

HUNGER FOR REALITY



*Do you long to go
deeper with God?*

by David Legge

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Hunger For Reality - Chapter 1

"Reckless Love"

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Let's pray together, and I want you to pray that God will really come and minister to your heart. Will you do that now? Our title is 'Hunger For Reality', and that's what we need to pray now: that we will experience the reality of God's presence, that God will come, that we will be real with God, and that He will be real to us. So let's pray.

Father, we thank You, we praise You, we exalt You, we glorify Your name. We declare that there is none like You, there is none beside You, neither is there any God like our God. There is none holy as the Lord. We worship You, Father; we worship You, Lord Jesus Christ; we worship You, Holy Spirit. We say 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is filled with His glory'. You are worthy of the highest praise, thrice holy God. We want to lift our spirits to You now, Father, we want to give You a sacrifice of praise, we want to bring the fruit of our lips to tell You how much we love You, and how great You are. Lord, as we come in prayer, we want to supplicate You to say we need You, Lord, we need You so deeply. We pray that You will come and meet with us now. Lord, let this be an extraordinary night. Lord, we pray, please deliver us from religion, deliver us from going through the motions, doing the right things in the wrong places, or the right things in the right places, or the wrong things in the right places. Lord, whatever we do, deliver us from just what we do, and You do something tonight. You come, Lord, and make the difference, come and invade this space, come and, Lord, engage with us personally. You are a relational God, for You are a relational Being, three persons, one God. So come and relate with us, Father, come and speak to us. So we welcome You, by the power of Your Holy Spirit now, come. We hunger for reality, so come and be real, Lord, and help us to be real with You. So let this be a place where there is honesty and transparency, where there is truth, so that Your grace might meet us. So come, Holy Spirit, we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, 'Hunger For Reality' - I'm sure most of you are familiar with VR, 'Virtual Reality'. It's a technological phenomenon that, if you're not up to speed with these type of things, you'll maybe not know about it - but basically virtual reality is defined as 'an immersive interactive experience generated by a computer'. It comprises, as you can see from the screen, hardware (things you put on your head and your hands and maybe other parts of the body), and software (computer programming) in order to have an interactive experience. Effectively, what it does is, it simulates an imaginary world with which you can interact, and you can even interact physically - hence all the hardware. So the entertainment industry, sports industry, games industry, fantasy worlds, they are all availing of this new technology - to make money of course - but to thrill us. Even the professional world is using some of this technology for training purposes.

I believe there is a sense in which our Christianity has been virtualised. What am I talking about? Well, we can become virtual, not real in our Christianity. So on a mental, even an emotional level we can interact with the Bible with our beliefs about

God, and our faith may even at times stimulate our senses, but it's not something that impacts our lives in real terms. So I want to ask you tonight, and indeed right throughout this series: have you got virtual Christianity rather than the real thing? There is another technology and it's called 'augmented reality', now that's a bit different than virtual reality because - as you can see from the diagram - this girl is able to look through these goggles, and so she has a view of reality, but it is enhanced by the computer program. Some have called it 'mixed reality'. So you can have a worldview that is Christianised, your value system, morally speaking, ethically, is Christian; but though it has impacted you to a degree, it's not truly transforming your life, and it certainly isn't changing the environment that you're in and those who you touch from day-to-day.

Now I would go a little bit further to say that, for many, their Christianity is virtual escapism. In other words, it's beyond reality, but the motive behind getting away from the real is to escape from the real. So there is a reality that you have created yourself, your own reality. Now I don't know whether you follow much of this in the press about this technology, and even the Internet for instance - but one problem, one fallout of our technological world, particularly the virtual world, is that the real world often becomes boring to the people who are immersed in the virtual world. That's why many marriages are breaking up, because men in particular are immersed within the sensuality of the Internet, and so real-life love doesn't appeal to them any more, it doesn't live up to the fantasy.

Taking this analogy to our faith, I know a lot of Christians are bored, they are bored with church - that's no surprise at times - they are bored with Christian experience in general. One of the reasons I believe is, that their faith is not in real terms, it's not impacting their everyday life because it's virtual, it's confined to some kind of Christian subculture at the weekend, or maybe if you're very religious the midweek meeting - but it's not real, in that it's not impacting the real world around you. Then there are those who have a sort of separatist view, an isolationist view of Christianity. So you divide, you come away from the world and go into your little cloister, and separate from the world. Some even call it 'old-time religion', and even spell that word 'time', 'tyme', just to emphasise what type of version of religion this is - but that further detaches the dynamic power of the Gospel from reality. Someone said, I read them recently: 'So many want the old time religion so much, that they try to preserve a day that no longer exists in the heart of God'. That's profound. Are you trying to preserve a day that no longer exists in the heart of God? To put it another way: if our memories are greater than our dreams, then we are already dead.

Yet we have been called to be salt and light. Isn't that what Jesus says? 'You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth', and I used to think that the salt was emphasising some kind of preservative - you remember that they used to salt the meat and so on - but that's not actually what it means. What does salt do? If you have salt and vinegar crisps, what do you need after it? A drink! Salt makes you thirsty. We are not simply meant to be people who preserve some kind of influence within society, we're actually meant to be making other people in the world thirsty for God - that they look at us and they say: 'Wow! What's different about them? I want that!', and they are drawn to it. So we are meant to be world-changers. We're not meant to be people who have a virtual reality in a little corner of the universe, where we close ourselves off separately in isolation from the rest of creation; but we are actually meant to be invading this world. Jesus said: 'I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not

prevail against it'. So many have used those verses to do with spiritual warfare, and when things are coming against us we think 'Oh, here's the enemy coming against us because we're standing for righteousness', but that's not what that verse means at all. That verse has the concept of, as we are advancing into the kingdom of the enemy, we're going to take flak from him, but we are on the move! We are victorious! We are expanding Christ's kingdom!

The early disciples turned the world upside down, they were world-changers because of the power of the Spirit that was upon them. But listen: you will never change your world with the truth if the truth hasn't changed you. This is why so many hunger for reality, because they see a disparity between what they read, for instance, in the book of Acts, what they read in Christian biography, the heroes of the faith who blazed the trail for Jesus in bygone eras; and they look at their own experience and see such a shortfall of that reality. Is that you tonight? I think we've all been there. Many of us are in a virtual church, if we're honest, detached from reality - we've created our own reality, and we need a reality check! So I want to ask: is there anybody hungry for reality tonight? Is there? In this gathering? If that's the case, where do we start?

Well, I'll be covering many subjects, as you see from the card tonight: 'Power In The Spirit', 'Exuberant Joy', 'Obeying God's Voice', 'Releasing Your Potential', 'Answering The Call', 'Fearless Boldness'. But tonight we're looking at 'Reckless Love', because the first subject tonight is essential for all the others to flow from. They are all vital, but every other one flows from love. It's a bit like the fruit of the Spirit, when you look at Galatians 5 - love, joy, peace, long-suffering, etc - but all of them flow out of love. In fact, you probably could say that all of the fruit of the Spirit could be summed up in love. I want you to turn with me quickly now to our first reading, we will have several readings tonight. We're turning to Matthew 22 please, Matthew 22 verse 35: *"Then one of them, a lawyer"* - now a lawyer in those days wasn't like a lawyer today in our culture, it's a person, a Jew, who knew the laws of God, the Torah, inside out, an expert in the Jewish law, *"A lawyer asked Jesus a question, testing Him, and saying, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?'. Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind'. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets"*.

Now that's fascinating. Jesus is saying this is the greatest of all commandments: love God, love your neighbour - and on these two hang all the Law and the Prophets. Now the Law and the Prophets was all there was of the Bible in the Old Testament and in Jesus' day, there was no New Testament, OK? So basically what Jesus is saying, and this is profound, is that this is what the Bible is all about - what? Love! Love God and love your neighbour! It summarises the whole of Scripture. So these guys, studying the nitty-gritty, every jot and tittle, every cross and dot of the Old Testament Scripture in the Hebrew, they are obsessed with that. They spend their day poring over all of these verses, and yet they so often miss the whole point - what's that? God is love, and we are meant to love one another.

The sad thing is that, if you look at the church today, and consider the creeds, the confessions, and even systematic theologies, there is not a lot of reference to love in them. Think about that. I don't know what church tradition you come from, but whatever creed you say, whatever catechism you have, think about it: love doesn't

really feature that much, does it? Take down your Louis Berkof theology, or another theology, from the dusty shelves of the Bible College library, and you'll probably not get a chapter in it about love, love for God, and love for one another. Yet what is it Jesus said in John 13 verse 35: 'By this shall all men know that you are My disciples: that you love one another. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you'. Jesus says you will be known for your love. This is like the Christian badge. It's not the fish (not that anything is wrong with the fish), it's not even the cross, it's love! Yet what has the church been known for in Ireland? Love? What? Hatred! War! Dissension! It's ironic, isn't it?

Jesus went even further in the New Covenant, because these lawyers of the Jewish law would have agreed with Jesus, they even commended Him for saying 'Love God and love your neighbour' - that's Old Testament stuff. But if you look, go back in Matthew to Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 verse 43, Jesus went further than the Old Covenant. Matthew 5:43: 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy" - that's a wee bit they added on, by the way, 'hate your enemy'. 'But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect'.

Now listen, this is why the parable of the Good Samaritan was so scandalous to the Jews - why? Because the question was asked by another Jewish lawyer: 'Who is my neighbour?', OK? So in the context of this discussion, love God and love your neighbour, and he asks: 'Well, who is my neighbour?'. Jesus tells this story, where the punchline is that his enemy is his neighbour. What do I mean? Well, the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, there was a sectarian, religious, ethnic divide for them, and they hated each other's guts. So Jesus tells this story, you know it, don't you? A man is beat up along the road to Jericho, bandits all over the place, he is beaten up, stripped bare; and the priest, the Jewish priest, walks by him; the Levite walks by him; but it is the Samaritan who stops, tends to his wounds, puts him on his donkey, takes him to an Inn, spends money for his keeping, and says he will pay whatever is necessary for that man's well-keeping in that Inn. Jesus says in verse 37: 'So, go and do likewise'.

Are you getting the point here? I don't think you are really getting the point. Do you understand the impact that this story would have had on the Jewish psyche? The Samaritans were like - and I don't like using the expression - but in the Hebrew mind they were like mongrels, they were mixed-race, but they were also mixed religion. They had a lot of stuff in the way of worshipping God that the Jews knew was wrong, and quite frankly a lot of it was wrong. But that's all a bit conceptual, we need to bring it into today's definitions for a moment to help you and to help me. You think of somebody whose identity is abhorrent to you right now, somebody whose identity is abhorrent to you, or someone whose lifestyle is despised by you - alright? Jesus is saying 'This Samaritan is good', I mean a good Samaritan was an oxymoron for them, alright? There was no such a thing as a good Samaritan. But you put your category in there, someone who is morally and spiritually repugnant, and what Jesus is saying is:

'They are doing a better job than you at loving people'.

Now the Jewish mind just couldn't take this in. Now I really want to push you a wee bit tonight, but I know that it might be difficult - but you think of somebody, dare I say it, think of a homosexual who is more charitable, who gives more alms, who is more kind. We're not saying anything to do with the veracity or morality of their lifestyle, we're talking about how someone who - to you - lives a wrong life. Let's think of a Muslim, someone who you might think worships a wrong god, and worships the wrong god the wrong way, but they are doing better than you in loving people. Now some of you are sitting there thinking 'No, no, no, no, you're going to far now' - that's the way they thought when Jesus told the Good Samaritan parable. That's where I'm trying to get, that's exactly the way they thought: 'No, that couldn't be, how could you have the wrong god, how could you have the wrong lifestyle, how could you be a sinner?' - this is what Jesus is saying, this is the point. Someone who you disagree with, someone who is wrong in their approach to God, someone whose lifestyle is maybe not squeaky-clean could actually be showing more love than you Pharisees who have all the Scripture but are not living up to it. That's what Jesus was saying.

It's unthinkable! We get a bit of a clue to the mind of the lawyer who asked Him the question that He answered with the parable, because it says: 'Willing to justify himself, he asked the question 'Who is my neighbour?'. You see, that's what it was all about, you see, that's religion: you're just trying to justify yourself, you're trying to show 'I'm OK! I've got it sorted! I'm right with God!'. But the problem is, he needed a reality check, he needed to realise that many outside of Israel were doing better than he was - they were showing reckless love.

Now this might be a push for some of you, a struggle, I don't know. First Corinthians 13 tells us that you can have overwhelming gifts from God, charismatic gifts of revelation and speech; you can have astounding intellectual and supernatural capability, prophesying, spiritual utterances, words of wisdom, words of knowledge; you can have mountain-moving faith, Paul says; you can have sacrificial exploits of giving money to the poor, even giving your very body to be burned; you can do all the great charitable deeds imaginable - but without love, Paul says, it profits you little, and you are nothing without love. Now that's frightening, it's very strong, but it's frightening - here's why: because all the aforementioned things that Paul says are nothing without love are often the things that we strive for in the church and we value. Paul says apart from love they all amount to nothing, and you amount to nothing for that matter.

This challenges how we even read our Bibles, doesn't it? The love of God is not just on the page with John 3:16 or some of the other well-known references to the love of God. What we're seeing when Jesus says 'In this is a summary of the Law and the Prophets', Jesus is saying this is on every page of the Bible, the love of God is what the Bible is about from cover to cover. In fact, God is love in His very nature, and so your starting point with anything has to be the nature of God's reckless love - and if you don't get that, you miss the whole point of the Bible! Now, let's be honest, what did Jesus say to these Scribes and Pharisees? He said: 'What credit is there if you love those who love you? If you love those who like you? The tax collectors do that, everybody does that'. You see, if we're honest, most of us have accommodated ourselves to an acceptable level of love. Or, to use the analogy in the beginning of virtual reality, we have created our own reality of love - but it falls far short of the

reckless love that Jesus taught about. You know, we love our family, OK? Tick that box. We love Christians, particularly Christians like us, we love those. Tick that box. We might even love our neighbour - that's maybe pushing it for some of you - but what we're saying is: this is a virtual reality that is divorced from the love that Jesus talks about, the reckless love. Some of us perhaps used to know a reckless love, but like the Ephesians that we read of in Revelation chapter 2 that Jesus gives a message to through the Apostle John writing a letter to the church at Ephesus, He says to them: 'You have lost your first love'. The words He actually says is: 'I know your works' - so they were a hard-working church - 'your labour' - they did a lot of good deeds - 'your patience' - they were long-suffering - 'that you cannot bear those who are evil' - they were morally upstanding - 'and that you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not' - they were theologically orthodox - 'and have found them liars; and have persevered and have had patience, and laboured for My name's sake' - they weren't doing it for themselves or for their denomination, they were doing it for Jesus - 'and you have not become weary' - they stuck at it, they had stickability, it's hard to find these days. But here is Jesus' parting shot to them: 'Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love'. Wow! That was a sucker punch, wasn't it? Look at all the things they have got going for them - has your church got all those things going for them? Yet the problem Jesus had was that they had left their first love. He goes on to say: 'You have forsaken your first love, remember the height from which you have fallen; repent and do the first works', or 'the things you did at first'.

Am I speaking to someone tonight, and you once had this love within you, this passionate, exuberant, fiery love for Jesus and for others; but it's gone? I think here we have an explanation for the frigid, the tepid, passionless Christianity that is so much abroad. It's a bit like the church of Laodicea that Jesus also spoke to and said: 'You're lukewarm', He said, 'I would spew you out of my mouth'. Do you know what that means? He's saying: 'You make me sick', because that's what tepid water does, it makes you want to vomit. He says: 'I would that you were either hot or cold, but you're lukewarm'. What He's saying there is: 'I would rather you were cold and enthusiastic about your coldness' - He obviously would prefer them hot, but He's saying 'I would rather you were at an extreme, as in the middle, nominal, tepid, insipid'. By the way, that's Jesus I'm quoting, you know, gentle Jesus, meek and mild - it's Him.

Now let me put the brakes on for a moment, because I have discovered over quite a few years preaching that hammering on people doesn't work. I'm giving you a break here, OK? What I mean is: preachers, and I have done it in the past, can put a guilt trip on people - you know, like tonight, if you're not loving enough, or you don't appreciate the love of God enough or something like that - they put a guilt trip on you, and you start to realise: 'Here, I'm falling far short of what I should be', and you walk out feeling miserable but you're no better. That's not what I'm doing tonight, OK? Definitely not what I'm doing. I'm certainly not saying you need to go away from here and strive to do better; here's why: because that won't work either! So what do you do? Well, if you want to express reckless love to others, you need to experience the reckless love of God yourself - do you hear that? If you want to express this love of God, you need to experience it, you need an encounter with reckless love, God's reckless love. That's not something that can be learned. You can go and read a book about God's love, you can do some kind of programme in the church about it, but ultimately what we need is for the head reality to become a heart reality, the head knowledge to drop down that journey - what is it, 12, 18 inches - right down into the

heart so that we will start to encounter the love of God. That's the only thing that is going to change your life, the life of your church, and the life of your community.

I want to ask you tonight: have you ever encountered, have you truly experienced the love of God? The love of God is a wild love, it's a furious, ferocious love. The love of God, the 'agape' love is the Greek word for it, it's an all-consuming, all-sacrificing, all-embracing love. It is a satisfying love, it's an exhilarating love, it's intoxicating, overwhelming! If you have experienced it, you will know what I'm talking about. Those superlatives I have used correctly describe God's reckless love. Though His love is dangerous and fearful, the wonderful good news is that at the same time it is safe, it's gentle, God's love is tender and patient. Listen, this is really the message God has laid on my heart tonight: to have reckless love, you first need to be wrecked by love. Has that ever happened to you?

I want you to turn with me to Luke chapter 15, Luke 15 verses 13 and 14. Now, this is the story, the parable of the prodigal son - we have come to know it as the prodigal son, but it's actually about two sons. You know what happens, the younger one comes and asks for his inheritance before his father is dead - which is tantamount to saying 'I wish you were six foot under in the ground so that I can get my hands on your money'. The father gives him this inheritance, and he also gives the older brother the inheritance. Then we join the story in verse 13: *"And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living"*, or riotous, wasteful living. *"But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want"*. Now that's why we call him 'the prodigal' - why? Because he got all his Dad's money, and then he wasted it all - that's what 'prodigal' means. But do you know something? The Jews who heard this story were not scandalised by the behaviour of the rebellious son in this parable, rather they were scandalised at how the father received him after what he had done - disparaging the father's name, wasting his inheritance, and then coming back in shame - how the father ran out, it says, to greet him, he threw his arms around him, he kissed him on the neck, he brought him home, he threw a party for him, he put a robe on him, a ring on his finger, shoes, not sandals, on his feet. All those things symbolise sonship, and the young fellow was rehearsing a speech when he was deep low in the pig swill, wasn't even allowed to eat it by the farmer, and he was rehearsing a speech for when he went home: 'Make me like one of your hired servants', because he didn't think he was worthy to be a son ever again.

So the Pharisees, the Scribes, the lawyers were scandalised, because they knew what Jesus was at. He was depicting God as the father in the story and here's God losing His dignity, here's God losing His reputation. If you go into Deuteronomy 21, there is the law of the rebellious son which said that if a son ever did anything remotely like this, he should be stoned to death. They knew that law, and they knew Jesus was a rabbi and He knew that law - but what is Jesus saying? He's saying this is what the Father is like, if you look at chapter 15 verses 1, 2 and 3 you see that He tells this parable in answer to the question: 'The Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, 'This Man receives sinners and eats with them'. It's basically a rhetorical question saying: 'Why does He do this? If He knows the law, why is He eating with tax collectors, prostitutes, various types of sinners?'. Here's Jesus: 'I am doing this because I have come to reveal the heart of the Father. The Father loves sinners! The Father wants to make sons and daughters out of tax collectors and prostitutes!'. Their big brains couldn't take it, because what Jesus was teaching - and Tim Keller has popularised this term

through his writings - Jesus was teaching about a prodigal God. I know people who are writing articles online because they're appalled at that title for God, 'prodigal God'. That's what He is - 'prodigal' does not mean 'sinful', 'prodigal' means 'reckless'. Literally the dictionary definition of 'prodigal' is 'spending money or using resources freely and recklessly, wastefully extravagant, giving something on a lavish scale'. What this story of the parable of the prodigal son is actually saying is that just the way that the son wasted his father's inheritance, when he gets home to the father's house, father wastes all his resources on his head - that's great!

Is that what you've got? Is that what you know? Is that what you're wildly celebrating? Romans chapter 8 and verse 32 says: 'He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?'. This is the incredible grace of God. Now the young son was a moral disaster, wasn't he? Yet he experienced this reckless love of the father. Yet the older son, who never did any of these things - he even protests himself saying 'I never wasted anything, all I've done is obey your commands', verse 29, 'He answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends'. He was a religious perfectionist, and yet he had never experienced the reckless love of his father. That's why the alcoholics, the drug addicts, the prostitutes, the terrorists, that's why the moral failures, burnouts, that's why they often get this Gospel quicker than the church-goers, the baptised, the catechised - because they realise it's reckless love, they couldn't pay for it if they had to, but it's prodigal love from a prodigal God who is the prodigal Father.

We need the love of God, this reckless love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We need to realise that love covers a multitude of sins. I can never get over how, when the prodigal came back - he was stinking, he had been living with the pigs, pigs were unclean of course to the Jews, you know all that, don't you? The Dad doesn't say: 'Right, get up to the house, have a bath or shower, and then we will dress you up like a son again' - what does he do? He takes the robe, and he covers his filth in that robe before he is washed, isn't that incredible? Love covers a multitude of sins. Have you experienced this reckless love? Have you ever been wrecked by love? Do you think that son was wrecked by his father's love?

Come with me again, still Luke, chapter 7 this time, Luke 7:36 - and we're going to take time to read all of this story. This is like the female prodigal, if you like, verse 36 of chapter 7 of Luke: *"Then one of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him"*. Now look who's asking here, one of these religious guys. *"And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner"*, right, now we are all sinners, the Bible tells us that. So, why does it say 'who was a sinner'? It's meaning that she was infamous as a sinner. In other words, her sin was a way of life, she was most likely a prostitute. *"When she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil"*.

Now, can I just pause there for a moment, because this really impacts me. I don't know what your version of 'holiness' is, OK? There is a lot of 'holiness' teaching that goes on around the country and all the rest, and I'm not being controversial at all, but in all sorts of colours of the spectrum of Christianity we know that 'holiness' is important. But so often our version of 'holiness' separates us from unholy people, and yet the irony of the holiness of Jesus - there ain't one of you any holier than Jesus, you

do know that? There's no church in this town or in this county holier than Jesus. Whatever the version of His holiness was, which I reckon was the right one, that holiness attracted the most sinful people in society. Does that not make you scratch your head? It should. Anyway, that's another sermon.

Verse 38: *"She stood at His feet behind Him weeping"*. He was sitting, reclining on one of these tables, low-standing tables, so His feet were sticking out behind Him as He was reclining, leaning on His elbow on the table to eat. *"And she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil"*. This is a prostitute, folks. This is rather sensual looking, isn't it? 'Oh, don't say that!'. Well, that's what it is, waken up! That's what it looks like. She is kissing His feet. If any woman did this, it would be a bit of a shocking moment, but this is somebody else, this is a prostitute. Verse 39: *"Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, 'This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner'"*. Are you getting it? *"And Jesus answered"* - now he didn't speak this out, but Jesus knew what he was saying - *"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you'. So he said, 'Teacher, say it'. 'There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?'. Simon answered and said, 'I suppose the one whom he forgave more'. And He said to him, 'You have rightly judged'. Then He"* - now watch the positioning here, the body language - *"Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon"*, so He's looking at her, speaking to him, *"Do you see this woman?"*. He wants him to look at her, He's not ashamed to look at her. *"Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little'. Then He said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven you'"*.

Now, isn't that incredible? Did Jesus not know where this woman had been the previous night? Yes, He did. Did He not know the graphic scenes that her eyes had looked upon? Yet He received tears from those eyes to wash His feet. Did He not know the illicit kisses and words that those lips had spoken? Yet He received kisses upon His feet. Did He not know the honey trap that that long hair that she let down to dry His feet, the honey trap it was for many a married man? Yes, He did. This is the sinless, spotless Son of God - but this is God the Son who has come to reveal the heart of the Father. This is reckless love. Jesus is teaching Simon, the religious perfectionist, that whoever is forgiven much will - what? Love much! That used to trouble me, because I was brought up in a Christian home, and I didn't do a lot of the things - I did plenty of stuff, mind you - but I didn't do a lot of the things that some of my friends had done in the world and so on. But it's not meaning that if you haven't had a wild life in your past that you can't really love God more, that's not what it's meaning. It's not just big sinners who can love Jesus, but Jesus is saying that it's those who know how much they are forgiven. The more you know how much you are forgiven - whether you're a Pharisee, or a prostitute, tax collector, whatever - the more you realise you've been forgiven, the more you will love God. The more you are wrecked by love, the more reckless you will be with God's love.

There are other records of this story, maybe it is a different story - there is a bit of a debate - but the lady broke the alabaster box, didn't she, or the flask? She smashed it to let out her worship. I have a sense, as I relay this story to you about this prostitute woman and her alabaster flask, that some of you: your love is not reckless, it's confined, it's restricted. I want to ask you: what is restricting extravagant love toward God? What is it? Sometimes this reckless love, if we are truly reckless with it, it will wreck our reputation. I can say that has happened to me in many people's eyes. You have to be prepared for that. If you're following after the love of God, and the love of other people, your reputation will get wrecked. Any prejudices that you have in your past towards ethnic minorities, people of other religious persuasions, those prejudices; if you're going to open your heart up to the reckless love of God, they're going to get wrecked, they're going to get obliterated. Whatever traditions you're maybe wedded to, religious ones, cultural ones, you've got to be prepared for the reckless love of God to wreck them, customs. Even our comfort zones, there is no such a thing as a comfort zone when you're baptised with the reckless love of God - God will push you out of those comfort zones, He will take you out of ease into a place of danger. The reckless love of God is dangerous!

Maybe the problem you have is that you've got idols in your life. You know what an idol is, it's another love. Often other loves in our lives can be idolatrous. First Timothy 6 talks about the love of money being the root of all evil - comprehensive. Is that incredible or what? Every evil comes out of the love of money, that's staggering. There are other disordered loves that we can have in our relationships, we can have misplaced loves. What did Jesus say? He said: 'He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me; he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me; he who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it'. Now, what does that verse mean? Jesus is not saying that we need to love our families less, that's not what He saying - you can't put that in Jesus' mouth. What He's saying is: 'You need to love Me more, and then if you love Me more you'll be a better parent, you'll be a better spouse, you'll be a better friend'. If you seek first the kingdom, everything else will fall into place. But it all comes from this reckless love, as we said at the beginning, everything comes from it and everything flows to it - it's the foundation of everything.

There is another record of a similar event to that sinner woman in Luke 7, and it's found in John 12 - you don't need to turn to it. Mary of Bethany this time, and she smashes an alabaster box of spikenard ointment, very costly, the flask and the perfume. She anoints Jesus' feet with it, and it says in that record that the fragrance filled the whole house. Do you know what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 26? He said that wherever the Gospel was preached, the testimony of Mary would be rehearsed. That's incredible. He said to the rest of the disciples: 'Don't say anything to her, because she has anointed Me for My burial'. This is profound: because she had a revelation in her heart of the reckless love of God, God give her a further revelation of what was going to happen to Jesus, so that she was anointing Him for His burial - something that nobody else in the room was able to see, but she could see it in her spirit because of her love for Jesus. But not only did that fragrance fill the house, the testimony of this woman would be rehearsed everywhere the Gospel would be preached. In other words, the fragrance of what she did would fill the world. This woman's reckless love filled the world. Do you believe that love can change the world?

Do you believe love can change Ireland?

Now I have to bring you a public health warning, to beware, because reckless love - it causes offence to those whose hearts are not reckless for God. It offends those who value the valueless. With Mary of Bethany it says that Judas was appalled. She smashed this vase, this flask, which was quite priceless, with the ointment in it. I haven't worked out the equivalence today, but it was a lot of money. Judas, of course, we know that he was a thief from the beginning, and he had his hand in the kitty - but he was wedded to money, his idol was money, he valued money, but he hadn't a reckless love for Jesus. When I thought about this, I was reminded of David, King David dancing before the Ark. Do you remember that the Ark was taken into a place of habitation, and it was always on David's heart? He was in a procession with the Ark - and this is probably not too accurate a drawing in a sense, because he was basically dancing in his undergarments, his priestly ephod. And it says that Michal his wife, who was Saul's daughter, she was absolutely shocked at what he was doing, and she disdained him - 2 Samuel 6:20 says: 'How can the King of Israel do this?'. She says: 'How the King of Israel has distinguished himself today' - she's being sarcastic - 'going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!'. But he didn't care, because it was reckless love, he didn't care what anybody thought - just like the prostitute. All these of the religious establishment all round, and she goes in to Jesus, does what she does, anoints His feet, she doesn't care. Mary of Bethany doesn't care. David doesn't care. Do you know that song by Matt Redmond? Do you know that one:

'I will dance, I will sing to be mad for my King.
Nothing, Lord, is hindering the passion in my soul:
I will dance, I will sing to be mad for my King.
Nothing, Lord, is hindering the passion in my soul.

And I'll become even more undignified than this.
Some would say it's foolishness!
But I'll become even more undignified than this'.

We need to smash out of our alabaster boxes! I can feel them on me when I come into a lot of church services. There are places where I feel free, there are other places where I feel a straitjacket on me. I feel confined, I feel manipulated, I feel controlled by the atmosphere - and that shouldn't be, because I should have my eyes on One! It's not just in times of worship and praise, that's the easy things that we can do - whatever it may be doing, praising the Lord, blessing the Lord with all that is in our being. But when it comes to obedience, when it comes to sacrifice, when it comes to surrender, when it comes to doing things that break out of the mould, that other people will disdain and be offended by - if my love for Christ is reckless it will not matter, just like David. You see, Michal loved dignity, she loved reputation, she loved pride of appearance, but David just loved God. He was a man after God's own heart, he had a reckless love.

Do you see this tonight? To have reckless love you first need to be wrecked by love, and then, then you can conform to a verse like this, Romans 12:1-2: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you

may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God'. Now so many times, in so many churches, in so many sermons, these verses have been preached - consecration, surrender, give your all to Jesus, go to the mission field, go and evangelise the lost around this country, do all these great exploits for God - but we miss out. It doesn't seem the most interesting part of these two verses, but it's the key part, the very first opening words: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies'. In other words, Paul is saying: 'I've just spent 11 chapters in the excursus of the Epistle to the Romans explaining the glorious Gospel that has been revealed from heaven, I've been explaining how Christ died for the ungodly, how we are justified by faith, how we are made acceptable to God by the blood of Jesus, we receive the righteousness of Christ. How the old person is put to death on the cross of Jesus, and we die with Jesus, and we become dead to sin, and we come out of the resurrection empty tomb with Jesus into a new life' - like baptism: we die, we are buried, we are risen, and then we are free from sin. This is a glorious Gospel, this is a reckless love that God has for us. Romans 5:8: 'God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. Now folks, because of all that, because of His reckless love, hopefully you have taken it into your heart and you have been wrecked by love, you can now go and take that reckless love to a broken world.

You see, a lot of us have got these verses, but we haven't really been wrecked by love. We've never seen the prodigal Father, we've never known the prodigal Father. We're still worshipping some distant Old Testament, Old Covenant concept of God, when Jesus has come to reveal the heart of the Father to us in the New Covenant. Some of us are still under guilt and shame, some of us have never been healed by the fullness of the power of the blessing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of us are not living in grace, we're still living under law. We're not free, some of us are confined with religion, some of us are trapped and ensnared by the fear of man - wow! What a big one that is! We can do all sorts of things in private when it's just me and God, but as soon as somebody else is sitting beside me, or I'm in a public gathering, I shut down. Folks, this is serious - and, please, I'm not getting cross with anybody here tonight, I'm just fired up with this! OK, I don't want to be heaping shame or anything like that on you, but we are trapped in the church with the fear of man, but we are trapped outside the church with the fear of man! So if God the Holy Spirit whispers in our heart and says: 'Go over and speak to this person', or 'Go over to that person who is not well and pray for them to be healed', we are completely restricted! Do you know what all of that means? You don't go on a course to learn how to do it - it means we have not had an encounter that is deep enough with the wild, ferocious, fierce, all-consuming, intoxicating, captivating love of God!

Don't go and enrol in some seminary or something like that. Go into your closet, shut the door, and say 'Father, show me Your heart of love. Break my heart for what breaks Yours. Let me look at the crowd like my Saviour did, till my eyes with tears grow dim. Let me look and pity the wandering sheep, and love them for love of Him. I don't have that love!'. I don't have it. Hands up? I don't have it, and I can't conjure it up - God has to give it to me. The only place that He gives it to me is in His presence.

Now, next time, I'm going to preach on the power of the Holy Spirit - and the power of the Holy Spirit is vital, it's crucial to live this Christian life. You cannot live the Christian life without the Spirit. Many are trying, but you can't do it - but there is so much emphasis on power, there is so much emphasis on gifts, and rightly so. There should

be an emphasis on the power of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit - but love is the key, love is the fundamental, non-negotiable, it's the secret to everything. Do you know what I'm going to tell you? We could talk, and we have talked about spiritual warfare and various things over the years, and we can talk about the weapons that we have, we can talk about the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the girdle of truth, the shield of the faith, the sword of the Spirit, feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace, all prayer. We can say that the power is in the blood of Jesus, and there is power in the name of Jesus - but I'm going to tell you: do you know what the greatest spiritual weapon we've all got is? Love. You can go out there and encounter a devil-worshipper face-to-face - and I'm telling you this, I don't care what tricks you have up your sleeve, you love them, love them, and you will see a breakthrough.

Do you have this reckless love? I'll be honest with you, I wasn't planning to say this, but I'll be honest with you: I've felt the Lord dealing with me over the last number of months about loving, really loving people. I'm getting there, but very far off from it. When you're in 'Christian work', this is the irony of it all: you can be so removed from ordinary people with normal problems, you're in your little virtual world - right? I remember going to Bible College, and I went straight to Bible college from school, and I missed school - do you know why I missed school? Not for the work. I missed school because I was interacting with non-Christians. I was stuck in the cloister of Bible College with all these people who knew the Lord, and I decided on a couple of occasions to walk home from Bible College, just to interact with people. Now that was very short-lived, but when you're in Christian circles, you could take a Gospel campaign and preach to the lost like Billy Graham, you can tell people how to come to Christ when they're in a church context - but when we step into the supermarket, or we go to the football field, or when we are in some kind of department store, a cafe, or a restaurant, we are tongue-tied - God can't use us!

Why is that? Why is it? We could talk about a lot of stuff: 'Oh, I'm an introvert'. Wait till I tell you: if you get the reckless love of God exploding in your soul, you will have to do it! Paul says: 'The love of Christ compels us'. I'm just being honest with you, OK, I hope you don't mind - but that is starting to happen to me, where I'm finding that if I see someone in need, I'm moving away, I'm walking away, I'm in the car, and then I have to go back, because me and the Lord are starting to deal with this stuff. I was thinking, as I was preparing for these meetings, I never shared this with the folks - and by the way, we all pray together about what we're dealing with in the season, OK? So it's not just coming from me, it's coming from a number of us praying and seeking God together. I was thinking I would love to give you homework every night - you would like that, wouldn't you? I would love to give you homework - but why not make your homework asking God the Father for a baptism of love upon your heart, true love, reckless love. Then, when you feel that love, that prod, that exercise within your heart towards others in need, that you decide: 'I'm going to step out in faith' - that's going to quench your fear. Obedience in faith. You see, we do need more power, but we need more love.

Lord, I've made it my life's work to make no enemies. This is part of the problem, probably, being a non-confrontationist, choosing the easy way, the way of least resistance - but, Lord, that was not the way of the cross, that's not the way You went. You're calling me to take up my cross and follow You the way You went. Lord, nobody promised that it would be easy, but You did promise it would be blessed: 'Blessed are

you when men revile you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake' - blessed are you! Happy are you! Happy! What? Yes, happy, blessed, fulfilled, prosperous, because you're in the will of God, you're following Jesus. It's a reckless love. Father, would You baptise this company, at least who want it, people that want it in this little room, Lord, would You baptise us with a fresh enduement of love right now, Your love, agape love, Jesus' love; that passion that caused Him to pour out His lifeblood. Jesus, we need that, we need that. Lord, we confess how we have failed in this; but, Lord, we know that You're not there with a big stick trying to beat us down because of what we've done wrong. Lord, You want to lift us up, You want to bring us to that place where we can fulfil what You have promised, what You died for. So, Lord, help us. Pour in Your love, Lord Jesus, pour in Your love. Help us to love the unlovable, help us to love people that we wouldn't even naturally like, help us to love people who hate our guts, help us to love people who smell, help us to love people who lie, help us to love people who use - because You loved them, Lord. Deliver us from the Pharisee inside us, Lord. Help us to love. Amen.

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Hunger For Reality - Chapter 2

"Power In The Spirit"

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I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 1, and tonight we're going to look at 'Hunger for Reality: do you long to go deeper with God?', and specifically we're looking tonight at 'Being Empowered By The Spirit', or 'The Power Of The Spirit'. So our initial reading tonight is coming from Acts chapter 1, and we're going to read verses 4 through to verse 8, and then we will pray before we begin. So Acts 1 verse 4: *"And being assembled together with them, He", that is, Jesus, "commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which', He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'. Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, 'Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'. And He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'"*.

Now, keep your Bible open there. We're going to pray just now, I know we've been praying already, but I want you to pray now a very simple prayer. I'm going to tell you it in a moment, but before I tell you the simple prayer, I believe that some of you here tonight have come with spirits that are closed to God. Now I am talking about your own human spirit. I sensed this just sitting here before I got up to the pulpit, that some of you are closed in your spirit right now to God. Now, I don't know why that is. It might be that there is an offence, that you've been offended today, or maybe you're anticipating you're just about to be offended tonight by what I'm going to preach on. I don't know. But it's just a picture like a flower, a flower can be opened, the petals are all open, soaking in the sun; but some of you are like flowers that are closed. Now, I don't know why that is, but I want to encourage you to open your spirit to God. We're about to pray, I want you to open your spirit to God now - and this is the simple prayer: 'Come, Holy Spirit', alright?

So let's pray that. Is your heart open? I hope it is, because you're going to miss out if your heart isn't open. If you've been offended in the last 24 hours, or 24 years, now would be a good time to say: 'Lord, I'm going to choose to forgive minor and major things, because I want to receive from You tonight. I don't want anything to be in the way, nothing blocking, nothing between' - so that when you say that prayer, 'Come, Holy Spirit', it's not tongue in cheek, you really mean it, and you know that it's possible because you've removed the obstacles. OK? So let's pray it together, maybe you might even want to pray it audibly, OK?

'Come, Lord Jesus', let's say it together: Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit. Come, Heavenly Father. Lord, we do ask You to come to us, Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we ask You to come and meet with us tonight in a very special way. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I heard a quote recently from Stuart Briscoe, some of you might know Stuart or remember Stuart, and he said this - it's remarkable: 'All that is being done in evangelical Christianity can be done with good equipment, modern media, and a few gifted people. Very little that is happening in the church is explainable solely on the basis of God's activity and authority'. It makes you think, doesn't it? Much of what is being done could be done by other means, but very little that is happening in the church is explainable solely on the basis of God's activity and authority. In other words, how much of what we are doing in church could be done without the Holy Spirit? Just think about that for a moment. You don't have time really to contemplate it right now, but it's worth considering, isn't it? I mean, let's face it, most of the places we will turn up to tomorrow at 11:00 or 11:30, or whatever time, they often do go on with clockwork precision - and would any of us notice if there was a distinct absence of the presence of God in the proceedings?

Now, I'm not casting aspersions on any of your places of worship, but I think that's a question worth asking. If the Holy Spirit was not to show up tomorrow morning, or tomorrow evening, would you notice? Would there be any discernible difference? Is He there most weeks? I thought of this when I was thinking of that: some of our churches are 'Keep Calm and Carry on without the Holy Spirit'. That's a great danger as churches, that we are so caught up in our programmes, in our parochial concepts of what ministry is, the weekly calendar, monthly and yearly, that we can just keep going on, carrying on regardless - ignorant of the fact that maybe God is not in a lot of what we do.

Now it's easier to exist in that capacity as a church than it is as an individual. What I mean by that is simply: when it is you, and you discern a distinct absence of the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life, it's more obvious to you as an individual. So your hunger for reality, as we are considering this subject over these months, your hunger for reality, that sense of an absence of engaging with God and encounters with God, of real substance, could be because you are not interacting properly, you're not connected intrinsically with the Holy Spirit as God intended you to be. Now the individual and the corporate scenario can be compounded by the fact that some sections of the church actively have divorced themselves from the power source of the Holy Spirit. That could be for a number of reasons which we're not going to go into tonight - one of them is liberalism, another is any deadening theology that in some way denies the Person or the works of the Holy Spirit. Listen, what I'm talking about tonight, I really don't want you to flounder thinking that this has got to do with denominationalism, or something to do with charismatic Pentecostal versus the rest - it's nothing of the sort.

C.H. Spurgeon was a Baptist, one that is lauded even by Baptists today, and he said: 'A church in the land without the Spirit is rather a curse than a blessing'. I'm glad I didn't say that! 'If you have not the Spirit of God, Christian worker, remember that you stand in somebody else's way, you are a fruitless tree standing where a fruitful tree might grow'. Now, is that not true concerning the church even in Ireland? To a large extent, the absence of the power and the dynamic of the Holy Spirit of God has meant that a great deal of religion has become a curse to us. I believe Spurgeon is alluding to that incident where Jesus walked by the fig tree that was not bearing fruit, and remember He cursed it. That was a picture of Israel, God's supposed people in Jesus' day, they were taking up space, there was a visible presence, but there was a lack of fruit, life. That can be the way the church is, that can be the way our lives are.

We need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Listen, if you have got a hunger for reality, you cannot circumvent the Holy Spirit, you cannot bypass the Spirit and the things of the Spirit, you cannot appendix it on to your Christian experience. It is the answer to those who are hungering for reality: you've got to - yes, experience the love of God as we saw last time, you've got to be aware and have a revelation of the reckless love of Christ, but you've also got to be wrecked by love - but once that happens at the cross and you understand the revelation of God's heart, you need then to be filled, endued, immersed, overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit; empowered by Him; unctonised by Him.

So I want to emphasise to you tonight that the power of the Holy Spirit is a non-negotiable. I'm not saying that your particular slant on your theology of the Holy Spirit, or mine, is a fundamental; but I am saying that we've got to all be able to confess, whatever creed we rhyme off, 'I believe in the Holy Ghost'. We've got to be able to say that, because that is Christianity. We've also got to recognise that - and this is what I want to establish tonight - that the power and presence and Person of the Holy Spirit is a necessity in each of our lives. So tonight we read from Acts chapter 1 verse 4: 'Being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which', He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit'.

'This is the Promise of the Father', Jesus says, 'which you have heard from Me'. 'Being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart' - in other words, He said to them: 'Listen you guys, and girls, don't lift a finger!'. You remember the Great Commission in Matthew 28, you've got it in [Mark] 16 and various other places: 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel, and I will be with you' - but that was at the end of the Gospels, but here at the beginning of Acts we're given further insight. Jesus is saying: 'Ah, yes, I've told you to go and preach the Good News to every creature, and to make disciples of nations, but you've got to understand that you're not a lift a finger, don't do anything until you get the power that I have promised and the Father has promised'. Now, of course, this is reiterated in the Gospels. Luke chapter 24 verse 49, where Jesus says: 'Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high' - 'You've got to wait on this, this Promise of the Father that You have heard from Me'. So it's necessary.

I want you to turn with me (keep a marker there in Acts, we'll be going back), but I want you to come to John 16 to see what Jesus is talking about when He speaks of 'the Promise of the Father which you have heard of Me'. John 16 verse 7: 'Nevertheless', Jesus says, 'I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you'. I don't know about you, but when I was a kid reading Bible storybooks - I still occasionally read them because I like the pictures, they kind of bring things to life - but I remember reading and thinking: 'Wouldn't it have been amazing to be alive when Jesus was here?'. Yes? Has anybody ever thought that? Wouldn't it be marvellous to have been there and seen the feeding of the 5000, see Him walking on water, see the great miracles that He did and all the rest? Well, the answer to that, now I know, is: no! It wouldn't have been great! 'What do you mean?'. Well, what I mean is, the inference in that assumption is that if we were around when Jesus was around it would be better than it is today, it would be advantageous. But in fact, what Jesus says is

contrary to that: 'It's advantageous that I go, it is to your advantage, it's necessary that I go; because if I don't go, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, the Strengthener cannot come'.

Now, we need to ask the question: how, possibly, could it be to our advantage, Jesus leaving? Well, Jesus says it is to your advantage because the Encourager - who needs a bit of encouragement? All of us! The Strengthener - who needs more strength? Yes! The Helper - yes! The Comforter - I'll have a bit of that as well! 'He can't come unless I go'. So, this is the Promise of the Father that we heard from Jesus. The old English Bibles call Him 'The Comforter', which is an old English word which has really lost its meaning to a large extent - we think of a comforter as a baby having some kind of towel or a dummy that they suck, or of comfort as being patted on the back, and somebody saying 'There, there, it'll be all right'. The old English word is made up of two Latin words 'com fortis', which means 'with strength'. So the idea, as someone has put it, it's not like a lullaby for the fainthearted; what Jesus is speaking of is more like a blood transfusion for the courageous. It's not 'There, there, all your troubles will go away and you'll be alright', it's rather 'There is a fight ahead, there's a battle, there are trials that you're going through, but I'm going to send the Holy Spirit to give you like a blood transfusion of supernatural strength for you to get through!'

Go back a couple of chapters, and we see more of what Jesus told was the Promise of the Father. Verse 16 of John 14, I'm skipping over a whole lot of scriptures because we haven't the time tonight, but in verse 16 of chapter 14 Jesus says: 'I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you'. Now let me explain something to you - I remember hearing John Stott say this, actually in the flesh, he was preaching in the Crescent Church. He said: 'Christ's ministry on earth was local and external' - alright? In other words, He was in the geographical locality of Galilee and Judaea, and largely in His whole life He didn't really go outside there. His ministry not only was local, but it was external. I know He was affecting the hearts of men and women, but He was doing a lot touching the body and so on - miracles in the physical realm. But when the Holy Spirit came, the ministry of Christ became universal and internal. So to look at that verse 17 again of John 14, Jesus speaks to the disciples and says: 'He', the Holy Spirit, 'dwells with you'. So the Holy Spirit was already with them. Later on in John 21 we see He breathes on them and says: 'Receive the Holy Spirit' - but Pentecost had not yet come. But when Pentecost would come, look at the end of verse 17, 'He will be in you'. 'He dwells with you now, but He will be in you. I will not leave you orphans, or comfortless, I will' - future tense - 'I will come to you'.

Now, we've got to understand that there is a difference between how the Holy Spirit works in the Old Testament, how the Holy Spirit worked in the Gospels, and how the Holy Spirit works with believers now after Pentecost. A lot of Christians don't understand that, the church often does not understand that. So they are still relating to the Holy Spirit in the way the Old Testament saints did, or even the disciples in the Gospels did - but it's different than that. Let me explain why: one of the fundamental reasons that Jesus died, rose again, and ascended to heaven was so that we could experience the Holy Spirit not just with us, but dwelling in us. Look at the same chapter, 14 and verse 12 - wow! This is an amazing verse! I'm still trying to get my head and heart round this one. Jesus says: 'Most assuredly, I say to you, he who

believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father'. Now we'll just shelve that one for another day, OK? I mean, it's incredible, and you can't explain that away, He says: 'You will do the works that I do, and greater works'. Now you work that out, and when you have the answer you come back and tell me. I think it just means what it says, I think that's what it means, yes? What it says, that's what most of the Bible means - in fact, all of the Bible, I think, means what it says, yes? We can agree on that?

But this is what I want you to see: 'Greater works than these shall he do, because I go to My Father', Jesus says. He dies, He rises again, but He ascends to heaven - and because of His death, resurrection, and ascension, the Holy Spirit gets poured out so that we can do greater works - that's the connection that is often missed. In fact, if you look down at verse 28 of chapter 14: 'You have heard Me say to you, 'I am going away and coming back to you'. If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, 'I am going to the Father', for My Father is greater than I'. So the disciples had their jaw hit the ground, they were downcast at the thought of Jesus now leaving us, 'We've just got used to Him, we're just starting to understand Him after three and a half years, and now He says He's going to go!'. But what is He saying? 'It is to your advantage that I go, in fact you should rejoice that I am telling you that I go to My Father'. Why should you rejoice? 'Because by Me going, the Holy Spirit comes'.

In John 7, if you care to turn back there, this logistical manoeuvre, if you like, of Jesus going to heaven and the Spirit coming is also reiterated. Verse 37, these very well-known verses: 'On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water''. We love that, and it's marvellous, but we often miss verse 39: 'This He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive' - so they were believing in Him, like Old Testament saints believed in Him these Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) disciples were believing in Him, but they would receive the Holy Spirit, who was not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified. Do you see the connection again? Rivers of living water coming out of our hearts, but the Holy Spirit was not yet given because Jesus was not yet - what? Dead? No, that's inferred. Risen again? That's inferred as well. But He was not yet glorified, He had not yet gone into heaven and, in His glorified state, fulfilled every requirement of Father God so that the Promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit, could be outpoured.

This truth was the basis of the apostolic message that was preached in the book of Acts, and indeed on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. Here it is, this is Peter preaching on the birthday of the church when the Holy Spirit was poured out: 'This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear'. I love those verses! There is the Divine mind in what is actually going on, when Jesus dies - yes, for our sins - rises again for our justification, but He ascends to heaven in order that the Holy Spirit would be poured out. This is God's great promise. This is the great Promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit. I think it was R.A. Torrey who said this is the greatest promise of God ever, the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if you would you go home tonight - I'm not advising you necessarily to do this, I have done it - but if you were to go home and Google the most important

person in the world, it's very interesting who comes up - but the most important Person in the world is the Holy Spirit. Jesus, in bodily form, has left. He is here by His Spirit, and it is the Spirit of God who brings the Father and the Son to us. He is the most important Person on the earth - and can I add something to that for you as a Christian: He is the person in the Godhead who you are most directly to be related to as a child of God. God is your Father, and I have touched on the Father Heart of God many times here, and it has revolutionised my life. Jesus is our Saviour and our Lord, OK, He is the one who died for us and was buried and rose again - but you understand that it is the Holy Spirit of God who has been sent to apply the reality of a relationship with the Father and the Son to all of our experiences. So, how much do you know Him? How is your ongoing relationship with Him? Why continue on in the flesh? Remember a few years ago, some of you were here, maybe it was two years ago, we looked at Jacob? You remember how he was always trying to do right things, with the wrong motive, with the wrong energy - the energy of the flesh rather than that of the Spirit?

So, back to Acts 1 verse 8, it says: 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'. This is actually a blueprint, Jesus was giving them a blueprint of how the Gospel would impact the world. It is outworked in the opening chapters of the book of Acts right through into chapter 10 and chapter 16. Now I want you to see this tonight, and this is vitally important, chapter 2 and verse 5, look - the Day of Pentecost: 'There were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven' - and you know what happened. The Holy Spirit is outpoured in the Upper Room, the disciples are flushed out, but that is Jerusalem and Judea - that's the fulfilment of Acts 1 verse 8. They are pushed out onto the street, and people hear in their own language these Jews that have come for the Feast of Pentecost, and so this is the fulfilment of the Holy Spirit coming to the Jews. But then you see if you go into chapter 8, and we're not going to read it, chapter 8 we see that Samaria receives the Holy Spirit. So there is a revival, Philip was preaching and the Holy Spirit comes upon the Samaritans. Then we go to chapter 10, and we are in Cornelius' house, Peter receives a vision and he has to go over, and there is a whole issue between the Jew and Gentile, and then the Holy Spirit comes down upon those Italians, and the Roman centurion Cornelius and his whole household - the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentiles. Now, there is the progression of Acts 1:8, are you following? Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world - it's being fulfilled. Now note please that all the Holy Spirit was not poured out on the day of Pentecost, that's Acts chapter 2, so that's a myth to say that it happened on the Day of Pentecost and it's over - Scripture clearly contradicts that, chapter 8, chapter 10, OK?

But come with me now to chapter 19, and we are going to read this. This is a group of - they are called disciples - and they are Ephesians. Look at verse 1: 'And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples' - note that word - 'he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'. So they said to him, 'We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit''. Oh, they're some disciples, aren't they? 'Holy Spirit? What's that? Who is that?'. 'And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptized?'. So they said, 'Into John's baptism'. Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus'. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.

Now the men were about twelve in all'. I think that's very interesting, that there are twelve of them, like the twelve disciples in the Gospels. They are called 'disciples', it says that they believed - what did they believe? They believed the preaching of John. What was the preaching of John? That you should believe on the One who would come after him, that was Jesus Christ, so they believed on Jesus Christ.

Now this is a tricky passage, OK? I'm going to grant that to you, it's difficult because there is a great debate over 'Are these fully fledged Christians or are they not?'. Were these disciples of John the Baptist who just didn't really get there to believe in Jesus, although it says they were believers in what John preached - it is obvious that Paul baptises them in water, into Jesus, in other words they are being identified with Jesus now - so, OK, jury is out, I think they were believers. But here's my point: even if they weren't believers, truly fully fledged believers, if the Holy Spirit had been completely poured out on the Day of Pentecost (which we know isn't the case, but let's grant you Acts 1:8 that this happened, He was poured out on Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth, period, all done and dusted in Acts 10) what is going on here if these believers were held behind, or these disciples of John the Baptist, and all that needed to happen was, Paul says, 'Now, trust Jesus Christ as your Saviour, we will baptise you, job done, you'll get the Holy Spirit and all you need when you get converted into Jesus'. Is that what happened? It's plainly not what happened. He baptised them into Jesus, we assume that they believed the fullness of the Gospel, but what did he do then? He laid hands on them and prayed that they would receive the Holy Spirit, and then they spoke in tongues and there was a witness.

Now, that is a big problem for anybody who believes that the Holy Spirit was just poured out in Acts 2, or even right up to Acts 10, and that's it, done. Because here were twelve Ephesian disciples that got stuck, or were held back in some way, and they had to receive the Holy Spirit - hands had to be laid upon them. Now that's not always the way it happened, but that's the way it happened here. Paul looked at them and saw that there was something deficient in their lives. I wonder, as we look at your life tonight, or as you look at your life, do you have to say that there is something missing, something not right? Some of you would have to go as far as to say: 'I hardly even know if there is a Holy Spirit, because I have such a lack of experience of Him in my life, in my Christianity'.

If you go back with me to Acts chapter 2, another point that we need to consider is that it says in verse 17: 'It shall come to pass', quoting Joel 2, 'in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh'. In the last days I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh - now, has that happened yet? Answer me, has that happened yet? Has God's Spirit been poured out upon all flesh? No. We are in the last days, we might even be in the last of the last days, but the Spirit of God has not been poured out on all flesh yet because all flesh have not heard the Gospel and come to Christ. Now there are other end time events, if you read down verse 17: 'that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapour of smoke' etc, etc. So there are other end time aspects of prophecy that have still to be fulfilled, they are unfulfilled in this passage - a fulfilment of Joel 2. But likewise, the outpouring of the Spirit has yet been unfulfilled to completion. That's why, if you look down at verse 39, look at verse 39: 'For the promise is to you and to

your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call'. The point of what Peter is saying there in the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy is not afar off in the distance, in the sense of logistical, geographical distance, but afar off in the distance of lineage in world history. So he's not talking about geography, he's talking about history, future tense - that this promise is for you, your children, and all your succeeding generations. This outpouring of the Spirit is going to happen right throughout world history until Jesus Christ comes.

So I want you to understand - and there needs to be a renewal in the mind and a complete shift in our thinking, to stop thinking of Pentecost as a once-for-all event, Acts 2, Acts 8, Acts 10, or even Acts 19; but understand that it is an ongoing thing in its nature. The Spirit is being poured out, continues to be poured out. You see this in relation to the gifts of the Spirit, if you turn with me to 1 Corinthians 13. We can't go into this in any depth, but 1 Corinthians 13, and this is the great love passage, and we begin our reading just at verse 8: 'Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love'.

Now I was taught, wrongly, that 'when that which is perfect has come' speaks of the Bible; and whenever we get a finished canon of Scripture we will not need prophetic utterances, we will not need the gift of tongues, etc, these gifts of the Spirit cease. But we aren't perfect yet, are we? It says 'when that which is perfect has come', 'when we know as we are known', 'when we no longer see through a glass darkly', what is it talking about? Is it talking about the canon of Scripture? No! The canon of Scripture isn't even mentioned in this passage of Scripture! It's not in the context at all! What is 'that which is perfect has come'? Well, listen, this is a wee tip for you when you want to know answers to difficult questions in books of the Bible: often the answer is in that actual book, in that specific book. So go to chapter 1, that would be a good place to start in the book of 1 Corinthians, go to chapter 1 for a moment quickly, and the answer is here. Look at verse 4: 'I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by Him' - now, notice this term - 'in all utterance and all knowledge'. Now, what is 'utterance'? It is the vocal gifts of the Spirit, tongues, prophecy, words of wisdom and so on. 'You were gifted in all utterance and all knowledge' - what's that? Words of knowledge, words of prophecy as well - so they are expressed through the mouth, but they also come through a supernatural knowledge. He's speaking about spiritual gifts, verse 6: 'Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you', watch verse 7, 'so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

He's saying to this very charismatic church, who were abusing spiritual gifts, it has to be said, in Corinth; he says to them: 'I know that you're greatly gifted in utterance and knowledge, but I am praying that you will not be held back or come behind in any gift until Jesus comes again'. What is 'when that which is perfect has come'? Jesus, the eternal state, it's obvious - but this shows us that it was always God's intention that the church should never be deficient in any of the Holy Spirit's giftings until Jesus

comes again. Now, I know this is a huge subject, and I'm only skirting around the edges tonight - but this is an explanation for so many of the exhortations in Scripture to Spirit-filled living. The Holy Spirit hasn't changed, He hasn't gone away you know, He is still here and He is still the same, and He's still got the power that He always had. So we see this with the gifts of the Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit are outlined in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, and some other places. But I don't know what you've been taught, I know what I was taught, but rather than the scriptures somehow subliminally telling us these things aren't that important really, on the contrary it exhorts us to pursue spiritual gifts. 'Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy', 1 Corinthians 14:39-40, desire to prophesy, 'and do not forbid to speak with tongues'. I don't know what you were taught about the gift of tongues, I know what I was taught - but that's the last word that Paul says about tongues, don't forbid it. A lot of our churches make a point out of forbidding it. 'Let all things be done decently and in order'. A lot of us really come down hard on that one, 'Oh yes, we believe in decency and in order' - like the order of a cemetery - but what does it say? 'Let all things be done decently and in order'. This is coming at the conclusion of a chapter - 12, 13, three chapters, 14 - expressing to the Corinthian church how spiritual gifts should be exercised. So the things that should be done decently and in order is not the prayer, announcement, hymn, sermon sandwich, but it's all these things, these spiritual charisma, these gifts.

Are you getting it? We are to desire it. In fact, verse 1 of chapter 14 says: 'Desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy'. Now don't forget that 1 Corinthians was written not to an individual, but was written to a church. Some of you might be here tonight and think: 'Well, I'm not against these things, I used to be, but I'm not against these things'. I don't know if you're in leadership in a church, but that is not a place that you can comfortably stay - I don't mean your church, what I mean is that position that 'I'm not against these things' - you are exhorted to pursue them and pursue them earnestly! To desire them and go after them! That's Scripture.

Another scripture, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22: 'Do not quench the Spirit', do not pour cold water on the Spirit. What would happen if there was an outbreak of Holy Spirit power tomorrow morning in some of our meetings? There would be heart attacks, wouldn't there? I mean honestly, if the way it happened in the book of Acts, or the way it happened in revivals - let's imagine, somebody manifests demonically in the front of the church, or somebody gets healed, and you see it, you actually see it. You think, 'Oh, that would be great!' - do you think? Do you think that wouldn't cause a problem in some of our circles? I'm telling you, it would. In the Bible sometimes people said to Jesus: 'Leave us, go away from us, we can't handle this'. It says in the book of Acts, 'Great fear came upon them all'.

I'm digressing, 'Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies'. Right? So here is balance, don't despise people who prophecy. Don't take everything gullibly either, because you need to test all things, hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil. So here we are seeing biblical balance. You see, the church at Corinth was one of the most abusive churches concerning spiritual gifts, and if ever there was a case for Paul the apostle to come in and say: 'Knock that nonsense on the head, all you need is your Bible, it was to Corinth, but he didn't do it. He encouraged them, he gave them guidelines - and the balance is: don't accept everything that somebody says is the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit, but test things, keep what is good and get rid of the rubbish - that's to the church, that's what we are meant to do. But how do we do that if we

prohibit the gifts of the Holy Spirit? Rather than prohibition, what Paul gives is prescription, he tells us how to regulate it.

But it's not just the gifts of the Spirit, there is the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - the fruit of the Spirit. Now people say: 'Oh, the fruit of the Spirit is much more important than the gifts of the Spirit' - that's not true, that is not true. They are both equally important. It's not either-or, it's both-and. Paul says in Galatians 5:16: 'Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfil the lust of the flesh', OK? These are the fruit of the Spirit, all these virtues, but post-Pentecost, after the Day of Pentecost the Shekinah glory of God - that Shekinah glory that was revealed in the Garden of Eden that had to be shut away from mankind after his sin, but then manifested itself again in the Tabernacle over the Ark of the Covenant; they saw it at night in the Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Cloud by day; then it was localised more permanently in the Temple in Jerusalem; then it was incarnate in our Lord Jesus Christ, His glory was veiled in human flesh - but at Pentecost, that Shekinah glory of God came to be outpoured upon the church, a temple not made with hands, stones that are people's lives, living beings put together as a temple: 'Do you not know that you are the Temple of the Holy Spirit?'. But listen, how is that Shekinah glory manifested in the church? It's manifested through the gifts of the Spirit and through the fruit of the Spirit.

That's how we see God's presence, God's gifts display His power, God's fruit, the fruit of the Spirit, display His personality. Gifts are power, fruit personality. Gifts, divine communication, how God often speaks to us and instructs us; fruit, divine character, His nature comes through. Now all of this is teaching us something, what is it teaching us? Christianity is a supernatural thing! It's not going to church, it's not adhering to a creed alone, it's a supernatural way of life - in fact, it's not our life at all, but it's God's life. In Galatians 2 verse 20 Paul says: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me'. It's not my life any more, it's the life of Jesus. I have died with Christ. You see, the only way to live is dead to ourselves and sin, and alive to God. We've got to understand: Jesus died so that you would die. He is not interested, in one sense, in making your life better, He's interested in ending your life as you have known it up to now! Because really, that's a life of sin, that's a life of self, and He has put that to death on the cross, and when He rose out of the grave He has given you life - so it's time for some of us to die. You see, some of us want a Spirit-filled life, but we also want a sin-filled life - that's true. It doesn't work. Sorry, that's not the deal, it can't work - because Jesus died so that you would die, your sinful nature would die, your self-centredness would die.

The only way to live is to have His power and His character, and the tragedy is: we have divorced ourselves from the supernatural power source of the Holy Spirit - some of us collectively, as groups of Christians, and individually in our own personal walk. The church of Galatia - we don't have time to go into this in much depth, but the church of Galatia began to live in the flesh. The Bible says, Paul writes to them and says: 'You're multiplying the works of the flesh because you're living in the flesh. You bite and devour one another, you're arguing with one another, you're tearing shreds off one another because you're living in the flesh'. He lists for them (you can look at it at home in Galatians 5 verses 19 through to 21), he lists the works of the flesh, the manifest behaviours and tendencies that come out of our sinful nature when we are living in the flesh. Now these were goody-two-shoes Christians, they were naming the

name of Christ, but they were not living in the power of the Spirit. They were living by law, they were living by Judaism - that is not Christianity! Listen to Romans chapter 8 verses 2 through to 4: 'For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death'. I am free from the law of sin in me, but I am also free from the law of Moses which multiplies and aggravates sin. I've got another law, it is the law of the Spirit of life. The law of Moses is the law of death, but Jesus' law of the Spirit is the law of life. 'For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit'.

What does that mean? There's nothing wrong with God's law, it's holy, the Commandments are still true, the problem is me - I am weak according to the flesh, I can't keep it. This is a Divine problem, so He sends His Perfect Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to die, bearing the penalty of the law, so that His great justice can be satisfied, so that Jesus can come alive again, go to heaven, ascend glorified, pour out gifts among men, so that I could live His life. Can I tell you: that is Christianity. I don't know what you're living, but that is Christianity, that is the crucified life: where you die to sin and to yourself, but understand - and we celebrate the cross of Jesus, and rightly so - but the cross of Jesus deals with our sin, it is the resurrection of Jesus that gives us life. Some Christians are living the crucified life very well, and that's why they look like the walking dead - I'm serious. But we are meant to be living the risen life, having died we are now alive with Jesus in resurrection power, and as He ascended on high He has made it possible for the Holy Spirit to come and enter and possess us completely - that is Christianity! That is why there is an emphatic command in Ephesians 5 verse 18: 'Be filled with the Holy Spirit'. You can't get out of that one! I don't care what your doctrine is, but that is an emphatic command, and it is also in the present-continuous tense which means: 'Be continually being filled by the Holy Spirit'. It's also in the passive mood, do you know what that means? You let the Holy Spirit do it to you, OK? It's a command, so you've got to come by faith and get what God is giving, but He is the One who does it - but it is to be on a continual basis, because that's Christianity.

Now, right away - and this is not prophetic - many will be having ingrained objections to what I'm preaching, OK? For some of you there are questions rising right away from what has been implanted in your psyche or in your spirit through teaching, wrong teaching, bad teaching. There could be confusion - I create that sometimes. I don't know what your questions are tonight. You've heard me say here that one of the greatest master strokes of the enemy is to make us afraid of the Spirit of God, yes? When Scripture teaches contrary, as we will see in a few moments in Luke 11. Another great strategy of the enemy is to get us to argue over theological terminology, OK? So you might be sitting here and thinking: 'He's talking about the baptism of the Spirit', or 'He's talking about second blessing', or 'He's talking about holiness teaching', or 'He's talking about Pentecostal or charismatic theology', OK? What I'm talking about probably would fit into those categories, but it would also fit in with Spurgeon's category, and R.A. Torrey's category, and D.L. Moody's category, and a lot of other people - OK? But this is where we flounder, this is often where we are offended and we stumble, these are the stumbling blocks of theological argumentation. This came into my imagination as I was contemplating this this week: imagine a young boy who is dying for the lack of oxygen, OK? The ambulance comes on the scene and there are two paramedics, and they begin to argue with one another. One says: 'Look, this is

what this boy needs, he needs the colourless, odourless, reactive gas, the life supporting component of air'. The other one says: 'No, I'm sorry, I must disagree with you there, that is not what he needs, what he needs is the chemical element of the atomic number number 8, O2'. Do you know what they're talking about? They're talking about the same thing, they're talking about oxygen. You see, oxygen is a big deal, a really big deal, isn't it, when there is a patient dying? Can I say to you tonight: the Holy Spirit, I say it reverently, is a big deal. We cannot do without the Holy Spirit. We ought not to do without the Holy Spirit. While these paramedics are arguing, meanwhile the patient dies - the church dies without the lifeblood and the oxygen of the Holy Spirit, that's why we're preaching to people in coffins in the pews. Often we are hastening the death by what we are preaching. The church is dying for the lack of the Holy Spirit.

I want to ask you personally: what about you? Because we are the church, we are these living stones that collectively make up the body, and I'm asking you - like Acts 19: what do you know about the Holy Spirit? How do you interact with the Holy Spirit on a daily basis? Did you receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit when you believed? It could happen when you believed. You see, what we need is the complete New Covenant experience of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Do you know the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant? I know this is maybe over some people's heads - the Old Covenant is the Old Testament, everything to do with the Old Testament. You know there is a difference between the Old and New Covenant, don't you? The Old and New Testament we might say. I mean, for instance, take the atonement. You know that we don't need to go around killing lambs and bulls and goats, and ripping pigeons apart and all sorts of things, you don't need to be doing that any more - why? Because Jesus died, the New Covenant is in His blood. Well, is it not the case with the Spirit of God? That there is something new with the New Covenant, that He relates to us differently in the Old Testament. He is not just with us, He doesn't just come upon us, He comes to indwell us - He still comes upon us, but He comes to indwell us, He stays with us and He does stuff that He never ever did before because it's a New Covenant.

John the Baptist said: 'I baptise you with water, but He who comes after me will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'. Jesus Himself said: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled'. So my question to you tonight is: have you been set on fire? I don't care about your terminology tonight, I don't care! You can object with me, and you can say: 'Oh, I received the Holy Spirit when I was converted'. I'm not asking you that, I'm asking you: are you on fire? Are you on fire, having been immersed by the power of God's Spirit? Because the early Christians were, the revival Christians were.

Can I share with you my story? I was saved when I was about eight years of age, and I do believe - as Romans chapter 8 verse 9 says - that if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His. So I do believe you can't be born again without the Holy Spirit, when you're born again we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, He is that eternal life that we receive when we become true Christians, OK? But that's not what we're talking about here, and I always knew that there was more than just being born again, there was more to this Christianity. It might surprise you, but very young in my life I was reading about revivals, I was reading all sorts of stuff I will not go into tonight - but I got the sense that the Acts of the Apostles, well, I have it written at the end of the Acts of the Apostles actually in my Bible 'To be continued...'. It's not the

end, it's meant to go on, and I saw these flashes of the Acts of the Apostles, or the Acts of the Holy Spirit it would be better put, right throughout Christian history - alright? - where God poured out His Spirit in a very special way. Many of the people who were involved, in fact I would probably say that all of the people who were involved in those movements believed that there were current experiences of the Holy Spirit that we could have. Some called it 'baptism of the Holy Spirit', some called it 'fullness', some called it 'perfect love', Wesley and so on, 'entire sanctification', different terms that they may have had - but I believed there was more. I came and asked God by faith to do this, even throughout my years as a pastor I was doing this, and I believe God heard me. I took it by faith, I believe He heard me, and I also believe that there was some evidence that He had heard me - but the problem was, I was not sure, I was not 100% sure that the Lord had filled me. If you had asked me: 'David, are you filled with the Holy Spirit?', I would have said, 'Well, I asked Him, and I believe He has heard me, and I see some evidence', but I wouldn't have really been convinced.

Can I just share with you, I'm not going into all the personal details of this, but can I just share with you one of the major issues that I had, which was a problem that I didn't realise. I had relegated certain works of the Holy Spirit to history, I had done that in my theology. Now I believed that God could do whatever He liked, OK? So I believed that He could show up with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but it would usually be in the back end of the jungle, not around here - if He had to do it, that's where He would do it. You see the crazies that are claiming these things around here, it's nonsense! That was my position, and I preached it. Well, I needed to realise that it's very rude to invite a person to your home, and then refuse their gifts. Imagine doing that at Christmas, it would be very rude, wouldn't it? So I was inviting the Holy Spirit into my life, but I was saying: 'I don't want all that stuff'. Do you know what that really was? It was unbelief. I believe that I grieved the Holy Spirit - He's very gracious you know, He didn't hold it against me - I grieved the Holy Spirit. Eventually, long story short, I repented, and after a lot of repentance - and I'm still probably in that phase - I then had many witnesses that the Holy Spirit did come and had come, but I needed the witnesses. You look in the Acts of the Apostles and there were always witnesses, different witnesses at times, but there was always witness. I try as much as possible not to defend myself when people criticise me, which happens every now and again, but people say I'm preaching 'second blessing', and I'm not - because I believe the whole Christian life is a myriad of blessings, not blessing number two, but millions of blessings, millions of God encounters, every day of my life is a God encounter when I meet with the Lord, when the Holy Spirit comes and ministers to me. It is witness, after witness, after witness.

So what I'm trying to say to you is: you can have an assent, a theological, cerebral belief in the Holy Spirit in some way, but I'm asking you personally tonight - have you had your own personal Pentecost? You needed personally to come to Calvary and bow the knee, didn't you? You needed to enter through the gate yourself, isn't that right? That's what you believe, personal individual faith and repentance in Jesus Christ. Well, it's the same with the Holy Spirit. You need to have your personal Pentecost, you need to come and receive - have received since you believed? Luke 11:10-13, this is in the New Living Translation: 'Everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds', Jesus says, 'to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. You fathers - if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not!'. That's addressing the fear issue. If you're in

bondage, and I believe there are folk here and you've grown up in churches that have preached against this stuff, and you've been inoculated against it like I was, and you have been made to be afraid of the Holy Spirit so that you're terrified to come and say: 'Come, Holy Spirit', in case you get a demon! That's from hell, that's from the demonic, and you need to rebuke that tonight, you need to repent of it because Jesus says the contrary. Can you pick up things in places that are supposed to be the Holy Spirit that are not of God? Of course you can, but not if you come to Father in the name of Jesus, He's not going to give you anything to hurt you. Read on: 'So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children', if you would never do that, 'how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him'.

Well, do you want to pray to receive the Holy Spirit? Don't please get hung up on my words, 'receive the Holy Spirit', 'Oh, I have the Holy Spirit' - look, you know what I'm talking about, don't you? Let's not hair-split on words. You've got the Holy Spirit if you're a Christian, we're talking about being filled, being submerged, being completely drenched in the Holy Spirit, completely unctionised. The Holy Spirit is in you for your sake, but He comes on you, over you for the sake of others. That's why, in Acts chapter 1 verse 8, it says: 'When he has come on you' - Jesus had already breathed the Holy Spirit over them and said 'Peace be unto you', but it was necessary that they were endued with power from on high to go out and spread the Gospel, that's what we're talking about. Do you want these rivers of living water? Rivers of living water don't dam up within you, that's the Dead Sea, where there is an inlet and no outlet. This is for others! This is so it will spread out and cover the whole world, that's what happened at Pentecost in the Upper Room. Scared to death, and the Holy Spirit comes and they are flushed out into the street and into the marketplace! This is so it will touch others!

Who is ready for this? Amen - I didn't ask you to put your hand up, but they're putting their hands up, it's great, isn't it? You see, who is hungry, hunger for reality? Come on! If you have a hunger for reality, you need the Holy Spirit. He is the ultimate reality, He is the Vicar of Christ on earth, He is the one who makes God real and brings God into our reality - which is usually not reality at all, it is an illusion. Remember last time we talked about virtual reality, He is the reality! So are you ready? I haven't finished preaching, but I want you to pray this now if you're ready, it's a very simple prayer: 'Dear Lord Jesus, we want to obey what You said. We come before You to ask for the Holy Spirit to fill this place and each waiting heart. We come to You thirsty and tired, we are empty' - who can identify with that? - 'we are empty, please pour out Your Spirit into us. Refresh us, renew us, ready to love You and serve You'. Can you pray this from your heart? Some of your hearts were closed before you came here, some of your hearts may have closed down from what you have heard tonight, I don't know. Please, God is speaking tonight, will you open your heart, and would you say: 'Lord, please'.

Now you might need to forgive some people for this to be more effective, you might need to confess your sins if you're not being straight with the Lord - He is the Holy Spirit. But some of you need the Holy Spirit to overcome your sins. You see, this is the problem, some of the teaching that is out there would teach us that we nearly need to become as holy as the Holy Spirit before we get the Holy Spirit. Sure, that can't be, we need the Holy Spirit to be holy - but you've got to be willing, you've got to be repentant, you've got to be surrendered. Will you pray this with me? Let's pray it together: 'Dear Lord Jesus, we want to obey what You said. We come before You to

ask for the Holy Spirit to fill this place and each waiting heart'. Let's pause for a moment, just for a moment. Yes, Holy Spirit, we ask You to fill this place and each waiting heart. Let's continue: 'We come to You thirsty and tired, we are empty, please pour out Your Spirit into us. Refresh us, renew us, ready to love You and serve You. Amen'.

Let me share something with you before I close, in John 1:33 John the Baptist said: 'I did not know Him', Jesus, 'but He who sent me to baptise with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptises with the Holy Spirit'. You see, if you want the Holy Spirit to remain on you, you need to be like Jesus. You see, the Dove remained on Jesus in that moment. A dove is a very sensitive creature. You see, maybe you're grieving the Holy Spirit, you're quenching the Spirit, you're sinning against the Spirit - isn't it interesting that when Jesus received His baptism of water, and I'm going to use the term 'baptism of Spirit', it was a Dove that came down upon Him. By the way, if Jesus needed it, I think you do - but anyway, it was a Dove. But when the Holy Spirit baptised the early disciples, what was it that came upon their heads? It was fire. Why? Because Jesus had purity, the disciples needed to be purged. What I want you further to see is this, John 14:16, this is what Jesus now promises us: 'I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever'. Now that word 'abide' is the word 'remain', in Greek it's 'meno', it's the exact same word as here in chapter 1:33. Just as the Spirit, the Dove, came down and remained upon Jesus, Jesus is saying: 'If you abide in Me, if My word abide in you, the Spirit will remain upon you' - wow! Is that not incredible? So I want to ask you tonight: are you ready? Are you ready?

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Hunger For Reality - Chapter 3

"Exuberant Joy"

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by David Legge

Tonight we're looking at 'Exuberant Joy'. This is the third one - I thought we had done more than that, but we haven't. So, 'Exuberant Joy', where are we going to go with this? We're going to pray first of all, and we're going to ask the Lord to come and meet with us. So I want you to pray for yourself right now, would you do that, that God would speak to you? We're not here just to do a Bible study, or to go through the ritual of the hymn-prayer sandwich or chorus-prayer sandwich, we want to encounter God. I don't want to be just going through the motions of church, we want to meet the Living God and know His touch upon our lives. So I hope you're in that position, are you? Do you want that? Well, if you want it, express that, rise up in your spirit now to God in prayer and ask Him to come and meet with you. As I lead you in prayer, would you enter in yourself before God and ask Him to come and meet with you tonight, and all of us together?

Father, we thank You for Your grace. We thank You that You're the God of all grace, and the Father of mercies, and the comforting God. We thank You, Lord, that through Jesus You have revealed Yourself to us as a God of unmerited favour and unconditional love. We thank You that so many in this gathering, even tonight, have experienced a baptism of the love of the Living God. Yet there are those who haven't, there are those who - and all of us to a degree are in this category - have not entered into the fullness of the blessing of the Gospel of Christ. We long to do that, Lord, no matter how deep we have been in so far, Lord, we want to go deeper. Whatever we have known of You, we know there is always more - because we cannot exhaust the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God. You're unsearchable, past finding out, and we know that Your love is a four-dimensional love: height, depth, breadth, and length - it's beyond our conception, and we cannot contain it within our intellect, let alone our emotions. Yet, Lord, we want to be lost in that love. In this experience of salvation, we want to be - as Ezekiel saw that vision - over our heads with the river of blessing:

'O the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
Rolling like a mighty ocean in its fullness over me!
Underneath me, all around me, is the fullness of His love...'

That's what we want, Lord, we want to just go under the surface tonight. We pray that the joy of the Lord will come upon us. We ask, Lord, tonight, please deliver us from talking about stuff that we have no conception or experience of - I ask that for myself and all of us tonight. Lord, we want to experience the joy of the Lord - and, boy, do some of us need that! We pray, Lord, that You will come, You will minister to us tonight in the mighty name of Jesus - and everybody said 'Amen'.

OK, we've two readings first of all - we're looking at several scriptures tonight - but the first Scripture we're looking at is Psalm 16, and the second is Romans 14. So if you want to get both of those ready, that would be great. Psalm 16 and we're only going to read one verse there, and then Romans 14 one verse also. OK, Psalm 16, wonderful

Psalm worthy of more attention than we're going to give it tonight - but verse 11, for our purposes: *"You will show me the path of life; in Your presence"*, God, *"is fullness of joy"* - say that with me 'fullness of joy' - *"at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore"*, say that 'pleasures forevermore'. Isn't that incredible? Fullness of joy, who would like some of that? And pleasures forevermore - wow!

OK, over to Romans 14 and just one verse, this time verse 17. This is in the context of a deeper subject, but we'll not go into that right now. Verse 17: *"For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking"*, if it was the case some of you would be very religious, isn't that right? But this is the kingdom of God: *"righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"*. Do you know what that means? Joy is one third of the Kingdom of God. There is righteousness, peace, but joy - at least in this verse - is one third.

Now, generally speaking, Christianity has not been known for its joy. Would you agree with me there? Certainly in Ireland, the public face of Christendom has not been happiness. So what is the public perception of our faith? Well, to a lot of people it's probably this - have you seen this before? 'Lips that touch liquor shall not touch ours' - let's face it, who would want to? Just in case you're missing the point, zoom in a little bit, there's a bit of a close-up of some of these dears - but that's often the way religion or Christianity has been perceived, isn't that right? A make-up artist by the name of Rosalind Russell once said 'Joy is a woman's best cosmetic', and it's true, isn't it? Joy is the Christian's best cosmetic - there's nothing like a smile to lighten your face. The fact of the matter is: we tend to sing about joy, we talk about joy, but we don't always convey joy - and we certainly fail in conferring joy upon others.

So you might say that we, as the Christian church, have had some bad PR. We have not communicated a third of the Kingdom of God, which is joy. That has turned a lot of people off Christianity. We've got to be real. The German philosopher - he was a godless philosopher - Frederick Nietzsche, he actually said scornfully about the Christians of his day: 'I would believe in their salvation if they looked a little more like people who had been saved'. Now that is very insightful, when you think about it. It was A.C. Swinburne, the English poet and critic, who pictured Christ as 'a pale Galilean who made the world grow grey at His breath'. That's the picture of Jesus that the atheists of that age were spinning out to the unbelieving world. Now, we know that such a description of Jesus is reprehensible and diabolically false, yet that's how some people perceive our Christ - because of how we have conveyed Him, how we have communicated our faith.

We do have to be honest here - most of us are Christians - we have to ask: is all that without foundation? Of course it's not! It's certainly not how things were meant to be, how God intended it, and how our Lord Jesus Christ - if you care to take time just to analyse His own life and His own words - that is not what He communicated when He came into the world. On the contrary, in John 15 verse 11 Jesus said: 'These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full'. The New Living Translation puts it: 'I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!' - will spill over! So everything that Jesus lived and taught was in order that His joy - and He had a lot of it, as we will see in a moment - would remain in us, and that we would experience it to the point that it would overflow so that others would be touched by it.

Incidentally, that phrase 'your joy may be full' is found four times, all in the writings of

John. The next time we find it is John 16:24: 'Until now you have asked nothing in My name', Jesus said, 'Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full'. I'm tempted to ask you to say that again - you're good at that - 'that your joy may be full'. Then we find it again in 1 John and 2 John. So this was God's intention, and when we think about it: what did Jesus come into the world to do? He came into the world to reveal the Father. Yes? So, what good Father would not want His child to have joy? Jesus had joy, He was the Perfect Son; and the Father and the Son and the Spirit want all of us to experience this joy. So Christianity, and we will see this as we tease through this study tonight, it was meant to be enjoyed not endured. I hope that has been your experience thus far. William Barclay said: 'The Christian is the laughing cavalier of Christ. A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, and nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces'. Amen?

We've seen what culture, popular culture of different eras, has thought about Christianity. We've even touched a little bit, briefly, on what Christianity has communicated erroneously to the world. But what does the Bible actually teach about joy? I'm going to go through several points, you may want to take notes or just get the recording - because I believe this is going to be revolutionary for people here tonight. Christianity is all about exuberant joy. The first thing the Bible teaches us about joy is that God is the Author of joy, it all comes from Him. Joy is attributed to God within Holy Scripture. There are several verses I can point you to, but the one I want you to look at is Zephaniah 3:17: 'The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in his love, He will joy over thee with singing'. It says that God rejoices over us with singing - have you ever pictured God like that? I tend to think of it a bit like a mother singing lullabies over a baby, rejoicing in the child, soothing the child. But actually the word 'rejoice' here in the Hebrew, I'm led to believe - you know Hebrew is quite a pictorial language - it literally means 'to twirl around'. The idea is 'dance', that God rejoices in such a celebration over us that He sings and He dances in delight over us - that's incredible, isn't it?

God was the original singer and dancer. Incidentally, Nietzsche again said: 'I would believe only in a God that knows how to dance'. Well, newsflash, our God knows how to dance over us with singing - we've got Him, the Living God of the Bible! When you go into the New Testament, you find that probably the most known parable of them all, 'the prodigal son' as it's called (I like to call it 'the prodigal God' or 'the prodigal father', it's all about the father - and of course the father was wasteful, that's what 'prodigal' means, it means wasteful, the father was indulgent in his love toward the son, even beyond the laws of Moses that said a rebellious son should have been stoned). He runs out to meet his son, he embraces him, kisses him, he gets a party thrown for him - but what was the punchline of the parable? Indeed, what was the punchline of all the 'lost' parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin? That there is great rejoicing in heaven in the presence of the angels over one sinner that repents. Now you're not going to tell me that the angels are all having a party, and God is just sitting there with a long face? That's what some people try to tell you, 'Oh, it's in the presence of the angels that there is rejoicing' - come off it! In heaven there is great celebration over one sinner who repents. So there is happiness in heaven - perish the thought, imagine that! Who would want to go there? There is happiness there! There is joy!

Now, if we pray: 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven',

we're saying 'As it is in heaven, so let it be on earth' - we ought to expect some joy to be around, wouldn't we? C.S. Lewis said: 'Joy is the serious business of heaven'. Psalm 16 verse 11 that we read at the outset: 'In Your presence there is fullness of joy, and at Your right hand there are pleasures forevermore'. Just in case there is somebody here who is not a Christian - there might be, you're very welcome by the way - you might be searching for pleasure and joy in the most obvious places that this world advertises it to be. OK, in various substances, various extracurricular activities; but you know that whilst there can be a momentary pleasure in those things - and let's not lie, there is pleasure in sin for a season, the Bible says - you do not gain joy, lasting, permanent joy. It is only found in this verse, it's only found with God. But note also, for everybody here, joy is not to be found in the absence of trouble, but in the presence of God. Nobody lives in the absence of trouble - if that's what you're looking for, you're never going to find it. But true joy is found with God, because He is the Author of Joy. Your Heavenly Father, if you're His child tonight, has more joy than anybody you know in the whole wide world. Can I tell you something: He has more joy than you can handle!

So, what does the Bible tell us about joy? God is the Author of joy, secondly: Jesus is a Man of joy. He came to reveal the Father, but let me just pause for a moment - I know I've already sort of hit you between the eyes with this one, but how do you picture Jesus? What picture of Jesus have you inherited? This is an awful picture, isn't it? Now I know we don't know what Jesus looked like, and there is trouble in trying to portray Him - I have never seen Jesus literally, but I'll tell you now: He doesn't look like that. He doesn't look like that, and the reason why I know that is: whoever that is, it's not Jesus, he looks ill. This is what Scripture says, Hebrews 1 verse 9: 'God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness more than Your companions'. Do you know what that means, to paraphrase it? Jesus had more joy than any other human being - that's Scripture. I don't think that's what that looks like, do you? Many portraits, some stained-glass windows, even children's picture books - what have you inherited (and don't tell me you don't have an image of Jesus in your mind, everybody does have some kind of conception of what Jesus was in His human form here on earth), but what have you inherited? One of the things I inherited was, because Isaiah says Jesus was a man of sorrows, that He sort of went about with a cloud over His head all His life; and then that had an overflow into how we worship God. Around the Lord's Table, some had the view that, well, this is like a funeral service because you're remembering the Lord in His death - and it was like a funeral service.

But what does Scripture say? Yes, He was a man of sorrows, that's talking about what He was going to bear on the cross - and it did hang over Him all His life, but it didn't stop Him living in the joy of the Lord! Someone has said that babies learn joy from the lines on their parent's faces as they smile. I don't know if that's true or not, but I know this is true: Jesus learned joy by gazing on the face of His Heavenly Father. There was a stern faced minister who once preached a sermon 'The Tears of Jesus', and he said: 'Three times we read that Jesus wept, but never do we read that He smiled'. A little girl below, forgetting herself, exclaimed: 'Oh, but I know He did!'. Shocked, the minister said: 'Why do you say that my child?'. Frightened, with all the eyes on her, she quietly said: 'Because the Bible says that He called a little child, and he came to Him. If Jesus looked like you, I know the child would have been afraid to come!'. But it's true, isn't it? 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me, do not forbid them, for such is the Kingdom of Heaven', it says He took the little child and He blessed them.

How do you see Jesus? Is that how we imagine Him? Because that's how He was - I'm not saying He was laughing all the time anything like that, but I'm saying that He had more joy than any human being who has ever lived, will ever live. That's saying something! Is this the Jesus you know? What does the Bible teach about joy? God is the Author, Jesus is the Man of joy who came to reveal the Father's heart; and then thirdly: joy is at the heart of the Gospel. The message that we preach, which is Christ, but this message - we read it already, didn't we, Romans 14:17: the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy - joy is one third. But there is a progression here: righteousness first. Now, what is righteousness? It is rightness, or right-relatedness with God. How do we get that? Jesus died, the great exchange, He took our sins on the cross, He was punished, what we deserved He took - why? So that He might exchange our sin for His righteousness. So He gets our sin, we get the righteousness of God in Jesus. He who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

Now, you get that by faith, you don't get that by works. This righteousness, it isn't yours, so you can't work it up. It's somebody else's, it's Jesus' - the only way you can get it is by faith. Have you got that tonight? Just out of interest: have you got the righteousness of God through Jesus by faith? You've got to believe He's the Son of God, believe you can't save yourself, believe you're on your way to hell and you need a Saviour; and you just believe Jesus is the One, and you ask Him to save you. That's simple childlike faith. But listen: some of you here tonight are professing Christians, but you believe you're only a sinner. I think I might have told you before, but just in case I haven't, I hate that hymn: 'I'm only a sinner saved by grace'. Sorry if that offends you, but I hate it - nice tune, some good stuff in it, but you're not only a sinner saved by grace! You see, if you believe you're only a sinner, you will sin by faith - think about that for a moment. I can hear the cogs turning right now. Do you understand what I mean? If you believe you are only a sinner, you will sin by faith, you will behave according to what you believe. But you're righteous, when you realise Christ has made you righteous, and if you know you're righteous - do you know how good Jesus was? I was thinking about this during the week: how good was Jesus? I mean, you don't get any better than Jesus. That's how good you are if, by faith, you're living and abiding in Him - that's wonderful! Do you know what that will do for you? It will give you peace, and it will give you great joy.

This is the Gospel, isn't it? Joy is at the heart of the Gospel. Then it follows on from that, therefore, that joy is an essential ingredient in reaching the lost with the Gospel. Would you agree with me? Now, please don't misunderstand me - immediately I go one pendulum direction, people go the other. I believe in judgement, I believe there is a place called hell, I believe it's very serious - that's an understatement. It's important for us to present that to people; they don't understand the good news without understanding the bad news. I get it, I preach it, OK? But what I want us to understand tonight is: good news, which is what 'gospel' means, must have joy in it? We do have to command sinners to repent, it's biblical, the end is near and we need to preach judgement, I'm not belittling that - but if that's all our message has, and sometimes that is all that it has, if that's all that it has, we might think we're being most faithful to the Gospel that has been deposited to us when in fact we are not. You're only telling the bad news and leaving the good news out! The Gospel is the good news, and it's filled with joy. Philip Brooks said: 'The religion that makes a man look sad certainly won't cure the world'.

So an essential ingredient to reaching out to the lost, who are lost, who are hell-bound, who are headed for the judgement, and they do need to know that and awaken to that - but the Gospel that we have is good news about joy in Jesus. Do you know that he who has the most hope has the most influence? The more hope you can have the better in winning the lost. You see, joy is like a magnet that draws people in because it's the one thing that people don't have. A smile is known in every language and every dialect, isn't that right? You should try it some time! It was the Moravians, their joy - you may never have heard of them, but they were a little community of Christians many years ago - their joy convinced the great John Wesley of the reality of their faith, and actually helped bring him a short time later to a state of true conversion which he had never had. He had grown up in a Christian environment, his father was a church minister, he became a church minister, but he wasn't genuinely saved - but it was their joy that spoke to him about the reality of this Gospel. You see, as Christians, we owe it to the world to have a supernatural joy, that's the only way we were going to win the world for Christ.

Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, was emphasising to his students the importance of making their facial expressions harmonise with the truth that they were preaching at any given time. 'When you speak of heaven', he said, 'let your face light up, let it be irradiated with a heavenly gleam, let your eyes shine with reflected glory. But when you speak of hell, well, then your ordinary face will do!'. It's so true, isn't it? Joy is at the heart of the Gospel, and so joy is an essential ingredient for reaching the lost. Have you ever tried that? You know, we've got all these evangelism programs and schemes and new ideas, but what about trying joy? What about smiling at people and showing them that you've got something that they need, and it's great, and it works!

Something else: joy is a secret of endurance, strength, and holiness. Joy is a secret of endurance, strength, and holiness. One of the marks of spiritual maturity is the level of joy that we carry - now, that is counter to what some of us have inherited. The more miserable you looked, the more holy you were - but that's not true. Strength and endurance come from joy. What does Nehemiah 8 and verse 10 say? 'The joy of the Lord is your strength'. Nehemiah had a lot to endure, because he was trying to build these walls and had various enemies coming at him and all sorts of things, enemies within and without and all the rest - so he wasn't having a picnic. That's not what we're talking about, as we said earlier, joy is not in the absence of trouble but in the presence of God. The joy of the Lord is our strength, and we do have to endure, because we have much trouble in this life. 'In the world you will have tribulation', Jesus said it. James Guthrie, one of the Scots worthies, who died for his faith, the morning of his execution he woke at 4:00am, and he spent time with the Lord worshipping in His presence. Then he was asked by a friend, James Cowey, how he felt. He said: 'Very well, this is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it'. Wow. They don't make them like that any more, do they?

I have to be honest with you, there are times when I have felt guilty feeling happy or joyous. I'm being serious, when you consider all that is going on in the world, all the sadness, the heartache, the depravity, the atrocities that have taken place in the world, natural disasters, famines, pestilences, and even persecuted Christians. We can be happy-clappy, imagine, dancing about, and enjoying ourselves in church - and then you think: 'Oh, it's all right for me, but what about these folk in China, these folk in Eritrea, or people in the Middle East, and they're suffering for their faith; oh, that's terrible'. Now don't misunderstand me tonight, there is a time to weep, and there is a

time to laugh; there is a time to mourn, and there is a time to dance - but if you allow the devil to make you feel guilty for rejoicing and celebrating, because of persecution, he has sold a lie to you. Do you know why? Because the happiest church in the world is the persecuted church; they are the most suffering, but they are the most joyous.

You know Andrew White, the Vicar of Baghdad, he said that 'Despite these atrocities, we are such a happy church. When you have lost everything, you realise that Yeshua, as we call Him, is all that you have left'. Don't feel guilty of being joyful one more moment, that's the enemy doing that to you. True joy glows in the dark. Can I say something to you, especially if you're in Christian work to any degree: if you do not have joy, you will burn out. But it's not just a secret of endurance and strength, joy is actually a secret to holiness - did you know that? Holiness and joy would appear to be mutually exclusive in some of our circles. You say 'holiness', and everybody thinks 'Oh', but in fact if you don't have joy, holiness is going to be a problem. You will never achieve holiness. Thomas Aquinas said: 'If a man has no joy, it is necessary that he will become addicted to some carnal pleasure'. If you don't have true joy in God, you're going to turn to a counterfeit. Maybe that's why, as a Christian, you're struggling, because the joy of the Lord hasn't actually been experienced by you. So much of the world's propaganda sown by the enemy is that God is a killjoy, but as John Piper has put it: it's not that God is a killjoy, He just opposes what kills joy. Sin kills joy.

Matthew Henry, the old Bible commentator, put it like this: 'Holy joy is the oil to the wheels of your obedience'. You might have been trying to pull your socks up and do better, pull yourself up by your bootstraps and walk on the clean side of life, and keep your nose clean, and not say anything wrong - and it's all being done out of the right motivation to please Jesus and to do what you feel is expected of you in the Scripture, but what is missing, and why it is eluding you is the joy. The joy is not there! The oil that oils the wheel of obedience.

So God is the Author of joy; Jesus is the Man of joy; joy is at the heart of the Gospel; joy is an essential ingredient for reaching the lost; joy is a secret of endurance, strength, and holiness - but see also: joy is not simply happiness and laughter. It is not simply happiness and laughter, but it includes those. Let me explain myself: joy is more than comedy. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as it is clean and wholesome. It's more than earthly pleasure, the pleasures of God are more than that. It's even more than mere happiness - while we can use the word happiness, essentially the etymology, the origination of the word 'happiness' is 'finding your satisfaction in happenings, happenstance', 'happiness'. So when things are going right for you, you can be happy, but when things are going wrong it's hard to be happy. But joy, in the biblical sense, is much more than that. It's not just frivolity, joy is enjoyment of God, the good things that come from His hand toward us.

Now I'm going to talk about the extent of exuberant, hilarious joy in the Lord in a few moments - but I don't want you to misunderstand that all of a sudden this is a switch that you can flick, you can forget all your troubles and be joyous in a supernatural way. There is a cost, there is a cost to know God's exuberant joy. You see, He commands you to lay your life down so that you might know joy. You can't bypass that, I'm afraid. It would be nice if you could, but you can't. So Jesus Himself, and Scripture actually rebukes people that are exuberant in an earthly joy, but have ignored the realities of the spiritual realm and eternity. Let me show you one of these

scriptures that was very insightful to me when I looked at it this week. Luke 6:21 and 25: 'Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh', verse 25: 'Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep'. I have to admit to you - I have been reading the Bible for years, I've been a Christian from I was a young child, I've read the Bible several times - I never ever saw, it never sat out to me, that phrase, Jesus saying 'You shall laugh, you shall laugh'. Have you claimed that promise yet, have you? Is it being fulfilled in your life? 'You shall laugh', Jesus said - you never teach the Sunday School that one, sure you don't? 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, you shall laugh', Jesus said 'You shall laugh'.

Do you see the dynamic here? Jesus saying: 'Blessed are those who are hungry, you will be filled. But those who are full' - in other words, full of earthly things, satisfying fleshly things, or those who are laughing in a sort of nonchalant frivolity, carelessness regarding the things of God and eternity - 'you're going to cry one day'. So what's it saying? It's saying there is a cost, you've got to lay your life down in order to find true life. You see it in James 4 and verse 9: 'Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom'. James was speaking to those who were rich and increased and thought they had need of nothing. They were living life and enjoying it all! So that's not the type of joy we're talking about, with the absence of the presence of God and priorities of God and the kingdom in our lives.

So what are we saying? This is not a mindless laughter, but it's coming - this exuberant, hilarious joy is coming from spiritual hunger. Are you spiritually hungry tonight? Do you want more of God? I've got to warn you: a lot of weeping may precede this laughter and this joy, a lot of repentance, a lot of surrender, a lot of sacrifice - people don't want that, people don't like hearing about that. You know, and I'm not going to enter into this, but there has been the phenomenon of 'holy laughter' that has taken place during awakenings and revivals. I'm not talking about stuff that has happened this century or at the end of last century - I'm not ruling that out, but I'm just saying that that's not only what I'm talking about. I'm talking about stuff that happened in the awakenings with figures that you would know, historical figures that you would consider very sound, but holy laughter erupted in their meetings - did you know that? But some of us want the laughter (why wouldn't we?), but not the cross - it doesn't work that way. We've got to go the way of Calvary, we've got to lay our life down to find it - but can I tell you: when you go that way, you get the exuberant, exhilarating, hilarious joy of God as your portion, and it does include laughter and happiness! Some of you are even starting already, maybe it's just looking at me!

The Bible says laughter is a medicine, 'A merry heart does good like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones'. How often do you take these tablets? I'm serious now: laughter is a medicine, laughter is a tonic, don't we say that? That's what the Bible teaches! Laughter is the second most powerful human emotion after love. He who laughs lasts, did you know that? It's good for long life to laugh! In fact, listen to this: it reduces health-sapping tensions and relaxes tissue, as well as exercising the most vital organs. It is like, I am told, internal jogging. Laughter enhances the respiratory system and oxygenates the body. Laughter is a painkiller, it relaxes muscles, lowers your pulse and your blood pressure. Laughter effects the hormones - be careful - the immune system, and the brain's natural chemicals, it releases chemicals in the brain, feel-good chemicals. Laughter is - ladies (and men) - calorie free, it's 100% natural, and it's legal. You can get high on it, but you can't overdose. It's contagious - you

know that, you remember being in church when they had the long pews, and somebody at the end of the pew started laughing and it moved the whole way; maybe there was a family of five, maybe you were that family of five, and it moved down the whole way and you got a clip round the ear or something like that - but little can be done to stop it when it starts. Think about it: laughter never felt bad, never committed a crime, never started a war, and never broke a relationship. You can't laugh and be angry, you can't laugh and be anxious, laughter is shared with the giver and the receiver. Laughter costs nothing and it is non-taxable - Amen. It's a trend-setter. What I mean by that is: if you've found ways to laugh first thing in the morning, it may in fact set the trend for the rest of the day. In fact, George Mueller - he was Brethren too! - George Mueller (I'm just throwing that in, he was a great hero of mine), great missionary pioneer who fed the orphans, he said he would not go out of his study every day until he found his happiness in God, and he was a very happy man - how else would those children have come to him?

One of the most constructive uses of laughter is when we laugh at ourselves, do you ever do that? If we can laugh at ourselves, we leave little room for other people to laugh at us - we've got it over with already. But listen, this is something very interesting: laughter, even when forced - that seems a strange concept - but even when forced, it results in beneficial effects on us both mentally and physically. What I mean by that is: the next time you feel nervous or jittery, indulge in a good laugh. You know, sometimes the children of darkness are wiser than the children of light when it comes to this. There is a certain phenomenon, you may have heard about it in the media, called 'laughing yoga'. Have you heard of it? It's a form of yoga, but they laugh, and they laugh themselves into happiness. I heard an interview on BBC Radio Ulster about it, and I was thinking to myself: 'That's interesting', but I got cross, because I thought to myself, 'That's ours, that belongs to us!'. Can I tell you: that's what the New Age does, and that's what the devil does - he's got no new ideas or good ideas of his own, but he counterfeits God's ideas, God's gifts, God's blessings, and then do you know what the church does? They see it in the occult, or they see it in the New Age, and they say 'Oh, don't talk about laughing, don't talk about making yourself laugh, that's yoga, that's the devil's!'. No, God created laughter. You say: 'But I'm not sure about this making yourself laugh'. Right, let me give you my final point tonight.

Joy will result in a feeling, joy will result in a feeling, but it often must begin as an act of your will. Eventually the feeling will come, but joy must begin as an act of your will. This is Biblical, because in Philippians 4:4, Paul says: 'Rejoice, again I say rejoice', rejoice in the Lord always, again, rejoice. Now that is an emphatic command. So is Paul commanding that your emotions should involuntarily just rise up at some point, and you rejoice? Does that happen to you? If it does, I think you need to go and see a doctor - that doesn't happen any of us. Joy does spring up every now and again, but it springs up as a reaction to something that we are feeling joyous about, there is usually a cognitive pattern that takes place. But Paul is in prison, these Christians are going through difficulties, and he's saying: 'You've got to make a concerted effort of the will to choose to rejoice in the Lord, you've got to praise the blessings that you have'. We sang it years ago: 'Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done' - what is that only using your will to rejoice, reminding yourself of the blessings of God.

You know, don't you, that joy is not a personality type? Some of us think that way, to say 'Ach, I'm just not a joyful person' - that's nonsensical, that's like saying 'Oh, I'm

not a loving person, I'm just not a loving person', or 'I'm just not a holy person, all that sin stuff, I always fall' - would we dream of saying that? Yet some of us say: 'I'm just not about joyful, I'm more of a melancholic disposition' - wise up! The Bible is clear: we can choose to rejoice. This is going to be a breakthrough for some of you, and this is a revelation for most of you: seriousness is not a fruit of the Spirit. Did you know that? It's not there, but joy is! Love, joy, yes? But here's a key: one of the other fruit of the Spirit is what? Self-control. Now let me show you this: you can actually take your self-control that the Spirit gives you to activate your joy - that's what 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice' means. Your will is very powerful, and listen: you might think all this talk about exuberant joy, ecstatic joy is all emotionalism, that's what critics will say, it's emotionalism - on the contrary, what I'm saying is: don't listen to your emotions, because your emotions probably will default to depressiveness. If you're like me, that's probably what will happen to you. The Bible says the sons of God are led by - their emotions? what? - the sons of God are led by the Spirit of God, not by their feelings. Therefore you, as a Spirit-filled child of God, with the fruit of the Spirit manifesting, I hope, in your life; you can take your self-control and choose to be joyful!

You say: 'Oh, I don't feel like it'. Well, you'll not feel like it, that's the whole point. If you wait until you feel like it, you will never do it. Let the weak say 'I am strong', do you see this? It's right throughout the Bible. You don't look at circumstances and interpret them as they seem to be, you interpret them according to what God says about you. Let the weak say 'I am strong', let the poor say 'I am rich', it's a matter of choice - joy is a matter of choice, your joy! You say: 'You don't know what I'm going through'. Well, I don't know what you're going through, and I'm not trying in anyway - if you've got depression, or you've got some terrible, tragic, traumatic circumstances going on in your life, or illness - I'm not belittling you. In fact, this is what you need to hear, it's in the midst of such circumstances that the devil who is a thief, a murderer, who wants to destroy and rob you of the life of Christ, he wants to take your joy - it's imperative, therefore, that you take your self-control and you take your joy back. It's what Isaiah 61 talks about: the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

Do you always feel like praising God in the morning? What? Who is there like that here tonight? I would love to meet you, a Saint, you should be canonised if that's the case - none of us, none of us are like that (I know her, I know that's a lie!), none of us are like that naturally. We have to use our will, and what we do? We focus, we meditate on God, that's why we've got the word of God. We meditate on God, and we start to be raised in our spirit to appraise the Lord, to appraise who He is, what He has done for us, what He means to us; and then what happens is our spirit lifts and then we begin to praise the Lord. Appraise - but I often have to, every morning, start praising the Lord just out of pure willpower, and then I break into the Spirit, eventually. Maybe it might take 20 minutes of singing, praising. This is the secret to a lot of Christian discipline, of using our will in obedience to the Lord, and it's no different with joy.

So I've got an exercise for you - not right now, I would love to do it right now, but I think it would push some of you over the edge - but the Bible says 'He who sits in the heavens laughs', that's the Bible, your Bible. Even if you're in the darkest of circumstances, you should try some time - you might want to try it tonight later on in private - laugh at what the enemy has designed for you, have you ever done that? I'll be honest with you - you might think I'm giddy or something, what I'm preaching tonight, far from it - I would be prone at times to little spells of depressiveness, it's

hard not to be when you're in the work of God at times. It can be discouraging when you're in spiritual warfare, sometimes the enemy really does bring an onslaught to you. I've had times that I've felt, driving in the car, meditating probably on the problems rather than anything else, but all of a sudden feeling emboldened to laugh at the enemy by will - I don't feel like laughing, but actually to exercise, with my will, laughter at what the devil is trying to do, what he's trying to do in my family, what he's trying to do in my ministry, what he's trying to do through slander and misrepresentation. I start to laugh at him, and it's not very long until I'm actually laughing like proper laughter, and belly laughter. It's great, you feel better for it, and sometimes I've come into the house, and I'm telling Barbara; 'Wait till you hear what happened to me tonight, wait till you hear what somebody said' - and I'm actually still laughing; but that's what the joy of the Lord can do! Normally I would obsess about it, let myself come under it, you see this is the power of joy - and we don't use it. Why not choose to laugh with Him who laughs in the heavens in the face of what the enemy declares over your life, what other people have said about you? Activate your self-control and laugh on purpose, the feelings eventually will come, but it's not about the feelings initially.

We need to strengthen our laugh muscle. Sometimes, do you know what we do when we've got problems, do you know what we do in prayer? Listen to this: in prayer we press into the problem, and God is not in the problem - are you hearing me? When you press into the problem, do you know what you can actually do? You can invite the problem and more problems. What we need to do is: 'I lift up my eyes to the hills - from whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. When I am afraid, I will trust in You. The Lord is a strong tower, the righteous run in and they are saved'. You see, our focus has got to lift up from our boots, away from our circumstances surrounding us, and look to God. This is not belittling or underestimating what any of us are going through, but this is the only answer! We need to get our eyes on the Lord, focus on God; and we need to, with our will, choose, even choose to laugh - and that can be priming the pump for true joy and true laughter to come. Why not try it? On a stamped, addressed envelope, give your response to me, and let me know how you're getting on. I'll probably know the next time I look at your face, how you're getting on!

But listen: are you aware, as a Christian; do you believe, as a child of God, in exuberant, extravagant, hilarious joy? Do you believe there is such a thing as supernatural joy? Do you? The Bible teaches it, 1 Peter 1 and verse 8: 'Whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy unspeakable' - say that one, 'joy unspeakable'. The ESV says 'Joy that is indescribable and full of glory' - filled with glory! Wow! Joy unspeakable, joy indescribable, joy that cannot be explained - have you ever had that? You're a Christian, aren't you? Have you ever had that? Do you have it now?

An old saint, many years ago, said 'The Holy Spirit turns to joy whatever He touches'. Has He touched you with supernatural joy? In John 20:20, the disciples were in the Upper Room, they were dejected, Thomas was doubting - and you know what happens. Jesus comes, the doors being shut, into their midst and appears in His resurrected form. He shows them the nail prints in His hands, and the scar in His side, and it says in John 20:20: 'When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord'. They were glad when they saw the Lord. It's upon those words 'then' and 'when' that their happiness turned. It

does not say that when they saw themselves they were glad, sure it doesn't? Some of you here tonight are looking internally for a sense of satisfaction in your Christian life by your own achievement, by how good you are or conversely how bad you have behaved, and that's not going to bring you much sense of esteem or being. Nevertheless, that's your problem, you're looking in, you're introspective. Some of you are of a perfectionist mentality, where you continually dissect yourself on your own surgical table, your own performance. You've been looking in too long, it's time to look out and look up. Their joy came when they saw the Lord. It doesn't say they looked at their circumstances. I mean, look at their performance, they're hiding behind locked doors in fear; look at their circumstances, their Messiah has died, they think it's all over, and they think they are going to die now too - so their circumstances weren't anything to look at. But how did they become glad? When they saw the Lord. By the way, not a doctrine about the Lord, some people get high on whatever doctrinal hobbyhorse they have. Doctrine is important, but that's not how we get real joy: we get joy in the face, gazing into the face of Jesus Christ.

So my question to you tonight - and I'm really finished - is: will you choose joy, exuberant joy, extravagant joy, indescribable, unspeakable, hilarious joy? That's a biblical word 'hilarious', it says 'God loves a hilarious giver', that's actually in the Bible. You know, not the person who He has to prise with a spanner their hand open to get the offering out of it - He loves hilarious giving, because He loves joy. Why? Because He is the Author of joy, Jesus is the Man of joy, it's the centre and heart of the Gospel, it's how we're going to win the world, it's the secret of endurance, strength, and holiness - and it's not just laughter and happiness, but it includes those. I want you to choose tonight, will you choose tonight - do you hunger for reality? This is reality! If this could be sold in bottles, I'd be a millionaire many times over! But it's not for money, or for price - 'Ho! You who are thirsty', are you thirsty? Are you prepared to die out? We'll all go for the laughter, but what about that? Are we prepared to come to the foot of the cross and say: 'Not my way any more, not my pursuit of joy and happiness. Lord, I'm sorry, but it's in Your presence. I have done everything but wait in Your presence. I have run everywhere, I have tried everything but the very thing that is before me'. Will you come tonight? Let's pray.

Let's take a moment or two. Let's, in the presence of God, just take a moment. I know when we're talking about these things it can be perceived as jovial, and people laugh, and people get offended. Isn't that interesting, by the way? Just as an aside, isn't it interesting that one of the most offensive things you could do in church is laugh - isn't that interesting? You should try it some time, it might help you get through the sermon! But, honestly, listen to me: this goes deep, this goes deep, really deep, because some of you are going through very traumatic circumstances, and some of you are going through illness, some of you are going through marriage problems, some of you are going through breakups of families. Listen: we are heading in our nation for darker days, persecution is coming for Christians who are bold in witnessing. If we haven't got joy we're not going to survive, we are not! So as we pray, I want you to come to God, you might want to pray something like this - you may want to recite it after me if you mean it: 'Oh Father, I come to You' - just from your heart, you don't need to say it out loud - 'Oh Father, I come to You as the God who created all life, and the God who created joy, laughter, singing, dancing, celebration'. Maybe you might have to say here: 'Forgive me for how I have despised that', or 'Forgive me for how I have esteemed that as unworthy, or unholy, or immature'. Maybe you need to repent of having spoken against people who have been happy in the Lord? I don't know, you

do whatever you have to do before the Lord. Maybe you have to repent of having embraced sombreness as holiness? You know, you deal with the Lord.

Just say: 'Lord, I thank You that Jesus is the express image of Your person. Whilst He was a man of sorrows who endured unspeakable agony and the pangs of hell on the cross, I thank You that He was anointed with joy above His fellows. I thank You that in Your presence, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there is fullness of joy, and at Your right hand there are pleasures forevermore. I thank You that I am righteous by faith in Jesus, that the peace of God is mine, and I ask You now for the deposit of joy that Jesus bought for me on the cross. Lord, I need it, I need it to get through, to endure, to survive, to overcome, to be holy, to resist temptations of this world. So, Father, now in Jesus' name, I ask You for a baptism of joy in the Holy Spirit. Thank You, Lord, that this is Your will for me'.

I'm just going to pray over you for a moment or two, just stay in the attitude of prayer. In the name and authority of the Lord Jesus, I rebuke anything that is binding the emotions right now, any demonic entity that is binding people's emotions: I rebuke you now in the name of Christ, and command you to be loosed and released and leave, right now in Jesus' name. I command all blocking spirits to leave in Jesus' name. I rebuke every spirit of legalism, every spirit of religion, every spirit of false holiness, every spirit of heaviness, every spirit of depression - I rebuke you in Jesus' name. I pray, Lord, now, that You will pour out upon this gathering, just as the anointing is poured out literally when we anoint people with oil, Lord, pour out the oil of gladness as You did upon Jesus, Your Son. Would You pour out the oil of gladness upon heads here tonight, just send the angelic hosts with the oil, Lord, of gladness. Let them come now and minister to the inheritors of salvation here in the building tonight, and pour out that supernatural holy oil, that it would start to spring up, Lord, right now, bubble up within - joy unspeakable and full of glory. Lord, help us also, give us the grace to activate our will in self-control of joy. Help us to choose to be joyful every day, to rejoice, again I say rejoice; to wake up in the morning and say, like we put our socks on, will it be red or yellow today, we decide: will we be sad or will we rejoice? Will we go under the cloud that the devil has sent for me today, or will I choose to get up and say 'This is the day that the Lord has made, we will be glad and rejoice in it'? Lord, give us the grace to choose life, to choose hope, to choose joy; and, Lord, may it be such an overflowing, abundant joy that it will spill over our vessel - 'Fill my cup Lord, fill it up Lord' - that it will spill over to our work colleagues, our families, our friends, our neighbours, and even our church! People will say: 'I want what he's got', 'I want what she's got'; that atheists who don't even believe You exist, Father, will say 'I don't know about God, but there is something different about him or her, they've got something I don't have'. Lord, really, the flag that tells everybody that the King is in residence in the castle of our heart is joy. May the flag fly high! Oh Lord, we love our flags here, but Lord, this is the flag that we need to erect - all of us. This is the flag, we need to be saying to folk, whatever is happening in our country, whatever is happening in our land, whatever is happening in Europe, whatever is happening in the world over the Atlantic: we've got joy! Yes, things are dark, but we've got joy - we've got a reason to rejoice! Lord, would You give us this, because it doesn't come naturally, it doesn't come easy. So thank You, Lord, in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Hunger For Reality - Chapter 4

"Obeying God's Voice"

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OK, well, if you haven't been with us, we're doing a study these nights at The Stables: "Hunger For Reality". What we're looking at is longing to go deeper with God. If the status quo of what you're experiencing at the moment is not enough for you (and I hope that's the case, that always should be the case for us as Christians). We should have an insatiable satisfaction in Jesus - do you know what that means? We're satisfied with Him, but we're not satisfied with the knowledge that we have of Him, or the depth of experience or relationship that we have - so we want to go deeper.

We're looking at "Obeying God's Voice". Let's pray together before we go on any further: Lord, we thank You for Your presence with us, and we thank You that that's something we can rely on - to know that You're here, You're with us, You're working by Your Holy Spirit. We thank You for each person gathered here too. We realise that they're very important to You, Lord. We just pray that You will draw near right now, Lord, that You will settle our hearts, that You will tune us in to Your Holy Spirit, and that there will be a real message from God for each of us tonight. I believe there are people hungering for reality, there are people here tonight hungry after You and encounters with You - there are people here that don't even realise how much they need You. Lord, I pray that You will show up tonight, and if there are people who are not aware of how You communicate to us, and not au fait with You speaking into their heart, that tonight they would move into that experience of actually being attuned to the voice of God. So Lord, we need You, please come. In and of ourselves we have nothing, we are nothing, we can do nothing - but we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. We wait upon You now, we welcome Your Spirit, we ask You to come into this room, Lord, come into our lives, and move in a mighty way. For Jesus' sake we ask it - and everybody said: 'Amen'.

OK, our reading is from John chapter 10 verse 27, this would be a well-known verse to a lot of folk. John 10:27, Jesus is speaking and He says: *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me"*. I'm sure that's a familiar Scripture, and the second half of it is wonderful as well: *"I give to them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone pluck them out of My hand or My Father's hand"*. But it's this bit at the beginning that we want to look at tonight: 'My sheep' - those who belong to Jesus, those who are children of God, those who are following the Good Shepherd, they hear His voice! 'And Jesus knows them', so they know His voice, and Jesus knows them personally, 'and they follow Christ'.

Now this is really the gist of my message tonight: to obey God's voice - so we're talking this evening about obeying God's voice - to obey God's voice, you've got to hear His voice. To hear His voice, you must recognise His voice. Do you understand? If you want to obey God, follow Jesus, obey His voice; you've got to be able to hear His voice - that makes sense, doesn't it? What a lot of people miss is that in order to hear His voice, you need to recognise it, there needs to be recognition and a perception of

how we actually know the voice of God - and that's really what we're going to be talking about. The topics are: how to hear God's voice; how to recognise His voice; and then what to do with it - because what's the use of hearing the voice of God, and being able to perceive His communications if we don't do anything with it? So, as our text, John 10:27, says: it's in order that we might follow Him, that we hear His voice.

Now, I don't know whether there's anybody here tonight frightened of this concept of hearing the voice of God - you know, it makes you a little bit nervous. Anybody? Well, that could be for at least two reasons - maybe more, but I'm going to give you two tonight. First of all, bad teaching concerning the voice of God; and then secondly, bad practice, or bad experience that you've had with hearing the voice of God, or others 'hearing the voice of God' on your behalf.

Let's deal with each of those first of all and get them out of the way immediately. First of all: bad teaching. Now it is not bad teaching for the church to declare that the Bible is the absolute and final authority concerning what God has to say. The Bible is God's Word, yes, we agree with that. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable, etc - and we are not to add nor subtract from the Scripture; there is a judgement upon that. I have to say to you tonight: if you're wanting to know the will of God, here's a newsflash for you, the majority of the will of God for your life is found in this book, the Bible. Sometimes we can sit in a meditative, passive state: 'Lord, show me Your will for my life', when maybe 85-90% of it is found within the Scriptures - and so we just need to get into the word of God. A famous preacher was asked recently: 'What's the will of God for my life?', this person said. His retort was: 'Heal the sick, cleanse the leper, raise the dead, and cast out demons - freely you have received, freely give', that covers a lot, doesn't it? The commission that Jesus has given us, the command and instruction for all of our lives - and so let's not underestimate the impact of what it is to truly get into the Bible and realise, as Psalm 119 verse 105 says: 'Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path'. It is what guides our way, and so you need to learn to hear God's voice in God's word. I want to lay that as a foundation tonight.

Let me ask you: do you know how to get a 'rhema' word from God? Do you know what a 'rhema' word of God is? You see, we are very familiar with the Greek word 'logos' which speaks of the actual word of God come in incarnate human flesh, the Son of God manifested in humanity; but also the written word of God. So the 'logos', if you like, is the objective word of God. But the 'rhema' word of God is the spoken word, or the proceeding word of God that is coming out of His mouth for here and now, for you at this very moment in time - we might call it 'the prophetic word'. Do you know how to get that from God out of His word? Well, you need to sit down and read the Bible. You see, for many of us, the bottom line is: we are lazy and we are passive in our devotions toward the Lord. Maybe when it comes to guidance, and we come to a junction in our life and we don't know whether to go left or right, forward or backward, we treat God like a proverbial satnav. We want Him just to tell us: right, left, back, or forth, or whatever - when, in fact, we haven't been cultivating a relationship with Him 24/7. If you want to be guided by God, that's what you need to concentrate on day by day. You can't be lazy, you've got to get into His word. You cannot have a relationship with God without a relationship with this book. I am talking about more than 'read your Bible, pray every day if you want to grow'. You can know the book, but it's another thing entirely to know the Author. I'm talking about getting to know God, and yet the converse is true as well: you cannot get to know God without intimacy with this

book.

OK? So right away we want to establish that the Bible is the way that God primarily speaks, instructs, and guides us as His children. Having said that, the Bible is not the only way that God speaks. I have to tell you tonight that that is bad teaching. Much of evangelicalism has imbibed that teaching: that God does not speak to us outside the revelation of Genesis through to the book of Revelation. But, in fact, the Bible itself teaches us that God speaks in various ways. There are a variety of media through which God speaks. Granted, these are more subjective - like visions, dreams, prophecy, etc - and that makes some people nervous, especially if they've had a very sound biblical background and been warned against these things, that can make you frightened. There is no doubt about it: these are more subjective, and equally they are less binding - they are not authoritative like the Bible, the scriptures. These subjective means of God speaking must never supersede the scriptures or contradict the scriptures, yet - to be biblical - we must concede that these exist, and the Bible itself talks about them.

Alright? So I hope that that's clearing up (and I know it's quite cursory for our purposes tonight), but this is an error to say that the Bible is the only way that God speaks. Secondly, not only can people be frightened from the voice of God through bad teaching, but also bad practice. I'm talking about abuses of the voice of God or the way God speaks. Has anybody ever met this man: 'God told me to tell you'? You know, one of these starey-eyed people, a bit weird, maybe their head tilted, and they've got 'a word from God for you'. Sometimes there can be people (and we can't analyse their motivation), but it might be a desire to impress someone, or maybe it's a need for significance to show that they can impart a word of God to you, or in the very worst case scenario sometimes people who operate like this in an abusive way, it's in order to manipulate or control another person. So: 'Marry this person', 'Sell this business', 'Give this ministry so many pounds or so many dollars, and God says He will bless you, or He will do this or that'. Now the Bible teaches about the prophetic word, OK? So we're not decrying that at all, but the Bible also regulates and teaches how to guard the gift of prophecy, and how to protect the people who are prophesied to. Maybe you're here tonight, and it's not that you've had bad teaching, but you've had a bad experience with those who have prophesied over you, or given you a supposed 'word from God'. Maybe you have seen abuse, or you have even been hurt yourself.

We've got to be open to what the Bible teaches, but we also need a good dose of reserve. Would you not agree with me? Caution is necessary. Be open to God, but be cautious of people like this. I came across this picture on the Internet, it's hard to see that - it's a dog with sort of slitty eyes: when someone starts a conversation with 'The Lord told me to tell you', you need to look a wee bit like that! You get the point, don't you? Here is a tip, I've got a tip for hearers of words from God, and then a tip for the speakers of words from God. First of all to the hearers: usually when you get a word from God from someone else, if at all, it's confirming something that God has already told you - and if He hasn't already told you yet, He's just about to, or He's going to get round to it. He will confirm what you're hearing through the prophetic word. So will you remember that? I mean, if it seems totally off beam, it probably is! But equally, a tip to those who might give words from God - and we want to move into this area if we are going to be true to the New Testament, it tells us to 'desire earnestly the gift of prophecy', and that's not just individuals, it's to the whole church, we are meant to be pursuing this prophetic culture - we've got to change our language. What do I mean?

Well, definitely we need to ditch controlling words, we need to stop saying to people: 'You must do this', or 'Immediately', and not promise or guarantee certain outcomes. Rather than absolute language, like 'God told me', it would be far better to say things like 'I think God might be saying to you', 'I think, perhaps, God may be saying to me to pass on to you', or 'I sense that perhaps', or 'I feel maybe' - and give it in that context, and then say 'You need to test that before the Lord, so that He might confirm what He is saying or not saying to you'. Do you understand? We need to change the culture.

In fact, Scripture bears this out, it's nothing new. First Thessalonians 5 and verses 19 through 22, listen: 'Do not quench the Spirit', so we're not allowed to say 'Ah, this is too dangerous, it makes people too vulnerable, let's just drop it'. You're not allowed to quench the Spirit, and further: 'Do not despise prophecies'. So if you've got a problem with anything I'm saying already, you need to analyse Scripture yourself. We are prohibited from despising this prophetic word of the Lord. But, Paul says: 'Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil'. I don't know when the last time was you ate bad fish, but you need to work through the bones - don't you? You leave the bones and you eat the meat, yes? So we've got to weigh up prophecy, the other prophets are meant to weigh up the prophetic utterances in churches if they happen. But some people are just weird, let's face it, and we're always going to be perceived as weird by other people for various reasons - but what I'm basically saying is: we shouldn't be going out of our way to be weird. I believe in the concept of being supernaturally natural, that it should be the most natural thing in the world for us as Christians to be supernatural, and we don't need to look strange or sound strange, or put quivers in our voice, or say 'Thus saith the Lord'. Do you understand?

So let's deal - we're going to deal with three things: how do we hear God's voice; how do we recognise God's voice; and what do we do with God's voice? So, first of all, how do we hear God's voice? Well, we've established this already. We hear God's voice primarily and categorically through His word, and that is the Living Word. The Bible is not a dead book, it is a living - 'quick' the old versions said - a living entity, an organism; because Jesus is the Living Word Who inspired these pages through the Holy Spirit. So this is a living book. So, by reading the Bible God speaks to us - I hope you read your Bible. It would stagger you if you found out how many Christians don't read their Bible on a daily basis. Now I'm not saying to condemn yourself and become all legalistic if you miss a day here and there, but we do need - just as we need our daily bread - we need spiritual manna from God's word, more so. So you need to read the word of God, but also the Bible teaches us that we should be meditating on the word of God. Do you know what meditation is? It's not sitting in the lotus position and going 'Hmmmmm' - that's a form of meditation, but not Bible meditation. Bible meditation is muttering, it literally means 'muttering'. You may have seen in Jerusalem, or even been there, some of the rabbis and scholars with the ancient scriptures in front of them, and they would just mutter over the word of God - that actually is meditation. They are saying the word of God over and over, thinking about it, I liken it to chewing the cud. Digesting it, bringing it up again, chewing it, digesting it, bringing it up again - and the word of God is digested and assimilated into our being as we meditate upon it.

That's how we hear God's voice: reading, meditating, even memorising. Now I don't have, maybe to my shame, a programme of memorisation - a lot of my memorisation happens as I read Scripture and meditate upon it. I have, from time to time,

memorised stuff, but it's not something that is regular for me. But the point is: getting God's word in is what we need to do, in fact it's a process of computing. It's the same idea that you receive through input, so the computer programmer programs into the computer; the processor, the CPU system, processes the information; and then it produces output. So if you want output, and if output in this case is guidance from God, hearing God's voice, you need to be determined to program yourself with God's word. There needs to be input in order for output. People want God to guide them, but they're not prepared to sit down at any time during the day and read His word. Now I have had occasion in my own life, and I've heard about it in others, where God give me a verse, just like that, that I didn't even know was in the Bible - but that is very rare and unique, and you should not presume upon that. You should be putting in God's word.

Also, from Scripture, I would encourage you to get involved with personal application of the word. So, when you read something, you say: 'So what? What does that mean to me? How does that apply to me?'. One of the best ways that you can actually get a handle on that is journalling. I do it quite often, just an ordinary notepad and pen, and when I'm reading the word I jot down the verses that speak to me, and then I listen - behind the verses - for what God might be saying to me. I might even change the verse to be spoken directly to me if it isn't already, and the implications of what that means. I would really recommend Mark Virkler's writing and teaching - he's got a series on 'The Four Keys to Hearing the Voice of God' - and he's big on journalling, how you just tap into the flow of the Spirit in you and start to hear what God is saying to you in your heart.

Then of course there's not just reading, meditation, memorising, personal application, but there is preaching of the word. We have to believe - sadly preaching isn't often the case, sometimes it's just a running commentary of what the Bible says, you might as well pull down Matthew Henry's commentary and read it yourself - but that's not what preaching is meant to be, preaching is meant to be imparting life, which is actually a 'rhema' word, it's meant to be prophetic in its utterance. But we get fed when that happens, and we can often - some of you were converted by hearing the voice of God through preaching.

But there are other ways that God speaks, and Scripture testifies to this. Not just the Living Word, but Scripture says that God speaks through creation. The psalmist says: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky declares His handiwork'. In fact, this is a language that everybody in creation understands. Have you ever gone out on a starry night where there is no light pollution, and looked up into the sky and just went 'Wow! Isn't God great?'. Have you ever had God speak to you through the sparrows, through the trees, through the seasons - that's God speaking! Now then people get scared, 'Oh, this is New Age, you know we don't worship creation' - no, it's not New Age. You see, sometimes New Age and the enemy in particular seeks to counterfeit the truth. He often mixes truth and error to deceive us - but let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. God speaks in creation, OK?

He also speaks through conscience. Everybody, whether they're born again or not, has this mechanism. Now some people can bury it, some people can deaden it and sear it, cauterise it; but we've got this capacity to know right from wrong. Take the innate sense of justice and injustice, when things aren't fair. So, like Jiminy Cricket on Pinocchio's shoulder, we've got this mechanism: thumbs up, thumbs down - that's

God-given, and God can speak through it. Circumstances, these unknown conditions that are ahead of us - I'm not saying God actually makes all of it happen, but He is able to orchestrate it in such a way as to come to speak to us. Maybe God is speaking to you right now through some of your circumstances?

But as I said earlier, there are many more ways that God speaks - Scripture itself records the gifts of the Spirit, not just in the New, but in the Old Testament: the movings of the Holy Spirit, where people were given visions and dreams; in the New Testament words of wisdom, words of knowledge, prophecy, and various types of revelation. This is the way that God speaks to the Church. Then there is the audible voice of God - I'll not ask you if you've heard the audible voice of God, I've never heard it. I'm hoping to, by the way, I'm holding out. It's rather rare to hear the audible voice of God, count yourself privileged if you have. You might say: 'Well, why is that?'. I mean it would be wonderful if, you know, God would just part the heavens with a voice like in the films, Charlton Heston, He just booms these dulcet tones, and I shake with the tremor of hearing the voice of God - that would really help me, it would help us all, wouldn't it? But there are reasons why that doesn't happen so much. Primarily, this is the reason for New Testament believers, God tends to speak from His dwelling place. Would you remember that? God tends to speak from His dwelling place. No longer is His dwelling place Heaven alone, and His dwelling place is not temples made by men's hands, but God's dwelling place now is the New Testament believer, the child of God. We are the Temple: 'Do you not know', Paul says, 'that you are the Temple of the Holy Spirit?'. So God tends now, more often than not, to speak internally to the child of God in our spirits. It has been called 'the still, small voice of God'. He dwells within us, we are His Temple, so it figures that when He speaks He will speak within us.

That term 'the still, small voice of God' comes straight out of Scripture, 1 Kings chapter 19. God's presence passed by Elijah. You remember that Elijah was fleeing from the wicked Queen Jezebel, and he goes to a cave, and he goes through a period of depression. God feeds him, and he goes to sleep, and He feeds him again with angelic food and so on - and then eventually he wakes up, and he has been rehabilitated to an extent. He goes out to meet God, to hear what God has to say to them. It says that there were accompanying phenomena with the voice of God: there was wind, there was fire, there was even an earthquake - but it appears from the biblical narrative that God's voice was not in any of these manifestations. Moments later God chose to speak to Elijah softly, peacefully, in a still, small voice. Weisman translates that 'the voice of a gentle whisper'. That's generally how God speaks to Christian believers. I like this slide, it's a fortune cookie: 'Be aware of the still, small voice within you'. Don't be looking for the voice of God in fortune cookies or anywhere else, when God actually lives within you! He will speak to you.

Now there are prophets, OK? There are prophets, I believe, in the church. There are gifted people who God uses, maybe to bring us message and confirmation. But this is the point: we don't need to rely on spiritual elites, super-spiritual giants, to tell us what God wants us to know. The reason being: Scripture clearly says in 1 John 2 verse 20, 'You have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things'. Now, there are a lot of know-it-alls in the church, that's not what it means. It means that if you need to know something - God knows your address, He has ways of getting you the information, because you've got the Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart. Have you got it? We're not decrying Bible teaching, of course we're not, or prophets, or gifts of

the Spirit, or anything like that - but some of you need to be emboldened to know that God can speak to you. Maybe you've been wowed by people standing at the front and reading people's mail and all that type of stuff, and you think 'Oh, I could never do that, I can't hear God like that' - listen: you've got to understand that nobody has anything else that you don't have or can't have, because you've got the Holy Spirit'. Did you hear that? Don't be intimidated, don't compare yourself to anybody else: you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you don't need anybody to teach you. You got the Holy Spirit with you 24/7, and He is all you need. He is the answer for all the problems in your world, in the whole wide world. Is that reassuring? I think so.

So, from new birth, when you were born again, God lives in you by His Spirit - Amen? Proverbs chapter 20 verse 27, a wonderful verse: 'The spirit of a man is the lamp', or the candle, 'of the Lord, searching the uttermost parts of his being'. So your spirit is the part that God uses to see into you and communicate to you what He needs you to know. He speaks to you in your spirit. Romans chapter 8 and verse 16: 'The Spirit Himself bears witness with our human spirit that we are children of God'. So this is the testimony of God's Spirit with our spirit, we call it 'the witness of the Spirit' - the still, small voice. Let's be more practical: what exactly does this look like? Well, it's a kind of positive 'yes' when God wants you to do something, it's positive. It's hard to describe, but it's like a coming alive inside you, it's like something jumps inside you. Now to be honest, it's better felt than told, but when it happens you kind of know it. It's like an intuition, or an impulse, or an impression that is weighing heavily upon you. It's hard to describe, it's a bit like when people come to me and say: 'Well, how do you know when you're in love?'. What is usually the answer? 'You just know', yes, that's right - who said that? Go to them for advice! Are you an expert in this department, are you? You just know! How do you explain that? I don't know, but you just know in your know-er. It's the same with this positive 'yes' of God. Conversely, the negative impulse, the thumbs down is a cautious communication, maybe a 'Beware!' or 'Be careful!' - it's a sudden deadness instead of a coming of life, a deadness, an emptiness within you, a lack of life about something, a check on your spirit. Do you understand what I'm saying?

God, of course, can also speak through a word. He can give you an actual word in your mind. He can speak through feelings, through thoughts, some people get a lot of pictures in their mind or in their heart. But the point is this: God is a God who speaks. Francis Schaeffer put it: 'God is, and is not silent'. Generally speaking, God is saying much more than we ever realise! He is speaking to you much more than you ever conceived of! In fact, it's much more likely that God actually speaks to us in a way that we understand. You see, one of the greatest hindrances to the supernatural is actually the desire for the spectacular. Do you understand what I'm saying? Can I repeat that? One of the biggest hindrances to the supernatural is the desire for the spectacular or the sensational. I believe that the supernatural is inherently natural, as I said to you earlier, especially for the Christian. It's not that God can't do really, really sensational things - He does, and He can - but in the everyday run of things, He desires to talk with us in a way that is completely natural in the supernatural. Sometimes because we're looking for the heavens to cleave, and the big booming voice, or we're looking for a vision that is in Technicolor panoramic view, or we're looking for the audible voice of God in our ear, we miss what God is actually saying! The spectacular can stand in the way of recognising God's voice, and most of us here tonight - without even knowing it - are hearing all the time from God but not recognising His voice!

So I want to ask you before we go on any further, and this is elementary, biblical truth: God is speaking to all of us a lot of the time, would you have the faith to believe that God speaks to you? Some of you, I think, struggle with that: 'He speaks to others, but He never says anything to me'. Could it be that you just don't recognise Him? You're looking for something different. Psalm 40 verse 5 in the NASB says: 'Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders which You have done, and Your thoughts toward us; there is none to compare with You. If I would declare and speak of them, they would be too numerous to count'. The thoughts that God has toward me are too many for me to compute! Now, what does that mean? There is more than the days of my life, there is more than the hours in the day, there is more than the minutes and the seconds in every hour. So the communications are constantly coming from Heaven, from God's heart to my heart, and if I'm not hearing anything - what's the problem? The problem is not with God not speaking to me, the problem is that you're not tuned in! You don't need to get a pair of earphones for your ears, but you do need to do something - because obviously something needs to be addressed!

Now here are two problems, why we may not be hearing the voice of God. The first problem - that you may not be tuned in - is the problem of conflicting signals, or communications, or broadcasts if you like. Now, you'll agree with me here, there are so many voices clamouring for our attention in our society it is unreal, especially in the day and age in which we live. There is so much noise pollution! There has been the technological and the communications explosion. You can think of the myriad of ways that our life is invaded by all sorts of interaction and communication. I thought this was a wonderful slide, weapons of mass distraction: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, all these different social media sources that bombard us - even just SMS texts and email day by day. It's very difficult to cultivate stillness, isn't it? If God internal voice is the still, small voice, the voice of a gentle whisper, how on earth do you get still in our 21st-century age to hear His voice? But that is the challenge: we need to cultivate stillness.

Both my children play the piano. I don't know whether you have anybody in your house that plays an instrument, but it's very hard to talk on the telephone with a child blattering a piano in the background - have you ever tried to do that? We need stillness to communicate: to hear, to receive, and to give. It's the same with God, we must seek - as far as is possible, at least at some stage in our day - to eliminate distractions. But there are not only, when I talk about conflicting signals I'm not just talking about external distractions of which there are many, but internal distractions: crossed wires, crossed communications. Maybe it's self, it's our voice that we hear over and above God's; maybe it's the voice of other people that have spoken over us; maybe it is even the voice of Satan and the voice of the demonic, which I think speaks to us regularly and we don't even realise who it is. That's what I'm talking about when I speak of conflicting signals, mixed messages, crossed wires of communication.

Do you know what you need to do if that's the case? Not only do you need to de-clutter from the technological back noise, but you also need - inside your heart - to address the voices that are trying to grip your attention that are not from God. You say, 'How do we do that?'. Well, you need to cancel them out, you need to renounce them. What do I mean? Well, if those voices are not in line with the plumbline of God's word - whether it's your voice, somebody else's voice, or the voice of an enemy - you need to cancel them out, and you need to break off all agreement that you ever made with that voice. That agreement could be a mental agreement of dwelling on it - you

know, like the meditation of Scripture, but you're meditating on the lies. It could be an emotional embracing of that thing, where you start to feel what is being said in your mind. It could be something that has actually affected your volition, your behaviour, it's starting to dictate your actions, it might even be affecting your body. You see that's what happens: the soul becomes affected, and then the spirit as a consequence.

Would you do that tonight? Some of you desperately need to renounce things that you've been listening to in your mind and heart. This is one problem preventing us hearing God's still, small voice: conflicting signals outside and inside of us. But the second thing is wrong frequency, we need to tune into God's frequency. That slide is hard to read, it says: 'God is a natural frequency that exists within you, tune in!' - and that's for the believer. God's Spirit lives within you, but some of us are on the wrong wavelength. We're not on God's wavelength - you say: 'Well, what is God's wavelength?'. God's wavelength is grace. Some of you are still trying to work to earn God's favour, even in your devotional life. You're trying to pray long enough, or read enough chapters, and all this sort of thing - you're trying to meet God on the plane of performance, and He's not there, you'll never find Him there. You always meet Him on the plane, the level of grace - that's where God can be met. But some of you need to tune into God's wavelength according to how He really is, because you're trying to connect with a God that doesn't exist. What am I talking about? Well, maybe you still see God as a stern taskmaster, who is a great judge who just wants to batter you every time you trip up and sin and fail. You need to understand that God is your Father. If you're a born-again believer and a child of the King, He is also your Father, He indeed is your Abba Father, He is your Heavenly Father - and it's a different relationship entirely. You need to get grace, you need to get the Father-heart, you need to get the perfect love of God. What is it 1 John says? 'Perfect love casts out fear', because fear is to do with punishment, 'whoever fears has not been made perfect in love'. So you need to tune in to this love station of God's communication to us, through grace, through His Father heart. That's why some of you are not hearing the voice of God, because there needs to be healing deep in your heart, maybe there even needs to be deliverance from the bondage of the enemy, maybe there needs to be a renewal of the mind according to how you perceive God actually to be.

So maybe your problem is conflicting signals or wrong frequency - but can I appeal to you tonight: don't make it complicated. Now, we preachers are guilty of this, and you could read a hundred books on how to hear the voice of God. We can complicate things that are actually rather simple. It is quite hard not to hear the voice of God if you really want to obey Him. If you get rid of the clutter, it can be hard not to hear Him. If you stay humble, that is, He promises to guide you. There are times in the Bible where God goes silent, God goes mute, there have been times in my life where that has happened - but I have to say to you, both in the Bible and in personal experience, that is the exception rather than the rule. He does it for a reason for a short period of time, but it's not the norm. Do you know why? God has a lot to say to you! The problem is, our ears are often plugged not just by the things that we've talked about already, but by unbelief. Some of you don't believe God does speak, or that He would want to speak to you. Some of it is pride, we don't think we need to hear anything more, or 'The Bible is enough for me, the teaching that I have had from I was a child'. For some of us, it is sin that blocks our ears. For some it is even more simple than that, we just don't expect it - and, guess what, if you don't expect it to happen, it's not likely to happen. If you don't expect God to speak to you, what are you not going to be doing? Listening! You're not going to be in a disposition to receive. If you're not expecting

God, and you're not listening, there are other people who are listening, but they don't know what they're listening for and so they are not hearing God.

So if you're not tuned to God tonight, I want us to answer the second question: how do we recognise God's voice? Can I say to you first of all: it can take time to discern and recognise God's voice. There is no way round this, alright? You can hear God's voice the moment you're born-again, but it can take a cultivation of experience before you're hearing God's voice often. Can I add to that: it doesn't just take time, it takes practice. You might say: 'That's ridiculous, practising hearing the voice of God?'. It's not ridiculous, it's actually biblical. Listen to Hebrews chapter 5 and verse 14: 'Solid food belongs to those who are of full age', so you don't give people who are mature baby milk, you give them a steak hopefully. 'Solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who' - now watch this phrase - 'by reason of use', that's another way of saying 'practice', 'by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil'. Now the senses that are being spoken of there are not your ordinary natural senses, this is a spiritual statement. It's talking about our spiritual senses to discern both good and evil. So what is the verse saying? It's saying that mature Christians who are feeding on the meat of the word of God should be getting to the point where their senses are being exercised to discern the spiritual realm.

It's not just the senses of hearing God's voice, there can be other senses - I personally believe that all of the natural senses have corresponding spiritual senses. So just the way you can hear in the Spirit, you can see in the Spirit, you can smell in the Spirit, you can taste in the Spirit, you can feel and touch in the Spirit. We're talking about hearing the voice of God, but some people hear direction from God through seeing - all sorts of spiritual senses. Would you consider tonight praying to the Lord that He might activate your spiritual senses? Sounds a bit strange, but actually Paul prayed that for the Ephesian Christians in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 18, 'That the eyes of their understanding would be enlightened'. Were they all blind? Of course they weren't, they were physically sighted - what's he talking about? He's talking about spiritual understanding and spiritual sight. He said, 'This is a good prayer to pray, I'm going to pray it for you', so is that not a good prayer for you to pray tonight? 'God, activate my spiritual senses: give me spiritual hearing to hear You more clearly, to see You'.

What I want to say is - and I alluded to this a little bit earlier - God can actually speak to you in ways peculiar to you, did you know that? Sometimes I hear how God speaks to someone, and I think: 'Oh, I wish He could speak to me like that, I want Him to speak to me like that' - but, in fact, listen: it's not always about us learning God's language, but actually God chooses to learn ours. Isn't that beautiful? God actually will condescend down to our level to speak to us in a way that we understand. You know the way spouses learn to communicate and read each other - they can laugh over similar things, there is a certain look, maybe a raised eyebrow and the husband knows what that means, only he can understand. But all of that communication, spoken and non-verbal, what does it come out of? Relationship. If you want to hear the voice of God, you've got to understand that it's about relationship. Just as physical, facial expressions can be non-verbal means of communication that develop out of relationship, we can interpret God's nudges, His promptings, His checks because of relationship. So many of us want guidance: 'Lord, who do You want me to marry? What job do You want me to have? What country in the world do You want me to live in?' - there could be a thousand different questions, but guidance is first and foremost a relationship with the Guide who is your Father. Let's never go for the gifts before the

Giver - very rude that, isn't it? It's out of cultivating a relationship with the Lord our Father and Jesus that we get to know His voice. He'll even speak to me, David, in ways that He'll never speak to you - isn't that beautiful? Because He knows me, He knows you.

You know, God is more concerned about who you are in relationship to Him than what you are. You see, very zealous Christians, they want to know how they're going to serve the Lord, what role they have, or gifts they can exercise. Those things are not unimportant, but God is more interested in who you are in relationship to Him. The fast track to hearing the voice of God is getting an intimate knowledge of Him personally. No formulas, or tricks, or courses that will get you there any quicker.

But here's the big question that maybe many of you're asking already: how do you know if it's yourself talking, or if it's even the devil? Some of us have been made to be terrified of the voice of God in case we get misled by a demon. Well, here's the best answer I can give to that, OK? Out of everything that I have read and studied and known in my own life, the best answer of 'How do I know the voice of God?' is the tone of the voice of God. Do you know that God's voice has a specific tone? I know that we live in the age of Caller Display - you know what that is? Whether your smart phone, or even on the house phone, when somebody is ringing usually their name (if they're in the directory) or their number will come up, and you know who it is. Well, I can remember the day before that was, and even now when I can't see the display on my phone, if I lift the phone and answer it and it's my wife on the other end of the phone, of course I immediately know it's her. I don't need her to say: 'Hello David, it's Barbara, your wife'. What's that coming out of? It's coming out of familiarity in the relationship, yes? So there is a tone to God's voice that you will learn actually to recognise immediately, because you know Who is speaking, you know the Person Who is speaking.

This might be helpful for you, so that you don't have that reaction when you hear a voice: 'Is it me, is it the devil, or is it God?'. Two lists that I find immensely helpful, you may want to jot this down or take a photograph of it on your smartphone if you have one. God's voice and Satan's voice - look at how correspondingly different they are. God's voice stills you, Satan's voice rushes you. Have you ever had that experience where you feel pressurised into doing something, and you think it's the voice of God? 'You really must witness to that person over there, you really must witness to that person. You're not a good Christian if you don't witness to that person'. I'm not saying God doesn't prompt you to witness to someone, He does, He does it to me regularly - but He never does it like that. Some of you are living your life like that, God is rushing you to do your quiet time. Now, He does like to meet with you at that time every day, I know that, but you've got to discern what is God and what is not. He leads you, God leads you, but the devil pushes you, he drives you - yes? God reassures you, but Satan frightens you. God has not given a spirit of fear, isn't that right? Perfect love casts out - what? Fear.

God's voice enlightens you, Satan's voice confuses you. Now that's not to say you're never confused about the will of God, it's one of the most difficult things at times to know. But you've got to understand that if you're hearing a voice that is more confusing than anything else, it may not be God. God encourages you - of course, the Holy Spirit is called the Parakletos, the One who comes alongside and strengthens, He's called the Encourager, that's a literal translation, He encourages us - but Satan

discourages us. Some of us are perennially discouraged Christians, and we perceive that it is God that is making us that way. It's not to say that we blame God, but we attribute it to Him because we're not a good enough Christian to the standard that we feel is required of us. We think that it is God that is driving us and hammering us and pushing us forward, when it's not! God comforts you, the comfort of the Holy Spirit, Satan worries you. God's voice calms you, Satan obsesses you. It's interesting, yes? God's voice brings peace. Obsessive-compulsive religious people, very highly strung religious folk, perfectionist folk, it's not God. God's voice convicts you, Satan's voice condemns you. There is a very, very important distinction there, do you know what that actually means? It means that when you're convicted by the Holy Spirit - and He does convict of sin and of righteousness - you go to God, confess your sins, He is faithful and just to forgive you your sins, cleanse you from all unrighteousness, and if you have truly repented and confessed that sin you are free, you are forgiven! So if you continue to feel as if you're convicted, that is not conviction any more that is condemnation, and it's not the voice of God, it's the voice of the devil. If you don't know who's condemning you - well, God never condemns you, He might convict you, but all you need to do is confess it, deal with it, finish with it, and if that bad voice is still going on you know it's not God.

He is the accuser of the brothers, Satan - Revelation chapter 12 tells us. So when you get this accusatory tone, this nitpicking tone, this drivenness that is coming over in the voices that you're hearing, it may be you but in all likelihood it is the enemy. Especially with conscientious Christian people, you know, if Satan can't push you over the edge of backsliding through moral failure, he will try to drive you over the edge through frantic activism in Christian activity where you become obsessive in your devotion to the Lord. You say, 'Well, I need a bit more help. OK, I understand that there is a certain tone to the voice of God - but, you know, when I'm in this state, when there is this conflicting signals stuff coming, and my heart just is hard to get into God's frequency; how can I sort of still everything that I might know that I'm hearing the still, small voice of God?'. I'm going to give you three practical steps, very simply, you'll be able to remember these even.

First of all, what you need to do if you're questioning what the voices are you're hearing - is it God, is that the devil, is it demons, or is it you - first of all, you need to submit. What does that mean? Well, you need to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Every area of your life, submit it to Him as Lord. No no-go areas for Jesus and the Holy Spirit, OK? Now that will take humility, and this might be hitting a few red buttons here for folks. Humility presupposes that you have a sense of need. If you're sitting here tonight, and saying: 'All I need is the Bible', or 'Everything is working well for me, and I've got intelligence, and I'm quite capable or whatever, I know how to get along in life' - if you've got that kind of attitude, that's pride, and pride is the greatest obstacle to hearing the voice of God; it's the greatest obstacle in the Christian life in entirety. If you want to hear the voice of God, you need to take the low place. The Laodicean church in the book of Revelation, it says of them: 'They had need of nothing' - that's why Jesus Christ was standing outside a closed door, He wasn't in the church. Proverbs 3:5-6 says: 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart, do not lean on your own understanding; but in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path'. So you're not leaning on your knowledge or your own past experience, but you're saying: 'Lord, I need to acknowledge You in every area, and I need to trust You that You will guide me and direct my paths'. So there needs to be humility, that's part of what submitting to the Lordship of Jesus is.

There also needs to be purity. You will hear more clearly with a clean heart. Psalm 66 says: 'If I regard', or cherish, or harbour, 'iniquity in my heart, then the Lord will not hear me' - that is God going deaf. We might be deaf to the voice of God, but God actually goes deaf - so the two-way communication is broken through sin. Now, who of us doesn't sin? But we're talking about confessing, repenting, dealing with sin; not continuing on in habitual, lifestyle sin, but actually being ruthless with it. 'Who has clean hands and a pure heart, he will ascend the hill of the Lord' - he will have communion with his God. So you need to submit to the Lord, say 'Lord, I surrender every area to You in humility, ask You to purify me now'. In that act of submission, ask Him to help you silence your own thoughts, your own desires, your own opinions and that of others. So, you're submitting completely to Jesus. Second Corinthians chapter 10 verse 5 says we are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ. Do you get what we're doing here? You could picture it by lying prostrate on the floor and saying: 'Lord, over to You. I'm submitting everything to You, mind, body, soul and spirit; everything I'm submitting to You. I take captive every thought, every feeling, every desire, every aspiration, every dream, everything to Your obedience'. OK? So that's submission.

The second thing to do is resist, and this is coming directly from Scripture of course - some of you have guessed it already. James 4 verse 7: 'Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you'. So after laying everything in surrender at the feet of the Lord, you resist the enemy who may be trying to deceive you. So you use the authority that Jesus has given you to silence the enemy. What does that look like? Just what I said: 'Enemy, I silence you in Jesus' name. If you're trying to deceive me, any spirit is trying to deceive me, I rebuke you in the name of Jesus and I silence you and command you to leave me' - easy as that.

Submit, resist, and then thirdly: expect. Expect what? An answer! You see, you've got to believe that God speaks to you and that God will speak to you. Hebrews chapter 11 verse 6 says: 'Without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him'. Do you know what that means? Expectancy draws God. If you're walking around not expecting God to speak to you, do you think you're going to recognise when He does? Of course not! Believe that He will speak to you, and then wait until He does. There might be a waiting - but do you see when you do wait, and when He does speak, then you've got to allow Him to guide you in whatever way He sees fit. Not second-guess Him, but wait for what He will tell you to do.

So we've looked at how to hear the voice of God, we've looked at how to recognise God's voice, but thirdly and finally we want to look at what to do with God's voice. Obey! As we began, we can look at how to hear God's voice, how to recognise God's voice, but what is the use of any of it if we don't do anything with it? Here's a principle that is really intrinsic to you hearing the voice of God and continuing to hear the voice of God, William MacDonald says: 'Obedience is the instrument of revelation'. Obedience is the instrument of revelation. Do you know what that means? If you want to have a continued revelation from God concerning your direction in life, you need to continually be obeying God. Obedience will actually open up the avenue of guidance for you. I'm told that the glowworm only ever glows (I know he doesn't have feet), but he only ever glows one step at a time. In other words, he only ever sees what's just right in front of him at any given time - that's the way God guides us, because He requires

us to be obedient. Some of us are stuck in life, in Christianity, at whatever juncture we may find ourselves in, we're stuck because there has been a point at which God told us to do something, and it was very clear to us, and we disobeyed. Now we are expecting guidance with our job or relationships, church life, ministry, all the rest, but we haven't been obedient - and obedience is the instrument of revelation.

Amos chapter 3 verse 3 says: 'Can two walk together except they be agreed?'. The prophet is speaking there about how God was speaking to him because he walked with God, but Israel, God's people were not walking with God, so they weren't hearing from God. You see, Amos heard from God because he was walking in agreement with God, he was walking at God's pace. It was the blessing of obedience in his life, that prophetic vision. The blessings of obedience in the Christian life are immense. I'm going to show you on the screen two of probably my most favourite verses in the Bible. John chapter 14 verses 21 and 23, let these words sink in, Jesus said: 'He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father', watch this, 'and I will love him and manifest Myself to him'. Wow! Who would like Jesus to manifest Himself to them? That is what the verse says, isn't it? How does that happen? Obedience, obedience. You can't circumvent obedience. You can have all the weird and wonderful experiences you like, but if you want to truly go deep with God into an intimacy that Jesus is talking about, obedience is the way.

But look at the second verse, it's not just about Jesus. 'Jesus answered and said to him', this is to Judas (not Iscariot) who said 'How will You manifest Yourself to us and not the world?', 'Jesus answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him (or her) and make Our home (abode, habitation, dwelling place) with him". Wow! That's the Trinity. That's the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit will come and live with you, if you - what? Obey God's voice. Do you see the blessings of obedience? Jesus said: 'If you love Me, keep My commandments. Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not the things that I say?'

So let me ask you: do you really love the Lord? Now, I know obedience comes out of love, it's not that by being a legalistic religious type person that you will end up loving the Lord. It's more that when the love of God shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit, you will start living out love towards God by obeying Him - it's more like that. But through your obedience you're showing that you truly love the Lord. But let me ask you: what impulses are you obeying? What impulses? Maybe the fruit of your life is confusion, but what are you listening to? What actually are you heeding? Just analyse for a moment some of the thoughts that you have on a daily basis. Now, this is what I'm talking about: if the impulse is 'Let's sit down and just surf the net here to see what we find', or the impulse is (and this is a dietary thing, I'm not talking spiritually here) 'Let's go and look in the fridge at 9 o'clock at night and see what's there' - those are impulses that are not very healthy to obey if you're wanting to stay fit and healthy and tuned in, isn't that right? The impulse might be to lie in every morning in your life, but you don't listen to that voice, do you? Hopefully! But many of us in the spiritual realm are listening to those impulses, and we're following them - I've done it, and do still struggle - following them without even questioning where these thoughts are coming from, when we're actually being brought so near the edge of the precipice of moral failure at times, and we are playing fast and loose with sin, and we do it at the behest of a voice that speaks to us. We're not even alert to the fact that this is the enemy, and he knows that we're heeding him so he keeps doing it.

What are the impulses that you're following? The thoughts? The prompts? You know what Samuel said to Saul, don't you? You remember the incident in 1 Samuel 15 where the prophet, you see, would come and the priest would slay a sacrifice for the army going into battle - and Samuel was late. It was seven days, and they were standing encamped, and the enemy was coming at them. Saul was panicking, and out of fear of the people, he decided to perform the sacrifice illegally himself - he wasn't allowed to do that. He did the sacrifice, and then Samuel comes on the scene and says: 'What have you done?'. He says: 'Well, you wouldn't come, and I feared the people, so I did the sacrifice myself'. Then later on, what happens is: God had instructed them to kill all the Amalekites, but Saul spared King Agag and all the best livestock. He said: 'I'm doing that for the Lord, the livestock is for the Lord'. Samuel again comes on the scene, on this scene of disobedience, and he hears the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the cattle, and he says: 'What does this mean?'. Saul says: 'Oh, I spared them for the Lord and because of the people' - again he blames the people. Samuel says: 'To obey is better than sacrifice'.

You want to hear the voice of God, don't you? Who wouldn't? But are you going to obey Him? Do you think He's going to say an awful lot to you if your default position is disobedience and rebellion? No, He's not. I want to encourage you that spiritual growth does not develop until the Christian begins to hear from God; but equally, spiritual growth will never develop until you are obedient to what God is saying to you - because obedience is the instrument of revelation. 'My sheep', Jesus said, 'hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me'. One biblical commentator said: 'One of the reasons people find it hard to be obedient to the commands of Christ is that they are uncomfortable taking orders from a stranger'. Intimacy in relationship is the key to hearing the voice of God. Yes? Obedience is the way that you will go on hearing more clearly and more accurately what God is saying.

Now, I'm finished, but I want us to pray a prayer - potentially - if you feel up to it. Let me just read it over and explain it for you. This is really now positioning you to hear from God like you've never done before: 'Father, I thank You that You do speak' - and for some of you, that is a confession that you need to make, maybe undoing bad teaching or bad experience. 'I confess that I have not been listening, or have not been able to recognise Your voice' - for whatever reasons, we need to confess that perhaps. 'Through sin, unbelief, distractions, or listening to the enemy's voice, I have missed Yours. I repent of agreements made with inner voices of self or Satan, and I ask You to unblock my spiritual ears from any consequences of this'. Now, as I've been going through tonight, maybe the Holy Spirit has revealed to you certain things that have been said, you have agreed with, agreements that have been made internally, all the rest - you might need to break those tonight. 'I ask You to break off from me false pronouncements, curses, or false prophecy, or any words of rejection that have clogged my ears to You'. I believe that people who have received words of rejection a lot can have blockages in their hearing with God because of that - it can affect how they perceive God toward them. 'Please heal my heart, and deliver me from anything hindering me hearing Your voice. Forgive me for when I have heard Your voice and have disobeyed You'. How many times has that been the case? I know for me. 'I ask You now to awaken my spiritual senses to hear and perceive You better' - that's an exciting one. Expect that to happen. 'Draw me into greater intimacy with You, Lord', that's the key. 'May Your Holy Spirit completely possess me now' - remember the picture of the Temple of the Holy Spirit, that's what it's about, the still, small voice

comes within and speaks to you from your spirit. 'Please give me the grace and strength to obey Your voice when I hear You. I submit to You, I resist the devil, and expect to hear from You from now on' - those three things, submit, resist, and expect - 'in Jesus' name, Amen'.

Can you pray that? Are you willing, ready to pray? Let's pray it together, only if you want to, OK? Let's pray: 'Father, I thank You that You do speak. I confess that I have not been listening, or have not been able to recognise Your voice. Through sin, unbelief, distractions, or listening to the enemy's voice, I have missed Yours. I repent of agreements made with inner voices of self or Satan, and I ask You to unblock my spiritual ears from any consequences of this. I ask You to break off from me false pronouncements, curses, or false prophecy, or any words of rejection that have clogged my ears to You. Please heal my heart, and deliver me from anything hindering me hearing Your voice. Forgive me for when I have heard Your voice and have disobeyed You. I ask You now to awaken my spiritual senses to hear and perceive You better. Draw me into greater intimacy with You, Lord. May Your Holy Spirit completely possess me now. Please give me the grace and strength to obey Your voice when I hear You. I submit to You, I resist the devil, and expect to hear You from now on'.

Let's pray: Lord, we thank You for what You're doing tonight. We thank You that You're the God who is, and we believe that You're not silent, we believe that You're constantly speaking. Give us ears to hear what the Spirit is saying right now, Lord, to all of us. We pray: give us ears to hear; let the word go deep down into our ears, as Jesus said; let it go deep into our heart; let it make a change, Lord, in all of our lives. Lord, may we be people who walk in step with what Your Spirit is saying for the 21st-century, for this day and age. I pray for The Stables, that You will raise up a people who can hear God for this time, for this moment, for such a time as this. Lord, that's what we need. Lord, You're not saying what You said in 1859, You're not saying what You said in 1921, You're not saying what You said in 1904 and 1905 - You're saying something for the 21st-century, for this year, for this day, and we need to have ears to hear! So, Lord, let us not be hearing second-hand messages, but let us all be hearing from Your heart what You've got to say to me, to my marriage, to my family, to my neighbourhood, to my ministry, to my church, to my county. Lord, give us ears to hear. Lord, keep ministering on to people here, whatever their needs might be. In Jesus' name we pray - receive our praise, and we ask Your blessing on our refreshments as well and the rest of the evening - in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Hunger For Reality - Chapter 5

"Releasing Your Potential"

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Let's pray. Father, we thank You for what we've just been singing. Lord, we feel it's so prophetic. Having passed through the last week and seen so many things with both the natural eye and the spiritual eye, Lord, we really sense that You're wanting to move in our land. We believe that, we've always known that, but Lord You are communicating to so many of us in various different ways in our capacities, wherever we are serving You or representing You, that You are moving, You're doing a new thing. We're excited, we thank You, and we want to declare tonight - not just sing, but we want to declare - greater things have yet to come for this island, greater things have yet to come for this county, for this province, and for all the four provinces of Ireland. Lord, we are looking to You, and we're talking about 'Releasing Potential' tonight, Lord, and we just want to take that position before You individually, for You to do whatever You want to do with each of our lives. Yet, Father, we also want the potential of our nation to be released. We think of the latent potential of those old wells that were dug many many years ago, Lord, that You would open them again and release the potential. Lord, we really covet Your presence here tonight; we ask You to come now and meet with us in a very definite way and do whatever You want to do, Lord. We will give You all the praise and all the glory, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, you're very welcome. Thank you for joining with us. We've been going through this series - 'Release Your Potential' is tonight's subject, but the series is 'Hunger for Reality'. Really we've been charting the course of how to go deeper with God in our Christian experience. So many of us go through the motions in Christendom, Christianity, of churchgoing. Maybe you're really spiritual and you read your Bible and you pray, and maybe even tell people about Jesus - but, yet there is within many of us this ache of 'There must be more, and I'm not experiencing everything that God has for me'. So we have been covering - and all the CDs are free out there, there are hundreds of them, please take some of them! - but we've been covering subjects like being Spirit-filled, the empowerment of the Spirit, hearing the voice of God, obeying the voice of God, what else have we done? 'Exuberant Joy', and so subjects that are little bit different in a sense, and yet intrinsic to what it is to have experiential Christianity. Not just concept, but actually to have a depth to our knowledge and experience of God. Tonight we're looking at 'Releasing Your Potential'. Now, again, each of these subjects each night could be a series on their own, so there is a lot of potential in tonight's message - let me tell you! But we're not going to be looking at it exhaustively, you'll be glad to know, but I want to look at two scriptures first of all just as a launchpad for what we're going to look at tonight.

Colossians chapter 4, and then 2 Timothy chapter 4. So Colossians chapter 4 and then 2 Timothy 4, if you want to get both of those. Just one verse from each of them, Colossians 4 and verse 17, Paul is writing to this church and he highlights an individual in the church with a message: *"And say to Archippus, 'Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it'"*. Wow! It would be wonderful to have a church that you went to where you got a letter from an apostle, wouldn't it?

But imagine if you had a personal reference in that letter! It would seem really good that Sunday morning, while that was read out, you were singled out - but obviously there is a bit of a censure here as well, because this guy mustn't have been fulfilling his potential. Maybe he was reneging, backing off in a ministry that God had given him, and Paul is giving him this revelation: 'You've got to fulfil the ministry that God has given you'. Then a similar verse in 2 Timothy 4 verse 5, and this is Paul to Timothy - he gets two epistles to him highlighting issues in his own ministry! Second Timothy 4 and verse 5: *"But you be watchful", be sober and vigilant, "in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry"*. There it is again, 'Fulfill your ministry! What God has called you to, Timothy, you've got to fulfil it, you've got to execute. There is responsibility there, for you to fulfil your potential'.

Now, if you were with us last season at the very beginning, the first subject that we took in our 'Deeper Healing' series was 'Who Am I?' - Finding True Identity'. You may recall that I showed you this fellow [Michelangelo's David]. Antonio was a sculptor, I told you the story how he chipped away at a block of marble and he could do nothing with it, so he tossed away the marble - very precious. Later a guy called Michelangelo took it up, and he carved the greatest statue of all time, arguably speaking, and this is the statue of David that is now situated in Rome. Michelangelo had this gift that he could see the potential that another was going to discard. I asked you, I don't know whether you were there on that occasion, but I asked you: if you saw yourself as a block of marble, what do you see? What do you see in yourself? I'm not going to go over that whole ground that we spent a whole night on, but this is vital to your understanding of unlocking your potential; because a great deal of the problem and hindrance is our own perception of ourselves. So, how do you see yourself? Do you see yourself as having potential at all?

The dictionary definition of 'potential' as an adjective is 'having or showing the capacity to develop into something in the future'. So, you've got promise - is that the way you see yourself? The noun is 'having latent qualities or abilities that may be developed and lead to future success or usefulness'. So there are dormant abilities within you that may not have been tapped into or realised yet, but they are there - do you see yourself that way? That particular night, I homed in on Gideon. That's where we started, and we looked at Gideon in Judges, and he was hiding behind a winepress threshing out wheat, for fear of the Midianites, God's enemies and the people who were destroying God's people and taking their harvest. So here was a fearful man, his knees are knocking, he's intimidated, and he's even hiding as he is trying to get some food for himself - and that's when he has a theophany, what we call a divine encounter, and the Angel of the Lord appears to him and God speaks to him. It's ridiculous what God says to him, He addresses him as 'You mighty man of valour!' God must have been the only person who saw that in Gideon, yes? But God saw it nevertheless, and God told him: 'Go in this, your might' - he's probably thinking 'I don't have any might, what are You talking about?' - 'Go in this, your might', but God made him into what He saw him to be originally, not what everybody else saw, not what he saw, but what God saw.

You, whether you realise it or not or want to consider it, you have potential, you have unused strengths, you've got hidden talents, untapped abilities, dormant gifts. There is a great wealth of potential in every single one of you. Do you know what that is [a picture of]? No, it's not gold, it looks like gold but it's not gold:

'A diamond in the rough,
Is a diamond sure enough,
For, before it ever sparkled,
It was made of diamond stuff'

That's what that is, an uncut diamond. It's not very interesting to look at, is it, uncut? Look at the beauty of the cut diamond. Myles Munro in his book, 'Releasing Your Potential', says: 'The wealthiest spot on planet Earth is not the oilfields of Saudi Arabia, or the goldmines of South Africa. The richest deposits on our planet lie not many blocks from your house in your local cemetery. Buried beneath the soil of those sacred grounds are songs that never were sung, books that never were written, paintings that never filled a canvas, ideas that never became reality. Tragically, our graveyards are filled with potential that was never fulfilled'. Very sobering, isn't it? Again, even currently, consider that only a small percentage of the 7.5 billion people that inhabit our planet will achieve a significant proportion of their true potential. Before we even talk tonight about the potential of a Christian, on a mere human level so many people are living so far down on their potential.

So, you have a decision to make tonight, and that is: to live up to both your natural and your supernatural potential - because if you're a child of God, you have supernatural potential - not to waste your life like most of humanity is. Christians are no exceptions, Christians wasting away, eking out an existence without any purpose and not realising their potential. Myles Munro - I'm going to quote him a lot tonight, he wrote this book 'Releasing Your Potential' - he says: 'Every manufacturer establishes the specifications, environment, conditions and operational standards for attaining the maximum performance level of his or her product. God our Creator has also established a plan for the maximum performance and release of your potential. Violation of these requirements will result in the malfunction, distortion, misuse and abuse of your precious potential'.

After carefully studying the Manufacturer's manual, Munro identifies what he believes are ten major keys to releasing your full potential. This is what he says: first of all, you must know your source. We'll be looking at these tonight, maybe not in this order and in as much detail as he does, but you need to know your source - like everything that is manufactured needs to have a source, an origin. You need to understand how the product was designed to function. You need to know your purpose, what it's for. You need to understand your resources. You need to have the right environment. You must work out of your potential. You must cultivate your potential. You must guard your potential. You must share your potential, and you must know and understand the laws of limitation. You can take a photograph of that if you want if you have a smart phone, but we will be looking at these tonight.

First of all I want us to consider that you must know your Source. Now, what that simply means from a Christian perspective is that you've got to be related to your Source, to your Manufacturer. Have you got the picture, yes? Not of me I hope! That wooden table has a source, and the strength, the durability and stability of the table, the nature of the table can only be as strong and durable as the tree that it came from, the source. Therefore the potential of the table to do its job is determined by the potential of the source from which it came. It's exactly the same for us. We've got to understand, biblically speaking - just in case there's anybody here that is not a true Bible-believing, born-again Christian who knows Jesus personally as Saviour and Lord -

you've got to understand that you're not a mistake, you're certainly not an accident, you didn't come from a big bang in space billions of years ago, but God created you in His image. He designed you, there is a Creator, and He actually planned your life. You've got to understand that He is the source of all life, and therefore we need to be related to Him in order to have the meaning of life, and to know the true purpose. But equally, as Christians, we got to understand that our life here on Earth is not just to enjoy ourselves - even through the message of the Gospel and Christian blessings - but there is a divine order to everything, and we've got to understand that if we are born again we've actually received the life of God Himself! Is that not incredible?

The Bible says we have become partakers of the divine nature. It's a nonsense statement, but you understand what I mean: God's DNA is in us. I've said it before, I don't know whether it was here or not, but that's the difference between adoption in Bible times and even today, and spiritual adoption. When you adopt someone, you get another person's biological child and they become legally yours, and might be as much a child of yours as any biological child - but they will never be your biological offspring, correct? But when you're born again and adopted into God's family, you actually become - again, another nonsense statement - but you become biologically His. He gives you His life, His nature, yes? Isn't that good? So this is how we relate to our Source, that the very life of God is in us. Jesus put it another way in John chapter 15, He said: 'I am the vine, you are the branches'. The inferred truth there is that just as the branches are drawing life off the vine, we draw life off Jesus, and hopefully bear fruit. But there is something more that Jesus exhorts the disciples to do in John 15, having taught them that we are plugged into Him as the life source, He says: 'Remain in Me, abide in Me, so that you might bear much fruit'. So there is a responsibility upon us to be related to our Source, to abide in God, to continue to pursue God in order to release our potential.

I usually buy second-hand cars, and the nearest thing to a brand-new car I've ever bought was my latest car, and it was two years old. The beauty about that was that it was still in warranty, a four-year warranty. To stay in warranty, I'm not allowed to go to Joe Bloggs down the road and get a service, or get my car fixed - did you know that? I have to go to the manufacturer, and it has to be somebody who pays their bills and their VAT and all the rest and is registered, but they have to put genuine parts into that car. In order to stay in warranty, in order to get the guarantee if you like, I need to abide in the relationship with the manufacturer. Listen, if you want to release your full potential for the Lord, if you want to perform at a maximum level for God, you need to be in relationship with the Lord, you need to know your Source - and I don't just mean being a Christian, I mean actually getting a deep knowledge and experience of God in your life. So I'm asking you tonight: are you pursuing the Lord? So many people who come to meetings, and come out for prayer and look for help and ministry - and I'm encouraging you to do that tonight - but some of them don't have this desire and passion to really pursue God, to chase after Him, to follow hard after the Lord. They are not hungry and thirsty after Him and righteousness. They don't have a passion or a zeal to go after God.

If you want to release your potential for the kingdom of God, you need to have this relationship with your Source. Another thing I want you to see - and, again, a point that Myles Munroe makes, but not in the order that he makes them - you must understand your resources. So there is source, but there is also resource. All manufacturers provide access to the necessary resources for a proper maintenance

and operation of their product. Listen to Romans chapter 8 and verse 11, just listen to it: 'If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you'. What that verse is telling us is that the same power that raised Christ from the dead is living in you, do you believe that? Oh yes, yes - really? Do you believe it? That that power that raised Jesus from death - He was really dead, you know, really dead, like heart stopped, yes? Blood drains, He shed His blood at the cross of course, but that paleness of death - He was dead, really dead, and God's Spirit brought Him back from the dead, after three days now! That's some power, to do that. There were resurrections before, or at least people were brought back to life, but there was never a resurrection like this - because the Bible says that He was raised to the power of an endless life, which means He was raised to die never again. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he died again. Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead, but she died again. The widow of Nain's son was raised from the dead, but he died again. Jesus will never die again - that power that raised Him from the dead set Him into an eternal life that we now are partakers of, but listen: we don't have to wait until we die, or the resurrection, that actually is in us now! You're a hard audience tonight!

That life is in us that raised Jesus from the dead, do you believe that? Now that would be enough, but that's not all there is. First Corinthians 12 verses 4-6 says in the New Living Translation: 'There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source', there's that word again, 'of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us'. So God's Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in all of us, but He also gives us gifts, He gives us special abilities through which we can serve the Lord. Now, you might have natural talents, and we will touch on this in a moment or two, you might have natural talents - you don't have to be a Christian to have natural talents - but what you do have, if you're a child of God, is: you have spiritual gifts. You may not know what those are, you might even think you don't have them, but you do.

Not a lot of people know the difference between natural talents and spiritual gifts, some people mix them up. Let me show you this slide, you can take a photo of it if you want, just highlighting the contrasts between the two. Natural talents are from God, there is no doubt about that, but they come through our parents, they are more of a human thing; but spiritual gifts are from God, independent of our parents. So your Mum or Dad may not have the particular spiritual gift that you are given, even if they are Christians. Natural talents come from birth, spiritual gifts come from rebirth. Natural talent is to benefit mankind on a natural level, that's a blessing of course, but spiritual gifts are to benefit mankind on the spiritual level. Natural talents must be recognised, developed, and exercised; and identically so - this is worth a bit of pondering, we haven't got time tonight - spiritual gifts must also be recognised, developed, and exercised. So nobody who has a spiritual gift is perfect in the execution of that spiritual gift right away or perhaps ever. Natural talents ought to be dedicated by believers to the Lord - so God gives us them naturally, but we've got to dedicate them to God - and equally, spiritual gifts ought to be used for God's glory, to God for His use and glory. So those are the differences, and that's a huge subject in and of itself.

So what have you got? I'm sure you've got a few talents, whether you would admit it or not, but you also have got spiritual gifts. The good news is - it is good news, hopefully, for you tonight - whatever you have, you can have more. First Corinthians

12 verse 31 says: 'Earnestly desire the best gifts'. Now that infers that you haven't already got those gifts, doesn't it? Then in 1 Corinthians 14 verse 1: 'Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy'. There's a lot of nonsense talked about spiritual gifts, particularly in church: 'Oh, be very careful. Oh, be careful what you seek or what you go after'. But Paul on the contrary actually says: 'No, you go after these spiritual gifts, you desire them and pursue them, especially that you might prophesy'. Some of us have a very passive attitude to spiritual gifts, when we say in a laissez-faire type of way: 'Well, if God hasn't given me that, then I'll not be looking for that if God hasn't given me that'. That's not what the Bible says, the Bible says if you haven't got something, desire it and go after it, pursue it!

So, are you plugged into the power Source that raised Jesus Christ from the dead? Are you cognisant of the gifts that you have, not just natural talents which God can use, but the gifts that God has supernaturally given you? Do you recognise them? Now, be honest, OK? Spiritually, what are the things that you do really well? 'Oh, I couldn't possibly say I do anything well, because that would be pride, wouldn't it?'. If you have to say 'There's nothing that I do really well', can I tell you something? The devil is lying to you! You need to face that fact tonight, that you are good at things - what are you good at? What are you good at spiritually? You see, for some of you: your problem with admitting that at all, is that you cannot admit your own uniqueness, that you have unique gifts and talents. Now there are gifts delineated within the New Testament in general areas, but you are unique as a human being made in the image of God. That means - and we said this before, I think we talked about it when we looked at 'Empowered by the Spirit' - that what God can do with His Holy Spirit upon you, with the gifts that He has given you, is unique. It's like a fingerprint in the spiritual realm, He cannot do with anybody else what He can do with you with the Holy Spirit working in and through you - isn't that incredible?

There are some of you here tonight, and you don't think there is anything special about you - that's the devil's lie. You need to realise that you are unique. We were talking about 7.5 billion people on the face of the Earth tonight, and there's not one other person like you - and that's not even including all the people that have already lived and died; I mean, how many billions is that? Yet you are absolutely unique, there will never be another person like you - and yet you struggle with thinking that you're special? Isn't God incredible that He could make so many different types of people? But for some others of you, the problem is not just uniqueness, but it is actually self-acceptance - that you've got a real struggle accepting the way God has made you. I'm not talking about your foibles, your sins, and your deficiencies that can be worked on, and God wants to do that - He saves us as we are, but He doesn't want to leave us as we are. I'm talking about just generally speaking, the way that you're made, and I think it was that night to do with 'Identity' I talked about Psalm 139, how God knit us together in our mother's womb, He made us, He ordered us the way we are; and then when He saw the finished article, He said 'It's wonderful!'. You're fearfully and wonderfully made. I think I got you that night to say: 'God, You made a good job when You made me', didn't I, if you were here? Could you do that tonight? 'God, You made a good job when You made me'. Say it: 'God, You made a good job when You made me' - but the half of you don't believe that! Isn't that right?

We have a problem with self-acceptance. We need to accept ourselves the way God has made us - that would be a big step for some of you this evening if you could do that. Another issue that we would do well to address and indeed dispatch is

comparison and competition, where we are measuring ourselves to others. This is particularly rife within Christian circles and, in the sections of Christendom that really celebrate and believe in the gifts of the Spirit, this can be a real problem. Do you compare yourself? I shared this quote with you before, it's from Kirk Cobain from the rock band 'Nirvana', he took his own life sadly, but he said: 'Pretending to be someone you're not is a waste of the person you are'. How many of us have looked on at some other skilled or gifted Christian or person in the church that we admire, and said: 'I wish I was them', or 'I wish I was like them', when God has made you uniquely gifted and talented. He wants you to have His Spirit on you to do something that no one else can do, and yet we are harping after something that someone else has.

We need to dispatch comparison and competition, 2 Corinthians 10 verse 12 in the NIV says, Paul is writing: 'We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise'. Basically Paul is saying that they are fools, to measure themselves by themselves, to compare themselves with themselves - it's a road to no town. This is, at the top of this iceberg, what many of us see of ourselves - where our potential is below water level. Isn't that an incredible photograph? There is so much more to you than you realise, and certainly regarding potential - what you've got to offer, and what God sees in you. Now we have got this complex - and I've alluded to it already, particularly in Christian circles in the North of Ireland but I think it is a Northern Irish thing, and maybe even an Irish or a Celtic thing - whereby we are afraid of pride, so afraid, so afraid of admitting 'I might be good at something'. Who says that?

Now there is no doubt about it, we have to be aware of pride. Vavasor Powell was a Welsh Puritan, and he said: 'Pride in our talents is a sign of ingratitude to God. It is very hard to behold our own gifts without pride, and the gifts of others without envy'. It's true, isn't it? We seem to swing, pendulum like, to extremes. You know, I have found this as a preacher, sometimes when you preach well, you know, your head swells and you think 'Wow! That went well! That was good!'; and then when you think it hasn't gone so well, you go right into the dumps of despair and think 'I'm never going to preach again, that's it! That's my last sermon!'. Do you know what I mean? It's hard to get the happy medium in between, isn't it? That's because of the old sinful nature that we have. So we are afraid of pride, it was J.C. Ryle who said: 'Gifts without grace are the characteristics of Satan himself'. Isn't that what happened Lucifer? He was gifted by God, he had great powers and abilities, but pride lifted him to a level where he wanted to be in the glory himself. He still had the gifts, and he's still got those gifts, not power, but they were prostituted for the wrong reasons.

So we need to be aware of pride, but we also need to be aware that there are two extremes: one of them is pride, but the other is low self-esteem. The other is not recognising the gifts that God has given. Yes, let's recognise they are gifts, it's got nothing to do with us, but let's recognise them! So the answer to solve this problem is to focus on the Source, to keep God at the forefront. Romans chapter 12 and verse 6: 'Having then gifts differing according to the grace', so it's nothing to do with your abilities in and of yourself, it's what God has gifted you with through grace, 'Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith'. So recognise what God has given us, and use them. Going back a couple of verses to verse 3: 'For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly

than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith'.

So right away that bursts the bubble of pride, doesn't it? Don't think of yourself too highly, these gifts are given by God, they are grace-gifts - but hold on a wee minute. If we wrote that verse, it would say 'Don't think about yourself at all. Don't think about yourself highly, but don't think about yourself at all, because that would be pride'. It doesn't say that, it says: 'Think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith'. So what that means is: you need to think about yourself the way God thinks about you, you need to think about your gifts the way God thinks about your gifts, not the way the devil tells you or false humility tells you to denigrate yourself. Are you with me? We want to avoid the extreme of pride, but equally we want to avoid the extreme of low self-esteem and actually denying what God has given us. So, you need to know your gift. Now I don't have time tonight to go into a whole excursus about the gifts of the Spirit, or certain gifts in the church, or giftings that are people in the church - Ephesians 4 - we don't have time for that tonight. There are plenty of resources out there for you to get information on that. I'm not sure that some of these 'tick box exercises' are the best way to find out your gift, they might be ways to find out where your talents are or something like that. Go away and search out for that, but find before God, prayerfully, the gifts that He has given you and go and use them! Don't deny them, go and use them for Him!

But you also need to know how to use them. You must understand how the product was designed to function, isn't that right? Isn't that what we said at the beginning? Every manufacturer designs and develops products to function in a specific manner - so hoovers were not meant to cut the grass, isn't that right? There is a function of every product. So I want to ask you: what are you doing with what God gave you? What are you doing with the strength, even your life energy that you're living everyday, what are you doing with it? Now I'm not saying that you can't have a secular job - I don't think there is any such thing as a secular job when you're a Christian, because everything that we do we have to do with all our might to the glory of God, everything is a ministry - what I mean is that you don't have to be on a mission field or in a pulpit in order to be serving the Lord. But what are your energies being used on day by day? What are you using your gifts for, your strengths and talents? You must understand how the product was designed a function, to the glory of God.

You must know your purpose in life. There are a lot of people, Christians, who don't know their purpose. They're still asking, like the unbeliever: 'Why am I here? What's the purpose of my life?'. Maybe you're in middle age, and you're starting to think: 'What have I done with my years? Where am I going? What am I going to do with the rest of the time God has given to me?'. We need to know our gifts, but we need to know how to use them, the purpose for which we have them. We need to know our purpose here, that you possess potential and you need to know how to fulfil it. The good news tonight is, whatever that purpose is, you possess the potential to fulfil it; and no matter how big the dream is God has given you, your potential is equal to that assignment. He has given you purpose, and He can match the potential in you with the power to fulfil it!

But purpose gives birth to responsibility, doesn't it? You see, you must work out your potential. Potential is essentially, by definition, a dormant ability. It can lie sleeping, even a sleeping giant, but if it's lying sleeping it's no good to anybody. Potential means

nothing if you don't do anything with it. So you've got to take your responsibility with the gifts that God has given to you. 'How To Get up and Get Dressed' - reading a book about it lying in bed isn't going to make it happen, isn't that correct? It's interesting that the first thing that God gave Adam was not a wife - every man say 'Amen'! Do you know what God gave Adam before a wife? Work! Now I know the wife probably was a bit of work, in the end, but work - before the fall, before sinking into the world - work was given to Adam. He was given responsibility over all humanity, and he named the animals and so on; he was given dominion there. One of the verses we looked at a while ago, Romans 12 verse 6, talking about us being given grace gifts, it says: 'use them', to use them! If the gift of prophecy has been given to you, prophesy, use it. You see, all this potential latent within us has got to be tapped into, and we've got to use it! That verse that we read says 'by faith', according to the measure of faith that we're given. So it's not about feelings - let's ditch that right away - if you're sitting here thinking: 'Oh, but I don't feel confident', it's not about you feeling confident, it's about what God has called you to, the promises He has given, the inheritance that is yours, the gifts that have been laid upon you - the talents that are natural to you, but the gifts that God has given you supernaturally - about being obedient and, by faith, using them! What is faith? Taking God at His word, not your feelings - if it was down to feelings I never would've started preaching, maybe that would have been better, but I never would have started because you're a bundle of nerves, a bundle of nerves when you stand up for the first time in front of people and try to string a few words together. Am I right? When you give your first word of prophecy, or you share in a prayer meeting for the first time, I challenge anybody that is never nervous - there's probably something else that needs to be dealt with if you aren't nervous at all, you're overconfident if that's the case.

So it's not about feelings, it's about faith. Can I say this to you: your faith will put you outside your comfort zone. In other words, the faith has to actually cancel out the feelings, because it's our comfort zone that is holding in our potential. I like that, this goldfish jumping from one bowl to the other: 'If you want something in your life you've never had, you have to do something you've never done'. So, right away, you're pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, which will challenge your feelings - do you understand? God is speaking to some of you right now, and He's challenging you to the fact that you're too comfortable. Someone once said 'Faith is spelt R-I-S-K'. If you're going to exercise faith, you're going to have to take risks, it's going to step you out into uncomfortable places where you're vulnerable. Listen, if you're going to use your full potential for the Lord, you're going to have to do that - it's as simple as that. This passive attitude - and you can sing all the choruses you like, and go for all the prayer that you like, and get experiences galore - but if you just sit on your blessing assurance and do nothing about it, and wait for God to zap you and to do something so that all of a sudden you'll be a spiritual superhero overnight, it's not going to happen! God is going to call you to step out of your comfort zone by faith, to tap into your potential.

Not only must you work out of your potential, you must cultivate your potential and, indeed, guard your potential. Potential is like a seed, and so it has to be fed and watered, and bathed in sunshine. It has to be in an environment, you know, like a greenhouse effect, there has to be a climate, conditions conducive to the growth of that seed - and it might be a totally different environment to what you're inhabiting day by day (it usually is) in this world in which we live. But nevertheless, it needs to be cultivated, you need to get around people who are going to do that for you, who are

going to speak into your life, they're going to edify you. You need to be around a body of Christian believers that is going to encourage you in the giftings and the callings that are in your life. But you need to do your part, you need to pray, you need to be in the word, you need to be keeping yourself in the love of God so that that plant bringing fruit for the glory of the Lord might grow. You need to stimulate your faith and nourish your dream. A lot of people have dreams and visions, what are you doing about it? What are you doing about it?

There is an assumption in certain Christian circles that if God gives you a vision - whether I'm talking metaphorically or literally, you've had a vision from God or a dream that something is going to happen - I've heard this said even recently, that 'If God gives it, God will perform it'. There is an element of truth in that, but God will not perform it without your cooperation. I challenge you to look at every biblical character that God gave a vision, God give promises to - take Abraham himself, He called him out, showed him the stars in the sky, the sand of the shore, and said 'I'm going to make your descendants like this', but did Abraham not have to have faith? Sure, he's called 'the father of faith', because he had to believe God - even to the point where God was calling him, what a contradiction! God doesn't make sense at times, you do know that, don't you? He asks you to do certain things that seem to go contrary to what He has asked you before. He asked him to kill his one and only son after he'd got him - and he'd gone through a whole lot of hoops trying to get a son, wrongly, that's were Ishmael came from. He got the Ishmael, but when the son came - he's 99 years old, it's a miracle - then God asks him to put him to death! Now He didn't, of course, it was a test - but it took faith, it took years, it took generations before Abraham's vision that God splattered right across the sky for him, it took many years before that was fulfilled, because it took faith.

So you need to cultivate your potential, you also need to guard it. One of the saddest things is when what could have been becomes what should have been, and dreams die because people have not realised their potential. I mean, a premature death is a tragic thing, isn't it? Where people die before their time - and I know people debate that you can't die before your time, I believe you can die before your time - it's a tragedy, because what has been ordained of God for your life has not been fulfilled. Equally, dreams, you can live to a ripe old age but your dreams were never fulfilled, those visions that God gave you, the calling that was upon your life, the gifts that were dormant within your being never ever found manifestation - why? Because the potential was not guarded, something came in and attacked it. The enemy is a thief, you know that, don't you? He comes to steal, kill, and destroy. Jesus comes to bring life in abundance, life to the full, overflowing - that's potential.

Maybe the enemy has been coming to you, Paul talks about the life of God in us as treasure in earthen vessels - but our potential, isn't that right, is treasure within these clay pots of ours. Satan is after your potential, that's what was going on in the Garden of Eden, where he went and said 'Has God really said?'. He cast doubt upon God's word, he wanted to destroy the image of God in humanity, he wrested dominion from humankind and indeed of the whole universe from humanity in the Garden. He has been destroying humanity ever since, destroying and distorting the image of God in men and women and boys and girls. That's why you see the demoniac running about the way he was, stark naked in the graveyard, in the cemetery - that was a man in whom Satan had destroyed almost completely the image of God, but Jesus has come to undo what Satan has done. That's why, in the Garden of Gethsemane as He

wrestles, in the wilderness of temptation as He wrestles with the enemy, He is wresting back the dominion that Satan took from human hands and Adam and Eve. He is restoring us to a rightful place of potential, even far superior than the original plan of God in the Garden of Eden. You've got to understand that you've got an enemy. What is it that is causing you to not see your uniqueness? What is it that is robbing you of self-acceptance? What is it that is causing you to compare your gifts and even compete with other people? It's not a what, it's a who. It's the enemy. He's wanting to rob you, be on your guard.

Then something else: you must share your potential. It's a strange thing, but potential can only be truly fulfilled when you share it, when you give it away. That's what ministry is. In those first two readings we had from Colossians and 2 Timothy, 'Fulfil your ministry' - another word is 'service' for 'ministry'. We are most fulfilled in our potential when we serve others. We see this everywhere in nature. The sun does not exist for itself, plants release oxygen for us and we provide carbon dioxide for the plants. The bee receives nectar as it pollinates the flowers. No potential exists for itself. Sometimes when we think of spiritual gifts, we consider them solely for the benefit of the individual that has them. Do you know what that's like? It's like lighting the fire to warm the stove and not the room. It doesn't make sense. The whole of the passage of Scripture to do with spiritual gifts talks about edifying the body. Now we do get edified ourselves when we exercise them, but we are edifying the body primarily for the benefit of all. First Peter chapter 4 verse 10: 'As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God'. It's grace that has given it, we exercise it by faith, but the objective and motivation is to bless others. For some of us, including myself, do you know what we need to do? We need to ask the Lord to purify our motivations. Why do I want these gifts? So that people say 'Wow! Isn't he amazing! Oh, he's really in touch with God that guy! I just wish I was so like him!' - I know none of you are saying that, but you understand. That can be, very subtly, or maybe not so subtly, a motivation. If I could give you a word of knowledge or a word of wisdom that tells you your email address or your pass code for your bank or something (that would be handy, wouldn't it!), all of a sudden everybody would think 'Wow!'. Now I'm not saying those things necessarily are wrong, I'm just saying that where there is giftedness and power, there is a great danger for us to skew our motivations and not realise that we're not out to impress, we're out to bless. We're out to edify and build up. Do you need to ask the Lord to purify your motivation for spiritual gifts?

Finally, and again, as I say, all these points were from Myles Munroe, and some of the content - not all of it, but a lot of great depth in it: you must know and understand the laws of limitation. Now, what does that mean? Well, every manufacturer establishes laws of limitations. The laws aren't given to restrict, as such, your enjoyment or your effectiveness with this product, but they are there to protect you, isn't that right? The laws of limitation are there to protect. We talked a moment or two ago about power, and power without limitations is downright dangerous, isn't that right? So balance is necessary. You can do anything but not everything. So, understanding our potential is to know: 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, of myself I can do nothing' - we're all with that - 'but I can do all things. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is alive in me, quickens my mortal body, I've got gifts from the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ to edify the body. I get edified, I can edify others, I can serve other people'. So, there is a sense in which there is a limitlessness - God gives the Spirit without measure, isn't that incredible? There's enough to go around, by the

way - just because she or he is really topped up and overflowing - you know, there is enough to go round. Yet we've got to be aware of our limitations. We can do anything, but we can't do everything. Some people want to do everything, but balance is necessary.

God has given you at least two things. He has given you strengths; and we would include in that category gifts and talents. So there are your natural talents that you've just got from birth, and then there are your spiritual gifts supernaturally given to you at new birth. So there are your strengths, but God has also given to you - listen to what I'm saying - God has also given to you your limitations. Did you know that? Have you ever heard that? Do you know why God has given you limitations? So that you can't do everything. He has given you limitations so that you will need other people. If you could do everything you would need no one. Limitations are given to us so that we make room for other people. If you had all the strengths available, you wouldn't need anybody else. So none of us qualify to be to be superman or superwoman; God has given us limitations so that we look to each other.

Now limitations are not the same as weaknesses, do you understand that? Weaknesses are moral foibles and sin: pride, lust, greed, envy, sloth, wrath, gluttony, etc. We're not talking about weaknesses, weaknesses come from our fallenness, our depravity in sin. By the way, weaknesses can be overcome - isn't that good? Genesis chapter 4 and verse 7, do you remember Cain slew Abel, and the Lord said: 'If you do well, will you not be accepted?', this was after their sacrifice, you remember Abel brought a lamb, Cain brought the fruit of the ground that was rejected by God. The lamb was accepted and Cain wasn't too happy, that's why he ended up slaying Abel. 'If you do well', God said, 'you will be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door' - another translation puts it 'sin crouches at the door' - 'and its desire is for you, but you should rule over it'. So it's personifying sin, like a demonic entity behind sin, it is crouching ready to pounce once you give in wilfully to the enemy's voice. But listen to what God says: 'You should rule over it' - so weaknesses can be overcome. So sin is crouching at your door, it is crouching at all of our doors, but we're supposed overcome it - but limitations, your limitations given to you by God, you will never overcome. That's a revelation some of you need to accept, and I think a weight will just fall off your shoulders once you say: 'Right, I've got plenty of gifts and talents, and God will give me more if I seek them; but there are certain limitations that He wants me to have so that I will have the need for other people'. That is profound to me.

We've covered a lot of ground tonight, haven't we? Part of what I'm trying to do tonight under God is to enthuse you and excite you to the potential that you have latent within you - I hope it's working. I want to be like the rooster who took his hens to see some ostrich eggs, and said: 'Ladies, I just want you to see what can be done!'. Do you see what can be done with your little old life? Maybe you need to come to the Lord tonight, and you need to repent of certain attitudes that you've had about yourself, things you said about yourself and your own abilities. Maybe you need to forgive people who have said things about your abilities, your talents, that have stunted them. You see, the Lord wants you to live to your maximum potential. I mean, how many of us are doing this? I'm not doing it! Can you imagine if every human being lived to their maximum potential? Forget about Christians for a moment, every human being in Northern Ireland, politicians (I'm just saying), civil servants, people in the National Health Service, people in the legal system - imagine if everybody worked to their maximum potential, it would be the best country in the whole world, yes? But

imagine if every Christian was living to their maximum potential in God, which is limitless to one degree - personal limitations are there, but the power of God is limitless - imagine what would happen in our land! I think there would be revival very, very quickly. I know revival is something that comes from God, but again we are not exempt from the whole process, we are a part of it.

Do you know how - this is really what else I want to do - not just cause you to realise the potential that you have, but do you realise how you tap into it? It is God, it is being related to your Source. You only will tap into the resource when you are related to the Manufacturer, when you're living according to the design that you've been made for, you know your calling, your purpose. I'm going to read you a poem - probably some of you have heard it before - and it really gives the answer as to how to tap into your full potential. Just close your eyes, maybe, and even picture this. It's called 'The Touch of the Master's Hand':

"'Twas battered and scarred,
And the auctioneer thought it
Hardly worth his while
To waste his time on the old violin,
But he held it up with a smile.

'What am I bid, good people', he cried,
'Who starts the bidding for me?'
'One dollar, one dollar, do I hear two?'
'Two dollars, who makes it three?'
'Three dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three'.

But, no,
From the room far back a grey-bearded man
Came forward and picked up the bow,
Then wiping the dust from the old violin
And tightening up the strings,
He played a melody, pure and sweet
As sweet as the angel sings.

The music ceased and the auctioneer
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said 'What now am I bid for this old violin?'
As he held it aloft with its' bow.
'One thousand, one thousand, do I hear two?'
'Two thousand, who makes it three?'
'Three thousand once, three thousand twice,
Going and gone', said he.

The audience cheered,
But some of them cried,
'We just don't understand'.
'What changed its' worth?'
Swift came the reply:
'The Touch of the Master's Hand'.

And many a man with life out of tune
All battered and bruised with hardship
Is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd
Much like that old violin.

A mess of pottage, a glass of wine,
A game and he travels on.
He is going once, he is going twice,
He is going and almost gone.

But the Master comes,
And the foolish crowd never can quite understand,
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
By the Touch of the Master's Hand".

Let's pray. I know I've covered a lot of ground tonight, but really, essentially, that poem sums it all up. If you allow yourself to be placed in the hands of not only your Creator, the One who made you and knows what you were made for - you were made for Him, to glorify Him, but to be satisfied fully in Him; and you can only be fully satisfied in Him when you glorify Him - but actually place your life in the nail-pierced hands of the Son of God who is God Himself, who came to die in order to buy you back from a wasted life, a wasted existence of being unfulfilled and unsatisfied. To put your life into His nail-pierced hands, and to say: 'Lord Jesus, would You remake me, would You remould me? Would You bring a melody from my life that will bless Your heart, and bless this world?'. Would you be prepared tonight to allow the Lord to release your potential, to tap in, and to bless this world? This world has been rocked and changed by one man, one woman, time after time again in history. The life of one man or one woman has completely changed the world, and it's still going on, and it still can happen with your life - but you've got to know your Source, and you've got to know the resource, and you've got to be plugged in.

While heads are bowed tonight - and please do bow your head and close your eyes just to respect people before God right now - is there anybody here tonight, and there may not be anybody that's not a Christian, not a person who has trusted in Jesus; but if there is anybody and you've never taken that step of faith before, we want to give you an opportunity to do that just now. Would you be prepared to raise your hand and say: 'Yes, tonight I'm going to give my life to Christ. I'm going to turn from my ways and my sins, and I'm going to turn to Jesus and ask Him to forgive me and cleanse me, and give me a purpose, a hope, and a future'. Is there anybody? Would you just raise your hand where you're sitting? They mightn't be anybody, but I just want to give you an opportunity if that's the case - just raise your hand and put it down again. Is there anybody that is a backslider, that's somebody who has turned away from the Lord. You once had a calling on your life, you once lived according to Father's purpose, but you've turned away from it and started living for yourself or selfishly; or other things have come in and hurt you and damaged you. But you realise, like the prodigal, that there is bread in your Father's house and to spare. You're unfulfilled, you're not being satisfied, and you know you need to come home and you need to realise again that calling on your life. Is there any prodigal that wants to come home tonight? Would you raise your hand and say: 'Yes, that's me. I want to repent, I want to come to the foot of the cross and be cleansed and made whole again'? Just slip your hand up, we're not doing it to embarrass you or anything, we want to pray with you now and lead you

home to the Lord. Is there anybody?

OK, God bless you. Anybody else? Anybody else? Now, let me just pray with those people, you just pray now and say: 'Lord Jesus, I come to You', from your heart, 'I come to You. I ask You to forgive me for my waywardness, my selfishness and my sin. I place my life into Your hands to be my Lord, and to make me as I ought to be. Help me to be fulfilled and fulfill my calling in Your will. Teach me Your way, Lord Jesus'.

Now, are there any Christians here tonight - well, there obviously are - but God has spoken to you about a calling. This is a very specific thing that I'm going to say, a calling that you received - we'll talk in our next session in May about answering the call - but there are gifts that you have neglected, you haven't used, you've maybe even denied that you even have them now; and that calling in giftedness, you realise tonight that God is asking you to rediscover and to face again, and to by faith (not your feelings) by faith step out and say (and some of you need to do this) you need to actually put a line in the sand tonight and say: 'Yes, I'm hearing that, and I need to do something about it, I need to recognise that'. Even by putting up your hand tonight would be a way of saying: 'Lord, I'm going to do something about it, I'm not just going to sit and think 'Oh, that's me, but I'm not sure' - but you're actually going to do something tonight, and say 'Yes, I've got to deal with this'. Could you put your hand up if that's you? God bless you, anybody else? Now there is no pressure, and I don't put pressure on people, but there is more than one - I'm just letting you know that - there is more than one. Thank you, God bless.

Now this is very specific. Upstairs, when we were praying, just a few of us before the meeting, someone was praying that there would be words of wisdom and words of knowledge. Whenever they prayed that, I felt this, and I'm going to say it: I feel that there is perhaps someone here tonight, and someone said to you 'That is not your gift', and it was your gift - but because they said 'That's not your gift', that word shut you down in that talent or that gift that God had given you, and because of that you have not been using it. Specifically, I want you to acknowledge that, if that's you tonight - there could be more than one person, but I feel that God wants to speak that to someone here tonight. Would you acknowledge if that was you? Someone has said 'That's not your gift', or 'You're no good at that' - but actually it is your gift, and that shut that gift down for you. Would you be able to acknowledge that? Yes, God bless you. Is there anybody else for whom that was a word from the Lord? It might only be for that person.

Now, don't misunderstand me, some people need to be told 'That's not your gift'! Okay, some people really do! In a nice, gracious way, a loving way; but some people are told that and it's wrong. Some children are told at school: 'You can't sing a note, you haven't got a note in your head', and they go up through life thinking 'I can't sing', when they can sing.

OK, let's pray, the people that have realised a call that they had once, let's pray. Just before we do that, is there anybody who got a fresh call from God tonight - a fresh call, a new call. You never had a call before, and you realise you've got gifts, and you've got something, and God is calling you to use them tonight and you're going to go out of your comfort zone? This is a new thing, not an old thing being reawakened, a new thing. Is there anybody else, and you want to say 'Yes, God spoke to me'? We've talked about things that have been left dormant, but anything else, before we move

on, before we pray?

OK, let's pray, and just say: 'Lord, I thank You for Your call upon my life' - whoever you are - 'I thank You for Your call upon my life. Forgive me for neglecting it, forgive me for giving into fear or intimidation. Forgive me for listening to the enemy's voice when he has been trying to steal away my potential. Forgive me for passivity, waiting for You to get everything right, Lord, and for everything to align; when I have to do something and I haven't been doing it. Forgive me Lord, I repent. I ask You, Lord, tonight, to recommission me in that call and in those gifts, to reawaken those gifts, to activate those gifts again; to take my talents, if they are natural talents' - we saw a lot of musical stuff going on tonight, a lot of that is natural talent that has been dedicated to God. Dedicate those things back to God. That one person, and if there are others, who gave way to a word that bound them; where they were told 'That's not your gift', I want you to renounce that word that that person spoke, I want you to say 'I renounce that statement that that was not my gift, and I ask You, Lord, now to break the power of that statement off my life. I choose now to exercise my gift in the name of Jesus to the glory of God'. You do that. Thank You, Lord.

I'm going to pray for you all, OK. Father, I thank You that Jesus Christ on the cross bled and died to pay the penalty for our sins. Thank You for the precious power of the blood of Jesus. I thank You, Lord, that Jesus rose again from the dead, and when He ascended up on high He led captivity captive, and He gave gifts to men. He spoiled Satan's kingdom, and I thank You now that He is spreading His own riches and treasures in the kingdom of light. I thank You for everybody here tonight who has tapped into the source of true life, Jesus Christ, who is related to Jesus as Saviour and God as Father in salvation. But Lord, I pray that everybody here - and, Lord, I really don't want to even say this - without power (because it seems so redundant and futile), but Lord, the power that raised Christ from the dead is alive in these folk, and yet you could have fooled me. And I'm speaking of myself, Lord, I'm speaking of the church in general - that is not the impression that we give. Lord, I'm asking You to unleash the power of God in each of our lives. I'm asking You that the windows of heaven would open and the power of Pentecost would outflow. I'm asking You that from the innermost being would flow rivers of living water. Rivers don't just give us a wee fuzzy feeling, and it's not like a wee personal jacuzzi, Lord, it flows out to people around and touches them. That's what we need, Lord, we need something bubbling up within us. There is a well comes up within us, but we need it to become a river to outflow, to touch our communities and our whole land. So, Lord, that's what we're asking. We're not asking it selfishly, we want more experiences with You. Lord, we want the thrills, we do - if we're honest, we want to be satisfied, we want to be enjoying ourselves in this Christian life, why should it be anything else? But, Lord, we know it's not about that, it's not a dead end like that, it's not a cul-de-sac, it's not the Dead Sea with an inlet and no outlet; we have to be flowing out, touching others, and whoever touches that river will be revived. Lord, that's what we're asking for. So, would You just flow into us now. Holy Spirit come, Holy Spirit come now, flow in, just come Lord, come Holy Spirit, we need You. Come Holy Spirit, we pray. Come in Your strength and Your power, come in Your own special way. Come Lord. I pray that You will heal the hurts that have hindered people forgiving people who have judged or criticised the gifts or their talents, and they have shut down, or they are afraid to be rejected by exercising their talents or gifts because they've had so much rejection in their life. I pray, Lord, that You will heal people with low self-esteem; the people that are sitting here thinking 'What can I do? What do I have to offer?'. Lord, would You

please come and reveal Yourself to these people to show them how precious they are, how special, how unique, how gifted and talented. Even if they didn't have any talents or gifts - and they do - they've got the life of God in them. Please do a healing, delivering work. Deliver people from bondages that are holding them back from using the potential that You have given them. Take the scales from off their eyes, give them self-acceptance to see they are accepted in the Beloved. Lord, do a healing and delivering work. I rebuke Satan in Jesus' name, every binding influence and empowerment that has been robbing people of their potential here tonight, I rebuke you in the name of Jesus, and I command everything to go of the enemy. I pray, Lord, that You will give us strengthening of our will, that You will make us active and not passive, that You will give us the grace of obedience to actually - when we hear Your voice telling us 'Walk this way', that we will do it. Thank You, Lord, for this night. It has been a sort of funny night in ways, yet, Lord, I believe You are moving deeply in people's lives. Thank You for what You're doing. Just increase Your presence upon us as we begin to worship now again. Lord, receive our worship, but inhabit our praises. Come in an even deeper way, and as people may come out for ministry, Lord, meet them, meet them, Lord. You are the Potter, we are the clay, mould us and make us after Your will, till we are waiting, yielded and still. Thank You, Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Hunger For Reality - Chapter 6

"Answering The Call"

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by David Legge

Amen. Hi everybody! Good to be here, glad to be here tonight - I am anyway! Thank you for joining us, it's a real privilege for me to be here - and it's hard to believe again, as Brendan said, we're at the end of another season almost, one more month to go. This is, I think, my third season with you. I was just thinking that you could have a degree by now - three years, probably not a very good one like - but it has been a real pleasure for me to share with you. I hope that, some of you have been on the journey from the very beginning since I've been here, and it's great to have known God moving among us and continuing to do so. I believe tonight is going to be no exception.

We're going to look tonight at, again, this subject that we've been following month after month: 'Hunger For Reality'. Really we're wanting to know how to go deeper in the things of God. We've covered a lot of ground so far, and do avail yourself of the CDs if you haven't already got some of those. So we've been asking the question: 'Do you long to go deeper with the Lord?'. Tonight we're considering this subject: 'Answering The Call', answering the call. Now one of the questions that immediately came to my mind, before we look at any Scripture - we're going to be looking at plenty, don't worry - is the question: 'Is everybody called or only a few?'. Sometimes we can think that there is this elite breed of Christians whom God has sort of put His finger on and called to serve Him. One of the verses that is often quoted is Matthew 22 and verse 14: 'Many are called, but few are chosen'. So we ask the question: what does that actually mean? Does that mean, right, I'm called to be a Christian, but I'm maybe not one of the chosen few that God is going to send to do His bidding in some kind of service in His kingdom? That's not what it means at all. I would encourage you - we're not going to look at this tonight - but I would encourage you to always look at the context of verses, particularly verses that are commonly quoted, because they are often misquoted. That verse in particular comes at the very end of a parable that Jesus taught, the context of that parable was about a chap who turned up to a wedding celebration without the correct garment on, and he was cast out. The verse actually reads, in the NIV: 'Many are invited, but few are chosen'. So the idea is that everybody was invited to come to this wedding feast, but it was only those who had the right garment that got in - the chosen, if you like.

So be careful about these concepts that may have entered into our mind, even through the ecclesiastical system, if you like, the church, the institutional church - where we've got this concept that you've got the clergy and the laity. Now this isn't a pop at any denomination, or anybody's concept of how to do church, I'm just stating a fact. Often that can breed within us this conception that: 'Well, those guys up there, or those ladies, are the ones that we are paying to do the work. Those are the ones God has called, we supply their need because of that, but I'm just one of the laity, I'm one of the folk filling the pews. I will certainly pay my way, but that's a distinction, a demarcation line'. Well, that is false, as far as the Bible is concerned. I'm not saying there aren't people who have particular roles - there are - but the Bible teaches us that

we are all called, every single one of us, we are all called to preach the Gospel, we're all called to spread the good news, to gossip the Gospel in our daily life.

Now, having said that, we may be led as individuals to do that differently. So one may be called to do that on the factory floor with their work colleagues or in the office; but others might be set apart to minister full-time in the word of God and prayer and have their need supplied by the church. But nevertheless, there is no difference - it's a bit like the distinction between secular and sacred that we often make. You know, there is no distinction, if you're a child of God we're to do everything - whether we eat or drink - to the glory of God. In the same regard, there are no 'called' Christians and 'not called' Christians. We are all called, and so therefore I don't want any of you to tune out right now, OK, from what I'm going to say in the whole message tonight - it is for everybody. So if you don't consider yourself someone called to pulpit ministry, to be an evangelist, to maybe go to the mission field - this is relevant to you and your life.

So we're going to turn to Isaiah chapter 6 for our first reading. I reckon some of you could have guessed we might go there. 'Answering The Call', Isaiah chapter 6 verse 1, and we're reading through to just the beginning of verse 9. Isaiah 6:1: *"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim",* these are angelic beings, different than just normal angels - no such a thing, really, as a normal angel, but seraphims are an angel of a different kind - *"each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!'. And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts'. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged'. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?'. Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me'. And He said, 'Go, and tell this people'"*.

Let's pray. I want you to pray for yourself, if you want to hear the call of God in any shape or form, pray that He will speak to you now. Father, we thank You that there is a prophet, Isaiah. We thank You that these men of God spoke and wrote as the Holy Spirit moved them. We thank You for inspiration, we thank You that You are still the God who is and is not silent. We pray tonight, O God, that by the power of Your Holy Spirit, that You will come, You will speak into the depths of our being. Lord, You have confirmed this word several times already today, and I just pray that You will come mightily and that You will use it to bring Your call upon our hearts. Lord, I pray for the burden of God to come upon this meeting. In the mighty name of Jesus, Amen.

So, we've already established that it is not that we are not called, there are not any of us not called. I suppose the real issue is whether or not we are hearing it - yes? What we have read tonight from Isaiah chapter 6 is the call from heaven. I want to say right away: you don't have to be on a spiritual high in order for God to call you. That comes very clearly to me from Isaiah chapter 6. Now you might say, initially: 'Well, hold on a wee minute, I mean, was this not a high in Isaiah's ministry?'. I mean, this vision is known right throughout the church as one of the epochs of what we would call

'theophanies', where God appears to someone - and here we see His glory filling the whole Temple, it would appear. Would this not have been a pinnacle experience for the prophet? Well, of course it was, he records: 'I saw the Lord'. But I want you to note that it began with a low. This is often, I have to say, when the call of God comes - not the high points, mountaintop experiences; but rather deep in the valley, the low experiences.

It says right at the very beginning of verse 1: 'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord'. His other name was Azariah, sometimes we read of him with that name in Scripture. Uzziah the King had a long, distinguished reign within Judah. He began when he was only 16 years old, and he reigned for 52 years, and he was a great King. He was known as a good King, a moral man. He was a mighty ruler, also quite an accomplished military commander - he beat the archenemies of God's people, the Philistines, and others. He was also an innovator, he was a moderniser, and you can read in the record of his reign how he invented certain technologies that had never been seen before. The Bible says that his fame spread abroad, everybody knew about King Uzziah, even in other kingdoms. There is this phrase used of him in 2 Chronicles 26, it says that he was 'helped marvellously'. That term actually is quite similar to a New Testament term talking about the help of the Holy Spirit. God helped this King to get to where he was, but the problem came when he got too big for his boots. Just quickly, to summarise 2 Chronicles chapter 26, Uzziah took it upon himself to engage in a priestly role which was forbidden. He actually went into the Temple of God, and he attempted to burn incense on the holy altar - he was not allowed to do that as a King, you had to be a priest to do that. No King should also be a priest, in fact, this is interesting: the roles of prophet, priest and King combined in one person was to be reserved for the Messiah - and that's what Jesus was, Prophet, Priest, and King, and still is. So you might say that Uzziah got a bit of a Messiah complex. He thought he was all that, he thought he was God's man - and to an extent he was - but he overstepped his boundary and his remit. We read here that when he went into that holy place to do an unholy thing, that Azariah the high priest went in with eighty priests with him, and confronted Uzziah, and told him: 'It is not lawful for you to do this'. He got angry, because he was King - you can imagine - but when he got angry, it says that leprosy broke out on his forehead. That's interesting, because the forehead is where the high priest wore the mitre, or the crown, and written across the forehead of the high priest is 'Holiness to the Lord', but unholiness broke out on Uzziah's forehead. He then turned from anger to fear, and it says that he ran out of the Temple, and he lived the rest of his days as a leper until he died alone in a solitary home.

This was this great King, marvellously helped of the Lord, but he had a mighty fall because of pride - and then he dies because of his sin. So this is the backdrop to this vision: 'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord'. It appears that not only did the people get their eyes fixed on King Uzziah in an unhealthy way, but also the prophet of God did, Isaiah. Something had to die in Isaiah's life before God could call him. To put it another way - and some of you will know that one of my passions, and one of the messages that I have carried is 'God's New Thing' - here we see this principle again, that something old had to die in order for God to bring forth the new thing. Of course, that Scripture about God doing a new thing is found in Isaiah chapter 43, in this very book. So Isaiah was talking out of personal experience, that this King had to die before God could come to him in a new way, because he had got comfortable with the status quo. I wonder is that where you are tonight? I have really been challenged by this message myself as I have prepared it: have you gotten

comfortable in your own status quo? Is there something that needs to die in your life in order for God to come to you? God could be killing something right now.

This is a strange time, when God can come and call. Like Isaiah, your world could be just crashing down around you, but sometimes that's the way God works. Sometimes it's outward circumstances that conspire to sort of set us up for God to come and call us. For Isaiah, it was a time of grief, a time of loss, there was great uncertainty about his own ministry personally as the prophet to the King, and also nationally. He was disorientated, he was in a crisis. Can I say: he wasn't even spiritually match-fit - do you understand what I mean? We might say he was kind of backslidden to an extent, and yet it was in this place that God came to him. When our crutches, like Uzziah, our comforts, and our wrong dependencies are removed, that is the moment we really need a God encounter - and he got one of the greatest. In fact, if you go to John chapter 12 (not now), it's recorded by John of the Lord Jesus in John 12 that Isaiah saw the Lord Jesus in a pre-incarnate form, high and lifted up, and His train filling the Temple. This was the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, that Isaiah saw - so he had an encounter with Christ. When crutches, comforts, and wrong dependencies are removed, and then God reveals Himself, you have a God encounter - do you know what happens next? Look at verse 5: our secret sins are revealed, 'So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts''.

Now this is fascinating, there is so much I could bring out of this passage, but I'm trying to go as God leads. Isaiah's strength was his weakness - is that not the case for many of us? What am I talking about? Well, what was he? He was a prophet, so his mouth was part of his profession, forth-telling and foretelling the word of God. In fact, we know - and I'm not a Hebrew scholar by any means - but we know that the standard of literacy of the book of Isaiah surpasses any other book in the Old Testament. He has been called 'the Shakespeare of the Old Testament', and yet here he is crying with his hands up, 'Guilty as charged, Lord. I've been exposed to Your holy, holy, holiness; and as I have this God-revelation, this encounter with You, I'm undone because I've got unclean lips'. Isn't that incredible?

What was he meaning, that he had unclean lips? Did he use bad language? Did he engage in dirty or inappropriate talk or innuendo? Was he prone to lying, even the little white ones we talk about? Maybe it was slander, maybe he was gossiping about people? It could have been exaggeration - he wouldn't be the first person in the Lord's work to do that! Maybe it was flattery? Or could it possibly be that it had something to do with his prophetic gift, how he used and executed his gift was not completely pure, perhaps to do with selfish motives or something like that? Now, I don't want to cast aspersions, but there was something that Isaiah was compromising in that involved his mouth, his speech, his words; and that left him undone before the presence of God.

I want to ask you: have you ever been undone before God's holiness? The word 'undone' could be translated 'ruined', or 'lost', 'doomed'. The idea is that Isaiah was expressing from the depths of his being: 'It's all over for me', that's why verse 5 ends 'For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts'. He's not saying that in an elated way, he's saying that in utter fear and trepidation because the concept in these days was that if you saw God, you were dead. He not only saw God as a mortal, but he was seeing God as (he believed) as an immoral servant of the Lord in some shape or form - and he felt he was finished now. He thought he was going to die. Let me just remind

you that this is the Old Testament. We hear this nonsense over and over again about the God of the Old Testament, seemingly so different from the God of the New. 'The God of the New is all grace, the God of the Old is always law' - not anything remotely near the truth! What happens to him is not that he dies, but look at verse 6. One of the Seraphim, these angelic creatures, flies, having in his hand a live coal which he has taken with the tongs from the altar. Isaiah says: 'He touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged''.

Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound. I've taught you before: grace and truth come together - do you know that? Whenever you're willing to say, like Isaiah, 'I'm undone because I'm this, that, and the other!' - when you're truthful with God, that's the point at which grace will meet you. It's like 1 John 1: 'If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and...we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us...then the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son keeps on cleansing us from all sin'. As he walked into the light, what happened was: a heavenly creature brought a blood-saturated fire-induced coal from off the altar of God and touched his lips - isn't that wonderful? That's Calvary, that's the cross, that's the power of the Spirit in our lives - the blood and the fire. But isn't it interesting, God touched him with the power of the blood and the power of the Spirit in the very area of his weakness: his lips. The very thing the enemy used - and this is the word of the Lord, I believe this is a rhema word for some of you here tonight, so catch it - the very thing that the enemy used, God would take, He would sanctify, and He would use for His glory!

So Isaiah was effectively saying: 'Take my lips and let them be consecrated, Lord, to Thee'. Now all of this, all that we have looked at, was all preparation to hear God's call - the whole lot. It's all leading up to verse 8, to get him to that place where he can hear a call from God. 'Also', verse 8, 'I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' - there's the Trinity there - 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?'. All of this was getting Isaiah to the place where he could hear the call. Now, obviously he had heard the call of God on his life at some stage, because he was a prophet - but he needed to re-hear the call, he needed to be recommissioned, and that's where some of you are tonight! You've heard God's call upon your life, but you need to hear it afresh. It was preparing him to hear the call, but it was also preparing him for the response. He had to see the greatness of God to be humbled, in order to repent, in order to get to that place of utter brokenness so that he could respond in the manner he does in verse 8, the second half: 'Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me'. And God said, 'Go, and tell this people''.

I wonder have you gotten to the place where you can hear the call from heaven? Have you heard the call to repent? Is there someone here tonight and you're not born again, you've never been forgiven of your sins, you've never trusted Jesus as your Saviour? Have you heard that call? Christian, do you need cleansing, tonight, because you have backslidden? There are areas of compromise in your own life - I was deeply convicted, I felt undone as I was studying this yesterday in particular. Are you ready to give that response? That's a big thing, and I'm not asking for people just to in a very superficial manner - that often is the case at times in Christian meetings and conferences - to say 'Here am I! Send me'. Do not vow to the Lord and then not repay - it's a very silly thing to do, let alone a dangerous thing to do. But I believe some people here tonight are ready to say 'Here am I! Send me', because you have heard the call from heaven.

But I want to share another call with you, the call from hell. Turn with me to Luke chapter 16, Luke 16, and here we have a story that Jesus told about a rich man and a beggar called Lazarus. I will just summarise the story. The rich man, it says, fared sumptuously every day - so he had everything that he needed. He was wealthy. But down at his gate there was a beggar who had nothing, and that rich man would step over him every day. The difference between the two was: they were opposites in an eternal manner, than they were in a temporal. In other words, the rich man was poor spiritually, because he didn't truly know God; but the poor man, the beggar, was rich spiritually because when he died, it says, the angels came and carried him away into what we would call, probably, heaven. The rich man died, and it says he lifted up his eyes in hell being in torment; but he could see Lazarus, the beggar, in heaven or paradise. He begged that someone would dip the tip of their finger in water and cool his tongue from the torment that he was in, and that wasn't even permitted him - because there is no mercy in hell, mercy is before the grave. Then he utters this to Abraham, and he says - look at verse 27 - he said: 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment'. He wanted Abraham to send Lazarus back to life again, so that he would warn his brothers. Now this is the call from hell tonight, two words: 'Send, lest'.

Do you know there are people right now calling out, crying from hell that someone would go to their loved ones and tell them about Jesus? That's what this parable teaches us. One of the messages that I preached, probably 17 years ago, was entitled 'The Cry From Hell', from this very portion of Scripture, and it was one of the greatest responses I have ever had. The main point was this: that there are these two words, the cry from hell, 'Send someone, lest people come to this place'. Now, listen, I know many of us have been turned off heartless harsh hellfire and brimstone preaching - I certainly have. Sometimes I cringe when I walk through town centres and cities and hear that kind of preaching, graceless, loveless preaching, a preaching of hell without teary eyes. But equally let me ask the question: where are we on hell as the church? What do we believe about it? I know we have a theological assent up here in our heads, but I reckon most of us, including myself, practically speaking are maybe agnostic, or even unbelieving when it comes to hell. Has our culture airbrushed it out of our consciousness? I think that's what has happened to most of us; that we have become conditioned, the world has pushed us into its psychological mould, to thinking that this is beyond possibility and certainly beyond deity, that God, and especially a God of love, should send anyone to hell. Whatever happened to hell?

Believe it or not there is a town in Michigan in the United States called 'Hell' - and just like that sign, for many of us hell has frozen over. The coldness of our hearts has frozen our sensibility to what it means to be a lost soul. We can all have our ideas, hopefully they are biblical, about what hell might be and what it is like; but at the end of the day we cannot deny what Scripture teaches. When the American church historian, Martin Marty, a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, was preparing a Harvard lecture on the subject of hell (this is around 1989-90s), he consulted the indexes of several scholarly journals dating back over a period of 100 years to 1889. He failed to find one single entry on hell. This was his conclusion, he said: 'Hell disappeared and no one noticed'. Has that happened to us mentally, even emotionally, when we think of the lost? It was Alex MacDonald who said: 'If the 19th-century tried to conceal the facts of life, the 20th-century tries to conceal the facts of

death'. How much more the 21st-century?

Denial of hell makes us feel better, just like denial of death - but it doesn't make death less real or true. It's the same with hell. Do you know that there is more about hell in the Gospels than anywhere else in the whole of the Bible? Are you aware that 13% of the words of Jesus were about judgement and hell? The New Testament picture of hell was to use the blazing incinerator furnace of the rubbish heap outside one of the city gates. That rubbish dump was called Gehenna, and the word 'Gehenna' is used of hell twelve times in the New Testament, eleven of those times it was our Lord Jesus who used it. God's opinion is, Matthew 7, that many find the road that goes to destruction. In fact, it diminishes the cross of Jesus to dispense with hell, because He died to purchase our freedom and our salvation - that's what He was saving us from, our sin that judges us. He took the wrath of God that was ours upon Himself, that we might not have to. So the cross, if you like, is the evidence of punishment, if ever we needed it. Let whoever has ears to hear, hear what the Scripture is teaching. You see, this is the call from hell: 'Send, lest' - and I'm not hearing that, I'm just being honest with you, I'm not hearing that! I probably used to hear it more.

Charles Peace was a wicked criminal who was sentenced to death, this is an actual magazine picturing his morning of execution. The clergyman led him out of his cell to the gallows, and as he was doing it he read the liturgy to him. Charles Peace actually tapped the clergyman on the shoulder and asked him: 'Do you believe what you're reading?'. And he said: 'Oh yes, I believe it'. Charles Peace said: 'Well, if I believed what you believe, I would crawl on my hands and knees across broken glass to the four corners of the world to warn people'. He had read in the liturgy about the judgement. Do you hear the call from hell tonight? I'm not talking that we should be constantly, morbidly obsessed with hell - can I reiterate: hell is not the Gospel, in the sense that the Gospel is good news, the good news is we can escape hell through the cross of Jesus. But listen: we only understand that the good news is good if we know the bad news.

Do you hear the call from heaven? Do you hear the call from hell? Then thirdly, I want to ask you: do you hear the call from the harvest? The verse I'm thinking of here is John chapter 4, you might want to turn with me there, John chapter 4 verse 35. Jesus says in John 4:35: 'Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!'. Now, remember again context is key. The context of this is the woman at the well, John 4 is about the woman at the well, the Samaritan woman, the woman who was an immoral woman, who was married five times and she was cohabiting with a guy that wasn't her husband. Jesus met her, and you remember He teases her a little bit along the path of truth, He asks for a drink of water at the well and so on. She questions why He is talking to her and so on, and He eventually gets round to offer her water, and if she drinks it she will never thirst again. She gets wonderfully changed by the supernatural power of God, she believes in Jesus as the Messiah, and it says that she goes into her home town - OK - and she tells the men. Look at verse 28: 'The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, 'Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?'. Verse 30: 'Then they went out of the city and came to Him'.

Now look at what is going on here in the actual setting. Jesus says to His own disciples: 'Behold, lift up your eyes, look', and what has actually happened is, this

woman has gone and preached the Gospel from her own experience, she's telling the men and others in the town, and they are coming down the road. As this crowd is coming down the road, Jesus says: 'Lift up your eyes and look! The fields are white unto harvest! Don't say there is another four months before harvest can come'. The harvest was the Samaritans, they weren't Jews of course: 'Behold, look', the Lord said, 'Behold, look'. I don't know what they were looking at, but they weren't looking at the crowd of Samaritans coming down the road. Can I ask you what you are beholding? What you're looking at? What do you see? What do you see? Do you see the harvest field ready, white, ripe for the picking right now? Because that's what Jesus says it is. I'm not underestimating if you have been slogging away constantly at some little corner of God's field, and you've been seeing very little response - I'm not questioning your calling or anything like that, but I'm definitely not going to change the word of God to suit your experience either. Jesus said the fields are white and ready now. Sometimes I think we have to question whether we're harvesting in the right places, but that's another subject.

But to see and hear the call of the harvest we need to have responded to another call, the call of discipleship, first. You see, many are saved, converted, but they have never answered the call of discipleship - what's that? 'If anyone desires to come after Me', Jesus said, 'let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whosoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whosoever loses his life for My sake will save it'. It's going back to 'In the year that King Uzziah died' - for Isaiah to hear and respond to the call, something had to die in his life that was getting in the way, an idolatrous substitute, something that was keeping him in a comfortable status quo. That's the call to discipleship to all of us: we need to die out to certain things and to ourselves - not our true selves, but our selfish desires and motivations.

When you have answered the call of discipleship then you hear the call for help. You see, the call from the harvest is a call for help. This happened to Paul in Acts 16, it says he had a vision, and in that vision there appeared to Paul in the night a man of Macedonia. He stood and pleaded with him saying: 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'. 'Now after he had seen the vision', this is remarkable to me, 'after he saw the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the Gospel to them'. So he sees this vision of this man pleading for help, to come and harvest this particular part of the world and immediately the next day - would you obey immediately on a dream? It might not be a wise thing to do, I have to say, at times - but he was so certain that this was of God that he obeyed immediately.

I think some of you here tonight, I know some of you are hearing a cry - not from Macedonia, but from another place. Where is it? Some of you are hearing it, you're hearing a cry from part of God's harvest field, but you know exactly where it is. Even if you don't obey that cry, and go to the mission field or something, mission organisations need our help - so that Macedonian call is constantly coming to us. It has to be said that what a lot of indigenous missionary organisations need in the mission field is not new missionaries, but they need money. They've got the missionaries, I know some organisations in Asia in particular who have the evangelists queueing up, but they have no resources. I know one evangelist who went and sold his own blood, yes, gave blood donations for money in order to finance his evangelism. Isn't that incredible? But can you help, even if you don't go to the mission field? Do you know that in two millennia since the great commission Jesus gave, 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel', there is still one third of the planet, that's 2 billion souls, who have

still to hear the name of Christ for the first time? They don't know who Jesus is - 2 billion! That's not good.

Jesus said: 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'. Where is our treasure? Where are our priorities? Look at this pie chart on the screen. Do you know that of all church giving, of all church finances, 0.3% - do you know what that is? 30 pence out of every £100. 0.3% is used to take the Gospel to unreached areas. 96.8% of our finances are spent on ourselves, or to reach already Christianised parts of the world. Isn't that staggering? 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be', and yet 80,000 people in Asia alone died today without ever hearing the Gospel. Surely this has become the great omission of the church. You may not go, but you can give for others to go.

Do you hear the call from heaven? 'Who will go? Who will We send?'. Do you hear the call from hell? 'Send, lest my brothers come to this place of torment'. Do you hear the call from the harvest? 'Don't say there are yet four months, but lift up your eyes, look to the fields, they are white already to harvest. Come over and help us'. I'm going to ask you finally: is this the call in your heart, these calls, are these the calls and are they in your heart? What is the call that you're answering day by day? Let's just make this really personal now: the call to the wild is what some of us are following, myself included. In other words, we're following the flesh, we're following the world, we're following even the voice of the devil at times - that might seem staggering to you, but how often do we obey the insinuations and the prompts of the enemy in our life, in temptation, or what we think about life, ourselves, God, and everything? Maybe it's the call of comfort, surely that, ease and materialism and affluence, is one of the biggest problems - the seed of the word, the seed of the call, like Jesus' parable taught, is choked by riches and the care of other things. Maybe it's the call of your career, the call of pleasure, the call of care, worry, or fear? What voice are you listening to?

I want to emphasise this: it is vital that it must come to your heart directly from God, His call, do you understand? You must be hearing the call of God from Him. Now please listen, this is a public health warning over this message tonight: I am not wanting anybody here this evening to be motivated out of guilt or shame or mere emotion, 'Oh, those terrible people dying without Christ', and it's just an emotional response. It cannot be that! Listen, it's got to be more than that! It cannot - hear me loud and clear - it cannot be motivated by the need, and there is a great need; but if you're motivated by the need, and the need alone, you will become a basket case, OK? You will! Because the need is so great, there is only one set of shoulders that is able to carry the weight of the world, and it's not yours!

What am I saying? Well, every single call that we have mentioned already - and, I believe, every single call within the word of God - came through God's revelation. Recap with me: the call from heaven, what was it? Isaiah gets a vision, whether he was in the body or out of the body I don't know, but he gets a vision and it's a direct revelation from God, God gives it right to his heart. Yes? Luke 16, the cry from hell, was told as a story by Jesus. I believe it's a real story, but it was told as a story by Jesus, so it came directly to the disciples, directly to us by Jesus. The call to the harvest came from Jesus, He had to get the disciples to lift up their eyes and to see the Samaritans coming. The Macedonian call to Paul was a visitation in a night vision. So, do you see what I'm saying? Listen, even Isaiah, before Isaiah 6, must have been hearing from God because he was a prophet, whatever his sins of the mouth were!

If you think you're hearing from God - though immediate obedience, as I said earlier, may be a good thing - what we cannot allow is knee-jerk reactions. This is vital, this is probably the most important thing I'll say all night, OK? In Mark 3:14 it says: 'Then Jesus appointed twelve, that they might be with Him', first, I'm adding that, 'and that He might send them out to preach', second. So in everything that we say tonight, there is this caveat that you have to be with Jesus to know what Jesus is calling you to, and it comes through revelation. Listen, it doesn't come through an elder coming to you, or a pastor coming to you and saying: 'Would you teach this Sunday School class?'. OK, now I know there is a dilemma for church leaders, because they need workers, they need them to keep the thing going - but so often God is not involved in a lot of what goes on. You need to go to God, you need to get alone with Jesus. Jesus first called them to be with Him, then He sent them out. You see, one thing is needful, and Mary has chosen that better part which shall not be taken away from her. What Martha did was not wrong, by the way, we need people who are gifted like Martha - but they cannot be doing Martha's stuff without first getting to the feet of Jesus like Mary. So, after tonight, what I don't want you to do is go: 'Woohoo! I better get to it and do something, book a ticket to Peru or something like that', or 'I'm going to now send a direct debit every month to whatever missionary society'. Those might be things that you need to think about doing, but the first thing that you need to do from hearing from God - and I believe you're hearing from God tonight - is go to Jesus and say: 'Here I am! What would You have me to do?'.

One thing is needful. OK, I'm almost finished. You know, we can talk about the ends of the earth, but there is a principle in the word of God. Jesus told the disciples: 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, baptising in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age. All authority I have given you, go'. But He gave them a pattern in Acts chapter 1: 'When the Holy Spirit has come upon you', Acts 1:8, 'you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world'. If you follow the Acts of the Apostles, you will see actually how that transpires out - the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2, Jerusalem and Judea; Acts 8, Samaria; Acts 10, the Gentile nations through Cornelius, and the uttermost parts of the world thereafter. So in your Jerusalem, OK, if that's Enniskillen or wherever it might be, what are you doing? What are you doing in your Jerusalem? Some people feel called to the ends of the earth, but they're doing nothing in their Jerusalem - it's to Jerusalem first. Where is your Samaria? Well, your Samaria is the side of the community that isn't your side, and maybe that you traditionally haven't had much time for - that's your Samaria. Or a little group socially, class-wise, or in a certain moralistic persuasion, or immoral persuasion, that you have despised - that's your Samaria.

Really, what I'm getting at is: there is a call from our own people, there is a call from our own island, there is a call from Ireland. I believe that God is raising up a group of people who are hearing that call. Not all are hearing it, but there are more hearing it now than I believe have ever heard it in living memory. Can I share something personal with you? I'm here doing this three years, so this is 17, 16, 15 - the first weekend I think I had here, it was March, the first meeting I had here was March, isn't that right? Then we did the thing 'Sins, Wounds, and Demons' in October, that's right, isn't it? So that was March 2014, if I'm not mistaken. April we had a mighty night here, God came in, blessed, people healed, delivered, emotional healing mainly, delivered - and I was on a bit of a high, because that was probably the greatest thing I have

experienced to a degree. I remember (whenever the sun comes out like most Irish men or English men, I go out, and I tend to like to meditate in the back garden, pray, maybe have wee doze every now and again), this particular day the sun was out, and I decided to get the deckchair out and lie back. I had been reading an article by a man called Mark Virkler, and I would highly recommend his stuff on hearing the voice of God, and I was thinking about how God speaks. You know, he was talking about Abraham, and how Abraham was spoken to by God by the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, and how God can speak through sky and nature and all the rest. I laid back and closed my eyes and put my head back, just the sun hitting my face, and I said: 'Lord, You could speak to me in any way that You wanted today. If You wanted, You could even speak to me through the sky', OK?

Now this does not happen to me every week, I just want you to know that. But I was lying, that was the last thing I thought about, and I was just lying enjoying the sun, and all of a sudden there was a break in the sun, the heat wasn't there any more, and I was getting really cold. After a while I was getting miffed, and I thought, 'For dear's sake, I wish this cloud would hurry up and get by', and I opened my eyes - now understand that all of my life I have had a burden for this island, and I believe not a burden remotely near the burden that other people have and have had, I'm not comparing myself with others in that regard. There are people who are much more burdened and do much more. But that is something that God has birthed in me, as well as a belief that God is coming in revival to our land and awakening. I opened my eyes, and I really hope you can see this the way I did, but this is what I saw - that's my neighbour's garage, do you see the map, do you see Ireland? The whole island of Ireland, please tell me you do! I couldn't believe it. I quickly lifted my phone and I snapped a picture, but you can't really see this, you know the way photographs don't come out as well as the reality - the sun was right behind this cloud, as I said to you, and do you see this light here, it started round about there when I opened my eyes, and it was like fire; because the sun was right behind, it was like fire. As the cloud moved that way, the fire spread down, it was amazing.

Why am I sharing that with you? I'm sharing it with you because there is a call in many people's hearts that this is Ireland's time, that the harvest is ready, the fields are white and ripe, the labourers are few - and I'm not a great one. Now this is where I'm going to embarrass Daphne here. Daphne created, what would you call it? Wall art of some kind. It's a bit hard to see. What do you call this, it's not a tapestry, it's string art - it's obvious, isn't it? It's the island of Ireland, I hope you can see her island better than mine. The key is in the middle, the Scripture is there, Zephaniah 3:9: 'Then I will give to the peoples purified lips', isn't that interesting? Isaiah had to have his lips purified, listen: the church needs to have its lips purified for what it has said in this land, the curse that it has brought on this land through declarations, pronouncements, and vows, oaths. Christians need to have their lips cleansed for what they have said. 'Purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him'. You see, we need that cleansing before we can go on to do what needs to be done. 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity'. The big slogan here is 'shoulder to shoulder, united, shoulder to shoulder' - that's Ireland's call, isn't it? You know the rugby song, don't you? Do you know the rugby song? That's Ireland's call, the question is: do you hear it? Have you heard it tonight? You know, it never ceases to amaze me - and I don't know an awful lot about an awful lot - but I know that there has been revival to this island in more modern times; I'm talking about going back to 1859 and so on, but little of it touched the Republic of

Ireland. We have really a pre-Reformation, pre-revivalist island that, since the days of Patrick, has not been touched by a real swathe of the move of the Holy Spirit - but is it not time? Is it not Ireland's time? 6.5 million souls on this island, do you hear the call? Will you answer the call?

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Hunger For Reality - Chapter 7

"Times Of Refreshing"

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I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 3 verse 19. I apologise if you came to hear about 'Fearless Boldness', which was on the little card - but we had a prayer meeting here, just a few of us, in relation to the work here at The Stables, I think it was about a fortnight ago. I really wasn't feeling great about the subject that we had lined up for tonight, and during that time of prayer (I haven't shared this with anybody yet), but during that time of prayer the Lord laid this message on my heart. Not the entire message, but certainly the text. So the Lord has elaborated since then, you'll be glad to know, and I have a message entitled 'Times Of Refreshing'. Acts 3 and one verse, OK, we're launching in right in the middle of a context. Just to outline that without reading it, a man, a lame man, has been healed at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, and it has caused a commotion. Peter now preaches a sermon on the back of this great miracle, and we're launching right into the middle of that sermon in verse 19. This is Peter's appeal, as it were: *"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord"*, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.

Can we pray together? I would ask you, please, to engage in prayer yourself, that the Lord will really meet us tonight. Let's pray: Father, we really do praise You and worship You. We exalt You, Lord, as we have been singing already: O praise the Lord! We don't want that to be mere sanctimonious expressions of song or confession, Lord, we don't want to honour You with our mouths, our lips, and our hearts be far away from You. So we ask You tonight, Lord, would You, by Your grace and Holy Spirit, draw us close - would You draw us close? Would You draw us, that we might run after You? Lord, we need help with that, because some of us here tonight, including myself, we mightn't feel terribly energetic to run after You, to pursue You - but, Lord, we pray for Your grace tonight to enable us to seek You, that we might find You. Lord, surely there is no one in this place tonight who would say: 'I don't need refreshment from the Lord'? So we together, as individuals but collectively, uniting our hearts, we ask You, Father, that we would experience this evening times of refreshing from Your very presence, that we would have Throne Room experiences where we would break in, as it were, to the heavenly realm and receive from You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So we wait upon You now, we engage by faith in Your word. You have said, Lord Jesus, that 'If any man keep My word, and love Me, my Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him'. So Father, would You come and find resting places in our hearts for You to come and be at home in us. Come and be at home in this place, come and visit us, Lord. O, for a visitation of God! Lord, we are so longing for You, we are so hungry, we are so thirsty, we are desperate for You, Lord! Would You come and meet with us tonight? In the mighty name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

So our subject tonight, which fits in very well with the series 'Hunger for Reality: Going Deeper with God', is 'Times of Refreshing'. Now I have to confess to you at the outset that I am not a great fan of endless reminiscing of past moves of God. I think we can

be too romantic in our recollections of historic revivals, to the point where it becomes detrimental. There can be a really negative effect of it, which I will elaborate on in just a moment - but I believe it's biblical, what I have just said. There is a danger that we get a crick in our neck looking backwards, and it actually can hinder us. Isaiah 43 verses 18 and 19: 'Forget the former things', the Lord says, 'Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing, now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland'. You see, there is a danger that when we recollect to an excess what God has done in the past, that we get stuck in the past. Therefore, by getting stuck in history, we fail to perceive what God is presently doing and what He is breaking forth as we speak.

So we have to reiterate the fact that God is always working, yes? Do you believe that? Even in the day of small things - that's why we're not to despise it, because God is working. Jesus said: 'I work until now, and My Father works until now', so God is always at work, and God is the God of the new thing. He is therefore always doing new things. So biblically speaking, it is dangerous to have too much of an obsession with what went on in the past; but also practically speaking, it's dangerous because we then can make the mistake of expecting God, or even requiring God, to repeat history and to move in an identical manner that He had once moved before. So it's hazardous to those who are interested in revival to be stuck too much in the history, and beware of that if you have an interest in those things.

However, that being said, it's also biblical, in the correct manner, to recall what God has done - even not only to recollect it, but to rehearse it to succeeding generations. If you're familiar with your Bible, you will know, particularly in the Old Testament, there is a principle about telling your children, and telling your children's children what God has done. Laying down the principles of His word, but also telling of the great acts and miracles of history. That's one of the reasons, particularly in the Old Testament, why the Jews had to celebrate feasts and festivals, that's why there is the principle of not removing the ancient landmark - things that represent significant memorials of what God did, or what God said in the past were to remain, so that succeeding generations would take note. You may have heard of the saying: 'Those who cannot remember the past are in danger of repeating its mistakes'. That's a negative statement, but positively we could also say that those who ignore sacred history are in danger of failing to appreciate what God can do. That is the great encouragement that we get, not when we are stuck in the past, but when we appreciate the past - not only recollecting it, but rehearsing it for the benefit of others - we are stirred up in our faith to consider: 'Here, God can do this again! God is able!'. Yes? So that's why we have verses like Psalm 77: 'I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember Your miracles of long ago'. Psalm 143 verse 5: 'I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all Your works and consider what Your hands have done'.

So let's ask the question tonight: what have times of refreshing looked like in the past? Well, if you look at Acts 3, in the book of Acts this is what times of refreshing, the first ever time of refreshing as it were, looked like. Now, before we consider the specifics of this portion, Acts 3, let me just say that there are two ways of looking at the book of Acts. There are probably more, but there are two general ways: the first is looking at it as unique apostolic history never to be repeated again; the other is to look at Acts as normative Christianity to be continued. Now, you will have received, from whatever church background you've come from, one of those two positions: that this book is mere history, it's only reserved to the apostles, and it shouldn't be happening today;

or its normative Christianity, what we ought to expect in our modern age, it is to be continued - it's not the end of the story, it's actually the beginning. Now biblically, the latter view is the only credible one, in my estimation. We could talk and argue about that for long enough, but historically the phenomenon of revival shows us that God is still pouring out His Spirit upon the world as He did at Pentecost. 'This promise is to you, and to your children's children', Peter said this in the Pentecostal sermon on the Day of Pentecost, 'and to all who are afar off'. Now that's not a logistical, geographical 'afar off', but it's a historical, in the future sense, those in the future, from this moment on this promise is to them. 'My Spirit will be poured out upon...', some flesh? 'All flesh'. That's not just all who were alive at the time, because that clearly wasn't fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost or indeed in Acts chapter 8 or Acts chapter 10 or Acts chapter 19, but it is still being fulfilled as God's Holy Spirit is being poured out all over the world.

Now getting to the specifics, if you look at chapter 3 of Acts, Peter is now in his second preach, his second message on the Day of Pentecost, and he's making clear that when God's people repent, when they change their mind about their sins, there would follow times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. J. Edwin Orr was a great scholar of revival, and in his book 'The Second Great Awakening In Britain' he said of this phrase 'times of refreshing', that 'This phrase is one of the best definitions of revival in the Bible'. It's an exact depiction of what happens when true genuine revival takes place: there is refreshment. The church, in whatever age it might be, returns to the glory and the power of Pentecost. The immediate context here in Acts chapter 3 is, apart from the Lord Jesus Himself, and John the Baptist His forerunner coming in the spirit and power of Elijah, apart from those two, no prophet had spoken to the nation of Israel for 400 years. There had been a complete silence. Spiritually, God's people had been at an all-time low - and now, on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out, God speaks again, and thousands of people are brought into a new and living relationship with God. That's what times of refreshing look like.

What does it look like historically? Some of you will be familiar with the 1859 revival, yes? You may know how it originated - not entirely, but four young converts, young disciples of Jesus, decide that they are going to seek God and study His word. They go to a little schoolhouse in Kells in County Antrim, and they call upon the Lord, they go every Friday night, and teach a Sunday School as well - but they go every Friday night together with a Bible under one arm and a pile of peat under the other to feed the fire, and they pray, and they pray, and they claim God's promises. They study George Mueller's diary - a man who claimed the word of God by faith in God's promises - and they sought the living God, 1857, 1858. The first number of months they saw very little happen, and then, then, in the year 1859, which is now known as 'the year of grace', 100,000 souls in Ulster came to Christ in one year. Times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

What does it look like? Well, whole distilleries closed. The crime rate plummeted by half. Picture the scene: the Diamond in Coleraine, which most of you are familiar with, just where the town hall is, 15,000 people standing listening to open-air Gospel preaching. People falling to their knees and faces, crying out to God: 'What must I do?' in conviction. That's what it looks like. In fact, in Coleraine the Christians got together - isn't that a mysterious phenomenon! - the church united. Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, independent fellowships came together to pray, to seek God. Someone remarked of that, as they united with one heart and one soul after

the same thing, this is what was said: 'For the last three weeks it has been one continual Pentecost' - that's exactly what it was, Pentecost. If you look on the Day of Pentecost at what the church was like, they were united: one heart, one mind - that's what happens when the Holy Spirit is poured out, time of refreshing.

We could go on and on talking about 1859 here in Ulster. What else does it look like historically? It looks like what happened in Wales. Have you heard of the 1904-1905 Welsh Revival? Have you heard how it started? Great companies of people gathered, swathes, multitudes of people converted. Most of us know of Evan Roberts who is famed as being the leader of revival there, I'm not sure that that is completely accurate. He was certainly the public face, and sometimes the public faces are not people who pay the price. I'm not saying he didn't, he did pay a price - but do you know how it really started? In 1903 a young girl by the name of Florrie Evans, just converted, surrendered her whole life to Jesus Christ as Lord of all. She was in a young people's meeting, and she stood to your feet, overwhelmed with a sense of appreciation and gratitude to her Lord, and she just spoke these words, this is all she said: 'O how I do love Jesus'. That's all she said! 'O how I do love Jesus', and the whole gathering of young people broke. The Spirit of God spread right throughout that youth fellowship, and then throughout the church, right throughout the town, and eventually through the whole nation and in fact right across the world - because if you look at the history of the trajectory of the Welsh Revival, you will find that a great deal of the outpouring that we are even experiencing today, in a Pentecost sense, came from the 1904-1905 Revival.

One girl. In Kells it was four young men, new converts. One young convert, Florrie Evans - and eventually there is revival in Wales, and indeed spreading over the world, times of refreshing. Probably the most recent revival, most definitely I would say in the British Isles - there are little breakouts here and there, but what we could term as genuine community change in a large degree - was the Hebridean Revival in the 1940s and 1950s. Again, Duncan Campbell is commonly known as the instrument of revival, and he was the man that God used, particularly in the preaching of the word. But what many people don't know is that there is always a praying people that welcome in revival, and God moves people to pray to welcome that sovereign move of grace. The pray-ers behind the Hebridean revival were two praying bedridden sisters, Peggy and Christine Smith. Peggy was blind, Christine was arthritic to the point of not being hardly able to move at all; but they heard how low the ebb of spirituality was right across the Presbytery in the islands. There had been an appeal made by the ministers for people to seek God, and they took it up. They couldn't go out of their home, but bedridden they cried onto God day and night for God to come with times of refreshing. God showed them a vision of Duncan Campbell, they had never seen Duncan Campbell in their lives. God showed them a vision before they ever knew him and, to fast forward a little, Duncan Campbell, the Spirit began to move with him. He was in Bangor, our own Bangor, at the Faith Mission Convention. He was sitting on the platform just about to get up to speak, and he had to interrupt the chairman during one of the hymns to say: 'I can't speak, God is asking me to go to the islands'. Imagine being the chairman of that meeting! The chairman turned round and said: 'You've got to preach, go after you preach!', and he knew the voice of God, and he knew how important immediate obedience was, and he said 'I'm sorry, I've got to go!', and he left, and he didn't preach, and he went to the islands! When he got to the islands, there were those praying people, elders and deacons of the churches there who were waiting for him, who believed that he was going to hear God's voice and

come.

The rest is history, and you can read all about it, how God moved in such a miraculous way in the Hebrides. These are times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. What do they do? Be honest now, what does all that reminiscing do for you? I know what it does for me: it stirs in me an appetite for times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, but it also causes me to consider, what would that look like today? We're not looking for God to do an identical thing, because He is the God of the new thing - and, let's face it, something that was sufficient for 1950, 1940, 1904, 1905, 1859, would not be sufficient for today. Evan Roberts, Duncan Campbell, James McQuilkin were not facing LGBT issues and gay marriage, they weren't facing that! They weren't facing the epidemic of pornographic addiction that we have, they weren't facing the drug abuse challenges that are here today, they weren't facing the tragedy of fatherlessness which is across the whole of our people. So what do you think? You can't do it now, because I'm not going to give you time, but why not take some time out before God and say: 'Lord, would You just show me, even in my imagination, what this would look like?'. I mean, what do you think it would look like? What do you think it would look like morally? What do you think it would look like politically in Ireland? What do you think it would look like?

Let's get back to our verse: 'Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord'. There are two things I want to share with you from this verse: there is something implied, and then there is something supplied. Let's look first of all at what is implied. Well, what is implied is the need for refreshing, am I right? I've already said to you that in Acts chapter 3 what you've got is a dead religion, established Judaism is defunct. You remember when Jesus came to the fig tree and found that it only had leaves, it was fruitless; and then He went into the Temple and He upended the money changers' tables - all of that was symbolic. Jesus was saying: 'Look, Judaism is taking up space but bearing no fruit. My Father's house is to be a house of prayer, but He's not in it any more, and I'm going to do a new thing. These old wineskins are not sufficient to hold the new wine'. The prophetic voice is gone, as we've already said.

This very word 'revival' that we use, it suggests that once there was thriving life, but now it's all gone - isn't that what the prefix 're' means? You can put it on other words 're-turn', or 're-gain', or 're-store'. So 're-vival', [Christmas Evans] put it like this: 'Revival is God bending down to the dying embers of a fire that is just about to go out and breathing into it until it bursts again into flame'. There is death and dearth, but God comes and brings life. So something that is implied is the need for refreshing, it is implied that there is a deadness abroad, there is barrenness. The people of God are parched, there is a desert plain, a wilderness environment. Can I just ask you: do you feel like that? Do you? I'll be honest, I feel like that. What do you do when you feel that you're in a wilderness place where it is dry and barren and dead? What do you do? Do you just have to sit around, if this is your church, or if this is your own personal experience, do you just wait on God turning up? Is that what you do? Or is there something that you can do?

Well, I believe there is something that we can do. I believe you can prepare for times of refreshing; not only prepare, but you can actually practically position yourself for times of refreshing. Do you know how that's done? Well, here's one verse for you, the whole verse, Hosea 10:12: 'Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap in mercy; break up

your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD, till He comes and rains righteousness upon you'. It's this little phrase 'break up your fallow ground'. Now folk like you from rural communities will understand what this means, I shouldn't need to explain it too much - but when the ground is dry, the ground has been dried of all moisture, of all sustenance of water, and is starting to crack, and it cannot bear any fruit, nothing can be planted in it or fertilised below it - it has to be broken up, it has to be dug up in order for it to be good soil which can bear much fruit. That's something you can do, that something Charles Finney, the great revivalist, believed strongly in: that you can take your spade, and you can start to dig up the hard places in your life, do a spiritual inventory and ask the Lord 'Search me O God, know my heart, try me; see if there be any wicked way or anxious way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Lord, You show me' - not listening to the accuser, not being too introspective either, but going to God and saying 'God, You show me what I need to deal with: what do I need to break up? Where are the hard areas, the unfruitful areas, the barren places in my life?', and you go there, and you start to dig it all up.

Are you open to God, to listen to His voice in this regard? Breaking up those hard places, maybe they haven't been utilised in years, maybe no fruit in these particular areas for years - but you say: 'Lord, I need times of refreshing, and I'm prepared to go to those places and start digging', that's really what I'm suggesting you do. There is an incredible story, if you want to turn to it 2 Kings chapter 3, it's in the life of the prophet Elisha, 2 Kings chapter 3. What's happening is: Moab is rebelling against Israel, and the armies of Israel and Judah and some other nations unite together against the Moabites. They have been marching around the battleground seven days, and it says there is no more water, no more water left. So they go to the prophet of God, someone who is hearing from God, to say: 'Do we go after the Moabites or not, because there is no water - how can we operate when there is no water to drink?'. Look at what it says in verse 16, the prophet Elisha comes back: 'And he said, 'Thus says the LORD: 'Make this valley full of ditches'. For thus says the LORD: 'You shall not see wind, nor shall you see rain; yet that valley shall be filled with water, so that you, your cattle, and your animals may drink'. And this is a simple matter in the sight of the LORD'.

So what is Elisha saying? 'Guys, the rain is coming, but you need to get ready'. If you're thirsty, you need to somehow collect and gather the resource that God is going to pour out, so you need to start digging right now while it is dry, while it is arid, while there is famine - you need to dig now in order that, when the rain comes, you will be able to gather it. That's a word from the Lord right there. I don't know specifically what that means for you tonight, how you need to dig ditches, you need to ask God for what that means for you specifically - but there is something we can do to prepare and position ourselves for times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. We can start breaking up the fallow ground, start addressing practically and spiritually those areas of fruitlessness, those areas of blockage in our lives, those areas where we find we are sterile as far as productiveness for God's kingdom is concerned - but also, digging these ditches and getting ready to be able to receive, so that we have the capacity to hold what God is going to pour out. In a New Testament context that looks like creating new wineskins for new wine, it's a corresponding figure of the same thing.

I'm veering off now, but I have to say that many of our churches are not fit for purpose if the Holy Spirit was to be poured out as He was at Pentecost - we wouldn't be able to cope. Now, I believe God is sovereign in revival - what I mean is: I believe

revival is heaven-sent. Isn't that what our text says? 'From the presence of the Lord'. It is not something that is worked up, it is something that is sent down. However, God is the God who answers our prayers, God is the God who responds to our posture. As someone put it so well: 'You can't make the wind blow, but you can set your sails so that you're ready for the moment when the wind does blow'.

So there is something implied in the verse: the need for refreshing. So, if you're in the wilderness - are you? I really am, honestly, I really am! If your church is traversing through desert places, you need to make a choice - and this is it: you need to make the choice not just to dig up the fallow ground, not just to dig up ditches to receive and hold what God is going to pour out; but this is the ultimate choice, this is where all those things will be done, you need to choose to be in the presence of the Lord - because the times of refreshing are from the presence of the Lord. You need to wait in His presence. You need to soak in His presence.

I've just been meditating the last couple of days on Psalm 23. We're so familiar with that Psalm that it really doesn't often impact us as it should, but you know: 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want' - that means He will satisfy you. 'He makes me to lie down in green, luscious pastures, meadows. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul' - you know the rest, cups running over, through the valleys, a table spread before your enemies, goodness and mercy following you all the days of your life; that is refreshing from the presence of the Lord, but it's found in His presence. This is huge, it really is, it's huge - because you could go to your local Christian bookshop, or you could go online, and you could look at all the different paperbacks and all the different programs and resources and curriculums that are set out to tell us how we can know renewal and revival in the church and in our community, but the ultimate bottom line is this: it's found in the presence of the Lord. We're not really that hungry for the presence of the Lord, we want something to do, we want a formula, we want a secret, we want a key - and it doesn't work like that. It doesn't, be assured, I've tried, it doesn't! It can only be found in the presence of the Lord. We need to be people of the Presence, we need to be folk who practice the Presence, we need to be people who covet, and wait, and move in the Presence.

So something is implied: the need for refreshing; but something is supplied, and that obviously is refreshment. There's that prefix again, 're-freshment', something that has been lost, something that is dead being restored. We don't appreciate here in the West the value of water in the Middle East, that's because we live in Ireland and we've got plenty of water - maybe too much. But when you appreciate that wars, in the Old Testament wars almost broke out over wells - read Abraham's story. The reason was that to own a well was a resource of wealth, it's probably a bit like an oil well to us today, or a goldmine, to have a well of water or a water spring. We don't value water as they did because we have it all around us, but also we don't value it as they did because we have never experienced thirst as they did. Imagine being a traveller lost in the desert plains, imagine digging like an animal in the sand for any sign of water; your eyes distended, glaring, and you're rushing frantically towards mirages of water troughs and lakes - none of us really know what that is like, real thirst. Yet that's the biblical image that is used for the way we are meant to be in an insatiable appetite and pursuit of God Psalm 42:1-2: 'As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?'. Psalm 84:2: 'My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God'. Psalm 63 verse 1: 'O God,

You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water'. This is divine dehydration, where you are thirsty for God!

Are you? I mean, are you really thirsty for God to that extent? Let me ask you a really incisive diagnostic question, OK? Are you thirsty for God, or are you thirsty for His blessings? You might scratch your head and think: 'Are they not one and the same thing? I mean, when you get God, you get His blessings'. Well, we're not just hair-splitting, it's not semantics, it actually comes to the heart of the matter: are you actually thirsty for the Lord Himself, or only what the Lord can do for you? I have to say that often my desire and sentiment after revival, my reminiscences of revival in a romantic sense have to do with the outflow, the consequence, the knock-on effect of what happens when God comes in revival - but not necessarily is my motivation for God and God alone! I want God to save my relatives, why would we not? I want God to fill our churches, why not? I want the moral decline to stop. But is our primary goal for God Himself? We want times of refreshing, but it's from the presence of the Lord, we get it from God.

This has really been coming to me strongly lately. I read a book by Larry Crabb recently, and he gives a brilliant illustration in it. He has several grandchildren, and he says that in all the years that he's been bringing his grandchildren to go and see Santa Claus - they sit on his knee and they get the photograph - not once has he ever heard any of his grandchildren turn to Santa Claus and say: 'Santa Claus, I was just wondering how you're doing'. It's all: 'Oh, I've been a very good girl, I've been very good boy, and this is what I want for Christmas. Would you make sure I get this for Christmas?'. Do we treat God like Santa Claus? Do we treat God like a veritable slot machine? Listen, if that is our relationship with Him in order to get revival, that's not going to work.

Moses, you know the story in Exodus chapter 33 - wow! What a story! God was so disappointed with His people, Israel. You know how idolatrous they had been. Moses was up getting the law and meeting with God, and he comes down and there is an orgy going on, and they're worshipping a golden calf, attributing the deliverance through the Red Sea to this idol. God has had enough, and do you know what God says? You read it when you get home, God says: 'Moses, these are stiff-necked people. If I come among them, if I dwell among them, I will destroy them. So I'm going to send my angel before you into the Promised Land. I'm not going, but my angel will go before you into the Promised Land. I will honour My promise, but I'm not going with you'. Then He said to Moses: 'In fact, I could start over with you again, I could work with you again - not those people, but I could work with you again' - and what does Moses say? He says this, very famous version: 'Do not let us go up from here if You do not go with us'. Now, can I interpret that for you? What Moses was saying here is: 'I'm not content to have the Promised Land of Canaan with the blessings without Your presence. I'd rather have Your presence without the blessing!'. Wow! He was very unselfish when it came to God starting afresh with him, because he says: 'What will the Egyptians think, if You have promised them a Promised Land, and You got them out of Egypt but You weren't able to get them into the Promised Land'. He even pleaded for the people.

Moses would rather have God without the blessings, than the land without God. Revival is not only something supplied, but it is being satisfied with God. Duncan Campbell,

during the Hebridean revival, defined revival - I think this is probably the best definition of revival that there is. He defined it as 'A community saturated by God' - not just the church, but the whole community seeped in God. One of the meetings they came out of, and there wasn't much going on at this stage, they were preaching and he was cold in his preaching he felt, there was an emptiness, there was a deadness in the services. Then they had a special prayer meeting, and there were particular people - not Duncan Campbell, but particular young people who got to their feet and prayed, and touched the Throne of Grace. One particular night they come out of one of the churches, and the whole community had gathered outside the church - and this is how Duncan Campbell described it, he said: 'God was everywhere'. That gives me goosebumps: God was everywhere! Do we want God, or do we want the blessings? Frances Brook wrote that amazing hymn, listen:

'My goal is God Himself, not joy, nor peace,
Nor even blessing, but Himself, my God;
'Tis His to lead me there - not mine, but His -
At any cost, dear Lord, by any road.

So faith bounds forward to its goal in God,
And love can trust her Lord to lead her there;
Upheld by Him, my soul is following hard
Till God has full fulfilled my deepest prayer'.

'My goal is God Himself, not joy, nor peace,
Nor even blessing, but Himself, my God'.

We're not decrying the blessings of God, I have encouraged you here to seek earnestly the best gifts - that's biblical, but that's not the priority. A.B. Simpson was a man who rediscovered (if you know anything about him), he rediscovered the truth of healing, the truth of the gifts of the Spirit. He was before his time, a real pioneer in the things of the Spirit - but even he detected within himself a desire for blessings rather than God. He wrote that old hymn:

'Once it was the blessing,
Now it is the Lord;
Once it was the feeling,
Now it is His Word;
Once His gift I wanted,
Now, the Giver own;
Once I sought for healing,
Now Himself alone'.

Something is supplied, and it's refreshment - but it comes from the presence of the Lord. I have a book in the house, and it's entitled 'Him or It' - Him or it? It just takes chapter after chapter, expounding the truth of how we can have an 'it' in our Christian lives, whether the 'it' is our denomination, or the 'it' is a man-made theological system, or the 'it' is some kind of sacrament, or practice, or tradition, or whatever it might be, or the 'it' could be a particular gifting or ministry, or whatever, a role - but it's all about Him! For Him, through Him, to Him all things exist! He must have the preeminence, it's all about Him from start to finish! He is Alpha and Omega, He is Beginning, He is the End, and He is Revival.

Do we just want the benefits, or do we yearn for our Beloved? Revival is God's work, as I've said, but there is always something for us to do. Our text says: 'Repent therefore and be converted'. What is repentance? 'Metanoia', a change of mind, essentially that's where it begins, where you change your mind about your sin, you change your mind about yourself. 'And be converted', that's when you let God transform you. When you repent, change your mind, allow God to change your life, you will know times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. I think this verse, Acts 3:19, is a New Testament counterpart to that famous verse on revival, 2 Chronicles 7:14: '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 I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and' - what? - 'heal their land'! God is able to heal our land, but you need to change your mind.

How do you need to change your mind? Christians are not good - isn't it ironic that the people who are called to repent are not good at changing their minds? Christians are the most intransigent beasts, at times, in existence - concrete minds, set and fixed - and yet God calls us: 'Change your mind'. I'm telling you this now, as someone who God is trying to change his mind, I'm telling you this: unless we change dramatically as a church, we're not going to be ready, we're not going to be ready. Our mindsets need to be changed, but we need to allow the Lord to change us, we need to be converted! Imagine that! Christians need to get converted, we need to be transformed by the Lord so that we would be prepared for what God is going to do - I would chance to say, what God has already begun to do! The question is: are you prepared? Am I prepared? I'll be honest: I'm not, I'm not. There's not enough change here. I've been with you for three years now, and I have to say: I feel a great shortfall, a great negligence, even toward you, in regards to my position before God, what I've been bringing. This isn't false humility, this is honesty before you tonight: I'm not ready for this! I want to be ready, and me and God are having a chat about it - but I'm not ready for this!

But God is looking for a remnant to be ready, ready for refreshing, ready to dig up the fallow ground, ready to dig up the trenches, the ditches to receive, to hold what He's going to pour out; ready to wait in His presence, ready to be prepared to have Him above and beyond every other blessing, every other accolade or achievement, to have Him. There is a wonderful verse - and this is the last thing I'm going to say - in Psalm 110. I got it when I was sitting over here as well, that night we prayed together a couple of weeks ago. I got Acts 3:19 and I got this one, Psalm 110 verse 3: 'Your people shall be willing', or ready, 'in the day of Your power' - that's what we're talking about. 'Your people will be willing, or ready, in the day of Your power'. Another version puts it: 'Your people will volunteer', or 'Your troops will volunteer'. There is no conscription here, we're volunteering, ready and willing in the day of God's power, in the day of God's glory. The English Standard Version renders it like this: 'Your people will offer themselves freely' - that's what being willing and ready means. Young's Literal Translation translates it: 'Your people will be a free-will gift or offering', that's Old Testament speak. That means there were various tithes and offerings that were requirements in the Old Testament economy, but a free-will offering was something that you didn't have to give but you gave it out of the gratitude of your heart - this is what is being spoken of here. Where you're willing to give yourself, a freewill offering to God, so that you would be ready in the day of His power when He pours out His Spirit.

Romans 12 verse 1 says basically the same thing: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service'. Your expected worship, basic worship is giving yourself as a living sacrifice - and the picture there is the burnt offering, which was a sacrifice that was given and completely consumed; there was nothing for the priest to eat, there was nothing for anybody else, it was all for God. It's living, that means you can give it freely, and you need to keep giving it freely over and over with readiness, to be a volunteer in the day of God's power.

The sun is starting to set tonight, and the Sabbath was always sunset Friday to sunset Saturday - you know that. In the New Testament times, the days changed at sunset. So as this sun begins to set, do you know where we are moving? Do you know where we are moving? We are moving into the Day of Pentecost, but Days of Pentecost in the calendar sense are a bit futile - and I'm not rubbishing the church calendar, I think it's helpful at times - but what I'm saying is: we are living, now, in the Days of Pentecost every day of our lives, but there is a new day coming to our land, I believe. Times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. Are we ready? Let's pray.

Father, I have given the word, and we are all, when we have done our duty, unprofitable servants. Lord, You know my heart, and if there was a chief of unprofitable servants, I feel that way right now - to bring such a message as this, and yet fall so far short. Forgive me. But, Lord, there is one thing I'm absolutely certain of, and that is my barrenness, that is my thirst for You. It's not what it should be, but I know I'm dying without it, Lord. I pray that You will increase my hunger and thirst after You. It's the love of other things, the appetite for other things that has distracted and choked the seed of the word from growing up and bearing a hundredfold. Lord, I pray tonight: would You see us in our need, see me in my need? We thank You for all Your blessings, we don't underestimate, we're not ungrateful, Lord, for the least of Your mercies we thank You. We're not despising the day of small things, we acknowledge You are on the move, how could we not acknowledge it? We see it with our very eyes, not as we would like, but we can discern that You're doing something - but, Lord, we don't want to miss it. While on others You are calling, do not pass us by.

Lord, we need grace. I hear You saying: 'You've all the grace you need', but Lord, for some reason, there are things blocking, there are things tantalising us, there are things way-laying us and distracting us. Lord, help us, grace, more grace, that we might truly be a people, a Jacob generation, a generation of those who seek God and will not let Him go until He blesses us; that we would be a prevailing people that would overcome the spirit of the age, and overcome the lukewarmness of the church, and overcome the wickedness of our flesh. O Lord, make us a remnant, ready to be receptacles for the outpouring of the refreshment from heaven. Oh for the floods on a thirsty land! Oh for a mighty revival! Oh for a sanctified, fearless band, ready to hail its arrival! Lord, would You come to us in our need?

Lord, for Ireland we pray, for our nation, and we pray for our government, and we pray for our MLAs, and we pray for our TDs, and we pray for the new incoming Taoiseach - we pray that You will touch his life, and that You will bless him. We pray that You will move in our island, move in our islands. Lord we need You. I repent of seeking after blessings, I repent of seeking after experiences as first, I repent of

seeking after what You can do for me. Lord, I repent - in all my relationships - for being in it for what I can get out of it. I repent of being the centre of my little universe. Lord, I pray that Jesus will be the centre of my life, of His church.

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