

The following series of devotions was written by Christian worker Werner Groenewald from Afghanistan before he and his children were killed in Kabul in November 2014.

DAY 1: Hearing, Seeing, Believing and Telling

They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

John 4:42 (NIV)

One of the interesting aspects of life in Afghanistan is seeing how close the people’s culture is to the Bible’s culture. It is not necessary to explain to them why it was strange for Jesus to be talking to the woman at the well. He just wanted to complete the task He was sent to fulfill.

Let’s look at what happened at the well: Jesus went to where the woman was busy with her daily life. He began to talk to her on her level of understanding, then guided her to understand the reason why He was there. He wanted her to understand that she had met the Living God.

Meeting with God is not a once-off event. You are introduced to Him the first time. Then you meet with Him personally from then on as many times as you can.

The woman at the well then did the natural thing – she went to the town and told everybody she met about what He had told her and who she thought He was. She made them curious to go and see for themselves. When they went and saw, they started to follow the process that Jesus had started, and to develop it further. Their belief was not based on what she had told them, but on what they had heard from Him personally. Their testimony was the test: “we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world”.

And they were ready to take the process further.

DAY 2: Living Out Amazing Grace

Jonathan son of Saul had a son who was lame in both feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled, but as she hurried to leave, he fell and became disabled. His name was Mephibosheth.

2 Samuel 4:4 (NIV)

Extended reading: 2 Samuel 9 v 1-13

Do we really understand grace? It is easy to experience it daily without really paying attention to it. But to become involved in the practice of grace yourself is a different story altogether. Seeing so many poor people in the streets of Kabul, jobless and in dire need of love, the thought often crosses my mind: “Am I really a servant of grace?”

Reading through this Scripture (2 Samuel 9: 1-13) about how David set an example of showing this very grace, I started to see something that God wants to show us. It was actually due to David’s kingship over Israel that Mephibosheth became crippled. David, meanwhile, had experienced welfare and prosperity as king. But then he remembered what he once had promised his close friend, Jonathan, and asked: “Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan’s sake?”

David didn't ask "Who deserves my grace?" or "Is there someone who is qualified to receive my grace?" or "Is there someone clever enough so that I can use him in my state quests?"

He asked "Is there somebody?" Period.

Can we afford to show grace only to those who are "deserving" while we ourselves are dependent on the totally undeserved grace? We easily forget how much we need God's grace in our own lives. If He would look into our 'account', He would also find us 'insolvent', not worthy of any grace.

Let amazing grace keep you on your toes, practicing it day by day.

DAY 3: Unrelenting Determination

"Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as He said."

Joshua 14:12 (NIV)

Full passage: Joshua 14 v 6-14

What do you do when you know you are right but the opposition vote wins? What do you do when, because you have lost the vote, your family and nation have to bear the consequences for the rest of their lives? What do you do if you know the truth about Jesus, but your life is on the line if you would share that truth?

One example of acting in spiritual maturity can be found in the life of Caleb: he stated his opinion (about the possibilities of the Promised Land) and supported it with solid arguments. When his opinion was rejected, he became involved in 'what was on the plate'. 45 years later, he had a second chance to pursue the course he originally argued for. He went for it with the same enthusiasm as he initially had. Caleb never disagreed with the facts of the majority report – the threats were real, but so were the resources available to overcome these threats.

Caleb had one thing driving him all along these 45 years in the desert: a passion to prove that God had been right all the time and a purpose to see it fulfilled. He wanted to demonstrate that what God could have done in the past, He would do now through him and He would do so much more in the future if the people would trust in Him.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Whether people try to limit you or not, live in the freedom of the Spirit and He will lift you high!

DAY 4: Searching for Truth

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

1 Corinthians 8:20 (NIV)

Full passage: 1 Corinthians 15 v 1-8 and 20-28

Christ has indeed risen from the dead! How sure are you about this? Have you seen Him? Have you heard His voice? Many confessing believers these days have started following the trend of saying that 'mythology' contributed to the belief that Jesus died and rose again.

How can we be sure? Could Peter and the other apostles have spread lies about this? Maybe. But what would their motive have been? Could "more than five hundred of the brothers" (verse 6), of whom some were still alive when Paul wrote this letter, have schemed to spread this as a lie? Chances are slim. Somewhere it would have become known and the truth would have surfaced.

Scores of eye witnesses whose reports were identical are proof to us that this is true. Christ has indeed risen! But there is even more to it: I am experiencing a living relationship with the risen Christ day by day, something to which many other Christians all over the world also testify. The truth cannot be denied if one has experienced it first-hand.

In the same way, I can't determine whether or not something is true if someone else has experienced it but I haven't. When that happens, I have to go and search for the truth and make sure whether I can believe in this or not.

Only when I have searched everywhere, in all possible ways, and still haven't found the proof of His resurrection, do I dare to negate it. But then I have to be honest about the thoroughness of this search.

I believe. Do you?

DAY 5: Deliverance or Endurance?

Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 2:3 (NIV)

Full passage: 2 Timothy 2 v 3-10

It is a well-known fact that hardship and suffering is part of the Church in many places throughout the world. We read about martyrs, people who had to endure persecution until death. Many others had to give up comfort and a steady income because of their faith. Sitting and reading this in the comfort of your office chair or lounge sofa, the full reality of suffering for Christ may not really dawn in your mind. We would rather shy away, stay comfortable and be safe than put ourselves in harm's way for faith's sake. Still, suffering and persecution is a hard truth for millions of believers every day.

When Christ had the opportunity to pray before He was arrested, He asked the Father to let 'this cup' pass, a cup He knew was filled with pain and sorrow. Deliverance just seemed so much better than having to go through the pain. But isn't deliverance far overrated? When the Father's will was clear about the suffering having to start, Jesus was willing to endure it for you and me. And the endurance paid off. He achieved a standard for us which we were unable to meet.

Those around the world who are standing strong amidst persecution can testify about the worth of endurance. Yes, deliverance has its place, but endurance gives the opportunity to build stronger faith. Deliverance creates in us the awe of great testimonies, but endurance build the spiritual muscles we need to really be warriors.

Which one do you really choose?

WEEK 6: The Bread of Life

A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. "Give it to the people to eat," Elisha said. "How can I set this before a hundred men?" his servant asked. But Elisha answered, "Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the LORD says: 'They will eat and have some left over.'" Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the LORD.

2 Kings 4: 42-44 (NIV)

Additional reading – John 6: 5-13

Jesus is the Bread of Life.

In John 6, barley loaves with some fish were offered to a multitude of people, of whom only the men present counted 5000. In our day, it wouldn't be a problem for some bakery to bake and donate that much without blinking an eye. In those days, however, according to Philip at least, eight months of wages would have to be gathered. Then they would still have had the logistical nightmare of getting enough bread in time to feed that many people. But the Bread of Life provided some bread for life on that day in an astonishing way. When Elisha did the same thing for 100 people about 800 years earlier, it was already a huge feat. He didn't do it in his own power, though. The eternal Bread of Life is a miracle worker.

The real test was in the question of whether the disciples would realise the Source of their nutrition. Philip failed the test (John 6:7). Within less than a day later, the rest of the disciples failed another test when they watched the terrifying and awe-inspiring sight of Jesus walking to them on the water. The Son of God doesn't only provide bread, but also security, purpose and hope.

The Bread of Life is the Provider in all circumstances – when things go well and also when things look chaotic. He is always the provider. We never provide. Give Him the honour today for still being there every day. Acknowledge Him now and declare your dependence on Him.

WEEK 7: Go and See

The hand of the Lord was on me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

Ezekiel 37:1 (NIV)

Full reading - Ezekiel 37: 1-14

When God wants to show us His plan, just imagining it is not enough. He wants to take us on a journey so that we can see it for ourselves. This was also true in the case of Ezekiel who was "brought out by the Spirit of the Lord".

If you are not available for God to take you and show you what He is planning, you will not be able to work as instrument in his hands. "Going to see" should happen before any other long term plan should be made to serve somewhere, because while you are there looking at the 'valley of dry bones', He can really show you what He wants to do through you.

Without "going to see", you may have head knowledge about the needs. But working in the field applies more to the heart than to the head. True compassion happens when you move where the need is, when you smell it, taste it, hear it,

feel it. That is why, before making plans for long-term field work, we have to first let the Spirit of the Lord take us (by road or air) and set us in the valley where the bones are. That is where the vision will be formed. Then you can hear the voice of the Lord so much clearer.

That is how life would come to that valley. Are you available to go and let God show you the bones?

WEEK 8: The Everywhere of God

*Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in the depths, You are there...
... Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.
Psalm 139: 7-8, 23-24 (NIV)*

Full reading - Psalm 139

In a world where security cameras are seen all over and even surveillance drones are a reality that will soon enter your direct air space, staying out of the sight of some watchful eye is becoming increasingly difficult. In Kabul, we have several anchored blimps with surveillance cameras which keep a watchful eye all over the city.

When I read Psalm 139, the idea of being constantly watched comes to mind. David is clearly aware of the fact that God is watching over him without stop, day and night, wherever he goes. This is not limited to his outside. Even his heart and soul is laid bare before the eyes of God. There is nowhere he can go, even in his most private thoughts, where God can't see him. Best of all is that God even knew *what* he was going to think before he thought it. There's no hiding from God.

This knowledge can either freak you out totally, or it can give you peace that goes beyond all reason. Your personal mindset, and whether or not you are close to God, will determine your reaction to. With God being there constantly, it is far better to stay with Him and allow Him to rule. Pray verse 23 and 24 with an honest heart.

WEEK 9: Look upon 'Zion'

Look on Zion, the city of our festivals; your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved; its stakes will never be pulled up, nor any of its ropes broken. There the Lord will be our Mighty One. It will be like a place of broad rivers and streams. No galley with oars will ride them, no mighty ship will sail them. For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it is He who will save us.

Isaiah 33: 20-22 (NIV)

Wouldn't it be great to see Zion in all its splendour as at the heyday of David's rule, with the amazing presence of God within the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant as a constant reminder of God's promises?

At the time when Isaiah wrote chapter 33 of his great prophecy, it was long after the time of David and Solomon. The kingdom had split in two and the glory of the great city had vanished. Yes, the temple was there, but it had become a place of idolatry.

With this as backdrop, Isaiah reminds the faithful to take a 'mind journey' to that early vision of Zion, a "city of festivals". Right then it was in a bad shape, but Isaiah wanted to give the readers hope of coming peace and prosperity. No more

earthly dictators, just God as King. No more unrighteous judges who care more about their own pocket than sound judgement, just the righteous God. No more being driven by endless laws, just the God of love. He is the real Saviour.

At times when persecution and hardship cause us to feel downtrodden, it is easy to lose sight of the vision God wants us to have. Don't let your peace be stolen. Look upon Zion and see the King. Find your peace in His promises and don't let fear govern your daily life!

WEEK 10: Power in Prayer

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

James 5:16

Prayer is a powerful weapon in the hand of the believer, but can it change God's mind? I think the short answer is no. Yet there is no denying that our prayers are powerful and can influence the future and what God does and allows. Abraham pleaded with God for Sodom on behalf of a handful of faithful people and God agreed to change His planned destruction if they would be found. We can believe that God meant it when He said He would spare Sodom if some believers would be found there. But because He knew beforehand (from His position in time and space) that no one would be found, His mind was set and the plan would be executed.

Having said this, we should still hold on to the promise that God will listen to each prayer of our hearts because, although He is outside of time and space, we are not and His hope-giving, loving presence is what will carry us to where He wants us to be. We have to go through the paces of learning and growing. We have to move from one moment to the next, improving our relationship with God and each other. Prayer is an integral part of that. It shows our commitment to God who listens. And He does act on each one of your prayers. After all, prayer is nothing more than communicating with God. So, the real power of prayer is actually in the One to whom we pray!

WEEK 11: Let God be God

"Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like His?"

Job 40:9 (NIV)

Extended Reading – Job 40:6-24

Who else than God has what it takes to be God?

Reading through Job 40 and further, I remembered the story that I read as a young boy. A young man (let's call him Pete) died and went to heaven. He became very close to God and spent a lot of time with Him. This led to God trusting him so much that, when God had to go on a far journey, He gave Pete the key to His throne room, with one strict command – don't use this key to enter the throne room. Ever.

Pete agreed and God left. After a while Pete started getting curious about why he shouldn't go into the throne room of God. His curiosity took over and he gave in to the temptation. When he entered, he saw the throne standing in the

middle of a huge glass floor through which the whole world was visible. He went and sat down on the throne and then started seeing how all the people down on the earth were committing sins. It made him so furious that he started throwing furniture and cutlery down to them, luckily missing them. Then God entered and Pete had to realise that he, as a mere human soul, tried to be God to the people on the earth.

If God would be our version of Himself, who would be able to stand? The love and righteousness of God is in such a perfect balance that He alone can handle this broken world. Let's start aiming to become what God wants us to be and let Him be God alone.

WEEK 12: Acting on Faith

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

Faith means believing in and obeying God, which requires relying on what we cannot see—God's promises, provisions and concern for us. An inner attitude or a convinced mind alone does not define faith, though. For faith to be present, action is required. Faith proves itself by obedience to the Lord.

The writer of Hebrews expressed faith in two directions: faith toward future things (what we hope for) and faith toward invisible things (what we do not see). When we are certain God is in control of these areas and we live like He is in control, that's faith.

The two sides of faith—confidence and anticipation—can be seen in the lives of those listed in Hebrews 11. They had strong convictions and a strong assurance that God's promises would be fulfilled—even in the face of evidence that seemed to suggest otherwise.

All the faith examples noted in Hebrews 11 were described in terms of what they DID. Abel brought offerings, Enoch pleased God, Noah built an ark, Abraham moved to a foreign land, etc. They did not just think and say that they believed, they acted according to their faith.

Ultimately, the way we see God will determine the shape of our faith. If we see a big, faithful, all-powerful God, then our faith will rise to those levels. If, on the other hand, we see a smaller God, a distant or less active God, then faith will plateau at those levels.

How big is the ark you're building?

WEEK 13: Joyful or Sour?

"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

There are two categories of Christians: Joyful Christians and Sour Christians. Which one are you? Which kind is going to bring more glory to God, more souls to Christ, and have more peace in his life?

A Joyful Christian has hope in the future. A Joyful Christian has faith and trust that God is working in their day-to-day life. A Joyful Christian has love for God. They are disciples because they want to spend eternity with the One who loves them most. A Joyful Christian isn't afraid of failures. Failure reveals opportunity. In the Bible, God's greatest work comes about through human failure. A Joyful Christian rejoices in their identity *in Christ*. In Christ we are children of God, royal priests, anointed, blessed, beloved, sacred, liberated and justified. Although we sin, Christ is our primary identity. A Joyful Christian lives in the present day. You cannot change the past. You don't know the future. Joy is found in today.

A Sour Christian worries constantly, fearing the future. This makes them anxious all the time. They profess faith, but struggle to trust that God is working in the complications of each day. They say they love God, but they fear hell more than desiring to be with God in heaven. They fear failure and ridicule. They feel shame. Their status with God feels slippery and uncertain. A Sour Christian lives in the past or lives in the future. They spend time every day regretting the past and love playing the 'what if' game.

Only God can give you joy. Find it by walking with Him daily.

WEEK 14: The protection of God

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."

Isaiah 41:10 (NIV)

Why do bad things happen to good people?

The above verse is just one among the many passages that talk about God's protection. When I think about God as a protector, I want someone who will shield me from the hardships of life. I want Him to protect me and my family from disease and things like cancer, I want Him to protect my car when I travel, I want Him to protect my finances and my job... and the list could go on. It's tempting to read the verses in the Bible about God as protector with a kind of absolute interpretation—applying these verses to myself directly as true for all times and places. If I read about God as a shield, I want him to be a shield in all situations.

But does God protect us in every situation?

In one sense, we'll never know how many times God actually protected us. However, in a world where we have free will to make our own choices, we can't get around the fact that hardships await us—Jesus promised us as much. But He has a perfect will for us and that includes different kinds of protection. Sometimes, having to endure hardship is good for us, because we build a stronger relationship with God when we go through that experience.

We should focus more on the blessings that we received than the hardships we have to endure.

WEEK 15: Don't look back, look forward

"Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while He is near."

Isaiah 55:6 (NIV)

Regardless of whether or not we have a relationship with God, most of us, in our last weeks, will give ourselves the ultimate performance review. Barring sudden death, we'll ask some variation of the inevitable questions: Did I achieve what I was on earth for? Did I live the life I wanted to live? Did I realise all the possibilities of what my life could have been? Was I successful?

Being confronted with death forces us to focus on what we truly want to do with our lives. There's just one problem. For the promise of death to shape our lives, you can't lead a largely unexamined life and then, in your last year or weeks, conduct a 'post-mortem' on your life's journey. By then it's too late to change for the better. Instead of a post-mortem at the end of life, what's needed is a *pre-mortem* in the here and now: you look into the future, think about what you want to achieve, and imagine your efforts have failed. The exercise pushes you to take an unflinching look at the obstacles you'll likely encounter and honestly deal with the challenge of how best to accomplish your goals.

What will matter most to me will be the quality of my relationships with my God, my family and friends, and all the people who count on me to be a good steward. If I prove myself worthy of those relationships, I will reap the byproduct of having lived a successful life.

WEEK 16: Jesus at the door

Then He told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

Luke 13:6-9 (NIV)

Do you sometimes feel as if doors are being closed in your face? Jesus knows that feeling. The night He came, the inn keeper told Joseph, "No room," and shut the door. And it wasn't the last time Jesus got shut out. A lot of us are so busy and stressed running around in our own life that we're basically saying, "Jesus, I like You, but I really don't have any room for You." Jesus responds to this attitude in Matthew 23:37 "... how often I have longed to gather your children together ... but you were not willing ..." (NIV).

That tragedy continues today as Jesus tries to get into a life that He came for; that He died for on Good Friday. He paid such a high price for you. He loves you so much He doesn't want to lose you. He died to pay for the sin that would cause you to be shut out of Heaven.

Jesus never wants to cut down the fig tree. But if it doesn't bear fruit, what is the purpose of it taking up space in the garden? He paid the price for you to be in heaven with Him. He died so that you can have a choice, but it is still your choice. He reaches out to you. If you open the door to the One who died for you, you can be sure He'll open the door of heaven for you.

WEEK 17: Footprints Expanded

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance...”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 (NIV)

“Footprints” is a well-known spiritual anecdote about walking with Jesus. Here is my addition to the popular writing:

In a dream you see yourself and Jesus walking on a beach, leaving footprints in the sand. You and Jesus are walking along as friends in peace, in a good relationship. At one point, your footsteps show small inside the footsteps of Jesus, but gradually they start growing. Then the second set of footprints starts to show a chaotic pattern: zig-zags all over the place... stops, starts, gashes in the sand... a mess of prints.

You wake up shocked and disappointed. And you pray: “Lord, I understand the dream when You walked on and helped me through the storms, teaching me to walk with You. And when the smaller footprints were inside Yours, I was learning to walk in Your steps, following You closely. When the smaller footprints grew, I suppose I was becoming more and more like You. But Lord, what happened then – did I regress or turned away?”

There is a pause before the Lord answers with a smile in His voice, “You don’t know? That is when we danced!”

WEEK 18: God Above All

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”

Acts 17:22-23 (NIV)

Expanded Reading – Acts 17:22-34

Paul begins his famous speech about the unknown God by proclaiming that God made the world and therefore is the Lord of His creation. Acknowledging that God is the originator of all things is the beginning of everything; the beginning of believing.

What is Paul saying here?

First, that God is the Maker and not the one who was made. God was not created by man; He is the One who made man and still makes every man, and everything else that exists in all the universe. He is the originator of all things.

Second, God is the giver, and does not have any needs to be fulfilled by man. God does not need anything from man.

Paul says the real God is one who gives, who pours out. He does not need anything from you. Yes, He wants and asks for your worship and for your love and trust. But He does not need it. Are you spending time with Him to such an extent that He can guide you? Are you in a relationship with Him about which you can write journals?

Think about what is most important in your life!

WEEK 19: Faults and Falling

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

Galatians 6:1 (NIV)

Pick up those that fall. It is right to confront someone who is doing wrong, but with a humble attitude and not a complacent manner. When the elders wanted to stone a woman for being caught in the act of adultery, Jesus answered them that the one who is without sin may cast the first stone.

Are we aware of others' faults because they trusted us enough to tell us, or because we appointed ourselves as 'moral police' and are continually on the lookout to identify faults in others? Is your goal to assist others or to judge them in order to feel better about your own faults?

By searching your heart and answering these questions, you will be able to ensure that you approach someone with the right attitude. Your approach will, to a large degree, influence their reaction to you and their actions going forward. Of the possible reactions – anger, defensiveness or repentance – only the last one is productive.

Only God has the perfect combination of holiness and grace to judge another person's heart. And the only One who is worthy of judging has chosen to rather forgive us.

When the Holy Spirit prompts you to admonish someone that has made a mistake, do this with honesty, compassion and humility.