China who face ongoing persecution; pray that they would stand strong and have a supernatural ability to show love to those who are so abusive to them.

CHALLENGE 4

Why not try to fast from something for a week? It's a lot harder than it sounds, especially when it may be something you do out of habit or as part of your daily routine (for example, logging on to Facebook, listening to your iPod or texting). You might think that all these are difficult things to deprive yourself of but that is the point of fasting. Fasting is designed for us to deny ourselves something so we can use that time to draw near to God. Then if suffering does come you will know better how to respond to it and will have a stronger assurance of who your God is through it. So, what will you fast from this week? Go to page 26 and fill in the commitment card to help remind you why you're fasting this week. Do check with a parent or guardian first.



PRAYER IS SUCH AN ESSENTIAL FOR ME - MY LIFE BLOOD. IT GIVES ME STRENGTH IN MY WEAKNESS AND CENTRES MY FOCUS ON GOD, AWAY FROM MYSELF.

REBECCA ST. JAMES



PRAYER

It can be easy just to think of prayer as something we do before we eat or before we go to bed but prayer should affect our lives much more than that. It is a powerful weapon and a way to communicate directly with our heavenly Father.

Throughout the Bible we read story after story about the power of prayer. The power to be healed, to be protected, to be rescued from prison, even to be raised from the dead! Just think what would happen today if we truly understood the power of prayer.



These Uzbek men travel several kilometres from home to meet and pray. They are not allowed to meet for public services so instead they pray and sing in the desert despite scorching temperatures.

real life

Two Christian women have been cleared of all charges against them fourteen months after their arrest and are now safe in a country outside Iran.

Maryam and Marzieh left Iran with a warning from the courts that they would be 'dealt with severely' if they were ever involved in Christian activities in Iran again.

Both were reportedly eager to thank everyone who prayed for them. Maryam said: 'I believe our arrest, imprisonment and subsequent release were all for His glory. But the prayers of people encouraged and sustained us throughout this ordeal.'

Maryam and Marzieh, who were raised as Muslims, were arrested and charged with 'apostasy' (which means renouncing your faith) and 'propagating Christianity' (which means causing the 'spreading' or 'multiplying' of the Christian faith – what a thing to be charged with!).

They were held at Tehran's Evin prison where they endured repeated interrogations and solitary confinement and suffered very poor health.

a fresh look at the Bible

When you pray, what do you hope for? No, really. When you pray, do you expect anything to happen? And if you do, what exactly do you expect to happen?

Or is prayer that thing you do because someone said you should or because you don't know what else to do? You know what I mean. 'Well, things couldn't possibly get any worse; I guess I might as well give this talking to God thing a shot.' Sound familiar?

Jesus had a lot to say about prayer; when to pray, how to pray, what to pray for, even how to persist in it. Jesus taught that prayer is the ultimate act of faith.

Think about it. We pray to a God we can't see. We tend to pray about stuff that is beyond our control. Sometimes, we pray for people we will never meet like other believers who are persecuted just because they follow Jesus.

That takes faith. I guess that's why prayer is so hard at times.

There once was this judge. He was well known and he was really powerful. He didn't care about God and he certainly didn't care what other people thought. He was his own man. He was pretty much the law in the town where he lived. He did what he wanted when he wanted. And if you wanted justice, well you can imagine, you better have the cash to persuade this guy. Otherwise, he wasn't interested.

In the same town was a woman, a widow actually. She'd been ripped off and mistreated. She was running out of options for help. No one would side with her, fight for her, be her advocate. So, she goes to the judge. But the judge isn't bothered about this woman. She pleads with him, but he's not interested.

He wakes up in the morning. He gets ready for work. Goes out to his chariot. There's the woman asking for justice. He works at his office. He comes out at the end of a long day. There's the woman asking for justice. That evening he goes to the country club to meet his friends for a nice evening out. There's the woman asking for justice.

Finally, the judge thinks, 'This woman is wearing me out. Everywhere I go, she's there. Even though I couldn't care less about what people think or even what God thinks, I'm going to make sure this woman gets justice. If for no other reason, then at least I can get her to stop bothering me.'

In Luke 18 verse 7, Jesus asks a simple question after telling this story. He says 'Do you hear what that judge, corrupt as he is, is saying? So what makes you think God won't step in and work justice for His chosen people, who continue to cry out for help? Won't He stick up for them? I assure you, He will. He will not drag his feet.'

Jesus was saying if this judge, who isn't a nice guy at all, will give justice, how much more will your heavenly Father (who is good and faithful and loving), how much more will He respond and take action if you ask for it?

When it comes to praying, especially when it comes to praying for others who desperately need justice, such as our persecuted family, there are some questions you have to ask yourself:

Do you believe that God is in control?

Do you believe that God is good?

If you believe that God is good and that God is in control, do you believe that He cares for each one of us?

And if you believe that God is in control, that He is good, that He cares for each of us, can you trust Him enough to pray to Him and keep praying to Him?

It's your move.



have your say...

Having watched the *bruised: not broken* DVD, how does it make you feel?

What is your favourite way of praying? How many ways of praying can your group come up with?

Have you experienced answers to prayer in your own life, or when you've prayed for other people?

prayer points...

Spend some time being still. Prayer is not just about talking to God; it's also about listening. Allow God to speak to you as you take some time out of your day to hear from Him. Our prayers are powerful. Although we see Christians facing awful situations in many countries, we can pray for the persecutors' hearts to be changed and for them to come to know Jesus personally. Imagine if leaders of countries and terrorist groups personally had experiences of Jesus; how would that impact the world?

CHALLENGE 5

Take a prayer walk around your local community. Allow yourself to be led by the Holy Spirit with what to pray for. You will notice people and situations that you would never normally see from inside a church building. Don't be afraid to pray as you walk around; we know prayer is powerful and investing in your local community is a great thing. Why not explore as a group how you might pray for and with your local community.

I DO NOT BELIEVE ONE CAN
SETTLE HOW MUCH WE OUGHT
TO GIVE. I AM AFRAID THE
ONLY SAFE RULE IS TO GIVE
MORE THAN WE CAN SPARE.

C S LEWIS

GENEROSITY

It doesn't always come naturally to give. Especially if it isn't an easy thing to give. Maybe someone asks if they can borrow 50p when you're saving your last £1 for chips on the way home, or maybe your friend calls for a chat just as your favourite TV programme is about to start. Our initial reaction is not always to give joyfully.

Giving cost Jesus everything; it cost him his life. But it was worth it. Because it meant we can know God. Jesus saw past the cost to the reward.

The more time we invest in our relationship with Jesus, the more Jesus-like our character becomes. His generosity becomes our generosity. We too will see past the cost of giving to the reward.

real life

Richard Wurmbrand tells a story of a fellow prisoner in his book *Tortured for Christ*:

'One of the really great heroes of the faith was Pastor Milan Haimovici.

'The prisons in Romania were overcrowded and the guards did not know us by name. They called out for those who had been sentenced to get twenty-five lashes with a whip for having broken some prison rule.

Innumerable times, Pastor Haimovici went to get the beating in the place of someone else. By this he won the respect of other prisoners not only for himself, but also for Christ whom he represented.

'If I were continue to tell all the horrors of Communist tortures and all the self-sacrifices of Christians, I would never finish. Not only were the tortures known, but the heroic deeds were known also. The heroic examples of those in prison greatly inspired the brethren who were still free.'

[You can read more of Richard Wurmbrand's story in his book *Tortured for Christ* (available at www.releaseinternational.org/catalogue)]

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand,
founder of Release International,
spent a total of 14 years
imprisoned for his faith



a fresh look at the Bible

It can be good to give things. Giving a gift to a mate and hearing them go 'Oh my days!' can make you feel great. Or buying flowers for someone going through a rough time can make you feel like you've done something really worthwhile.

Believe it or not, most of us like to give. It makes us feel good. It makes us feel like we really know the person we are giving to when their eyes light up. It makes us feel special when our present makes their day a bit better. You know what I'm talking about, right?

Truth is we were all designed to give. God is totally, awesomely, completely generous. He is like crazy generous. It's embarrassing how generous God is with us. And I'm talking from the beginning of time. In Genesis 1:27 the Bible says that we were created in God's image: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.'

So, since we are made in His image, it just makes sense that we were meant for generosity. We are fulfilled when we look outside ourselves and decide to live generously.

There are a lot of ways to live generously. You don't have to have a truckload of money to be generous. In fact, many people who have a load of cash can be far from generous. Generosity is not based on having a lot of extra money. It's a mindset. It's an act of the will. It's a way of life.

Jesus was with his friends in the Temple in Jerusalem one day. They were watching all the people come and give their money to the Temple treasury. Believe it or not, when people would come with a big gift all kinds of fuss were made over them. The priests would make these big announcements. Sometimes trumpets would blare. It was this total show, kind of like: 'Hey look at me! See how much I've given. Am I spiritual or what?'

But Jesus pointed his friend's attention to a woman, a widow. She hardly had anything. In fact, all she had was one penny. That's it. That's all she had to her name. She was living in poverty. She had nothing except this one penny. And she stood in line and quietly gave that penny. And nobody noticed. The priests didn't make any big, flowery speeches. The trumpets stayed silent. The crowd looked elsewhere for the next big giver.

But Jesus noticed. In fact, He said that she had given more than anyone else. Everyone else gave out of their wealth. She gave out of her poverty. She gave a gift that made God's eyes light up. She gave a gift that made God smile. In fact, her gift was such a big deal that two thousand years later, we are still talking about it. Not bad, eh?

So here's the question: What can you give that will make a difference in someone else's life? Not, what can you give that you won't miss? But, what can you give that will be a big deal for you, that hurts to give but will make God's eyes light up? Can you give up something financially? Can you give your time? Can you be generous with your words? Can you be kind to someone who hasn't experienced kindness for a while?

Like I said, we were built for generosity. The question remains: What will you choose to give?

have your say...

How do you enjoy spending your time?

How do you enjoy spending your money?

In what areas could we choose to sacrifice either our time/money to bless someone else?

prayer points...

Ask God to show you what you are able to give that no one else can.

Thank God for both the bravery and generosity of Christians around the world who continue to spread the gospel despite the danger it involves.

CHALLENGE 6

We are challenging young people in the UK to join our 'Sow & Reap' movement. The challenge is to imaginatively sow a seed of £1 and see what creative fruit you can reap. You may choose to use your £1 to try to raise more money or you may use it to open up opportunities to talk to others about the issue of persecution. See www.releasepotential.org/sowand reap for inspiration and to tell us your ideas.

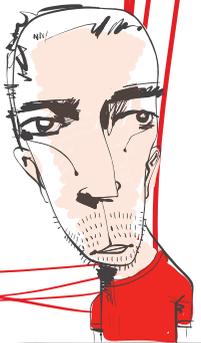


Why not cut out
the card and stick
it up somewhere you
will see it over the
next week to remind
you of your commitment?

COMMITMENT CARD

Christians around the world are going through many trials and sufferings for Jesus - yet they hold tight to their faith.

THIS WEEK I'M GOING TO FAST...



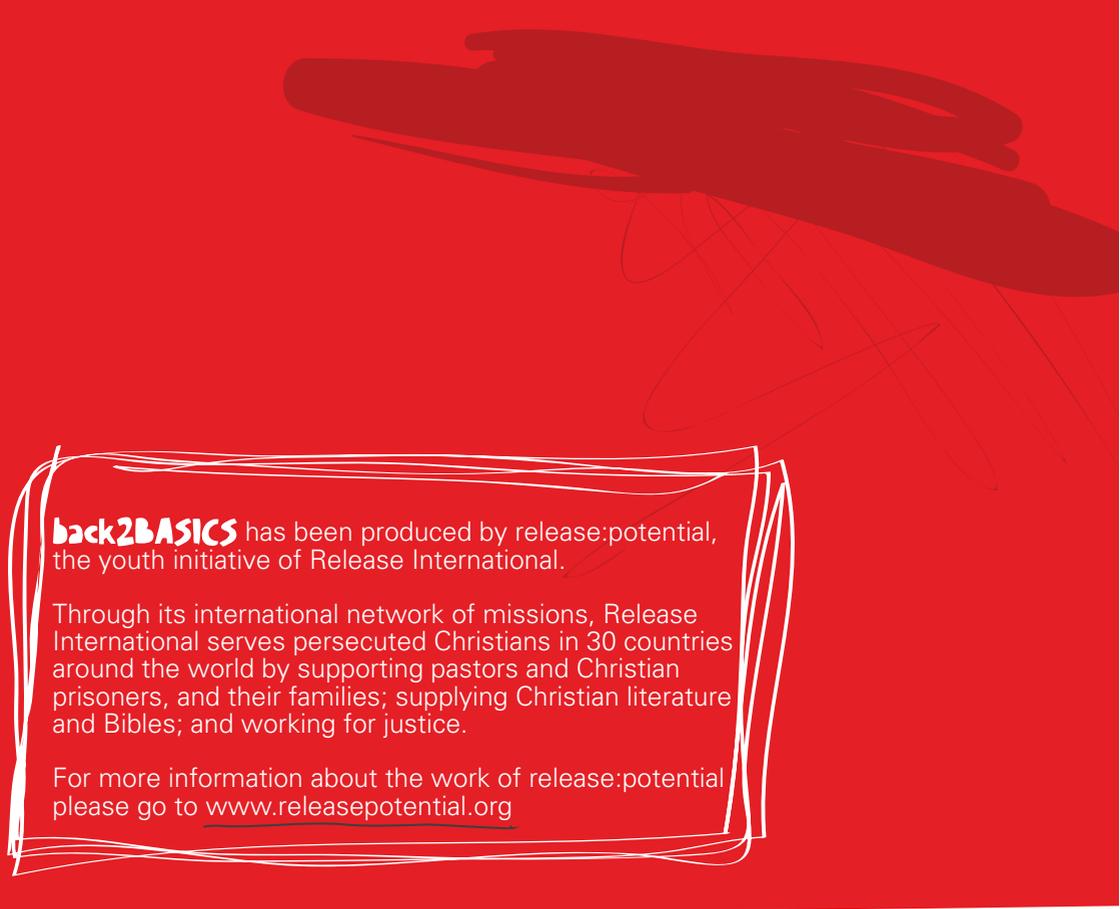
The time I would normally spend doing this I will use to pray for and remember my family who are suffering for their faith.

In doing this I want to draw closer to God and allow Him to help me understand how and why Christians are suffering.

challenge 4
commitment card



release:potential



back2BASICS has been produced by release:potential, the youth initiative of Release International.

Through its international network of missions, Release International serves persecuted Christians in 30 countries around the world by supporting pastors and Christian prisoners, and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles; and working for justice.

For more information about the work of release:potential please go to www.releasepotential.org



Special thanks to Ron Willoughby for his contributions to back2BASICS content and to Share Creative for the design work.

Please note that for their protection some of the names of people included in this course have been changed.

release:potential