

Ready to Suffer

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[0:00] Last week I talked about the invested leader, the leader who admonished with tears, who was willing to be with his people night and day. And it would rebuke them, would encourage them. But all of it would be done just through this personal relationship.

Just this leader that is humble, this leader that is filled with integrity, this leader that has courage. And honestly, you can see from Paul's writing, he also gets so blessed by the people that he leads. He writes to the church in Ephesus, in Philippi, and he just has this love that's just exploding for his people. I pray for that kind of love that I would have for you. I pray if you're in a small group that your leader would have that same love for you.

And I pray that you would have that same love for your leader. And today we continue, because at the end, previously in the book of Acts, chapter 20, we see him saying goodbye to his leaders. And they're crying and they're on their knees because he's about to head off. He's about to head off to Jerusalem. And the chances are they know that actually he's not coming back. This is the last time that they see him.

[1:04] And then the journey begins. And this is where we jump in, in Acts, chapter 21. So if I could invite you to stand for the word of the Lord. And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Kos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara.

And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we sailed to Syria and landed in Tyre.

From there, the ship was to unload its cargo. And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit, they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey. And they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another.

Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home. When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemaeus, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day.

[2:19] On the next day, we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, Thus says the Holy Spirit, This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns his belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.

When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

And since he would not be persuaded, we seized and said, Let the will of the Lord be done. After those days, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Manassan of Cyprus, an early disciple with whom we should lodge.

This is the word of God. Praise be to God. Please take a seat. Thank you. Holy Spirit, we ask that you would be here with us this morning. I'm not convinced.

[3:35] My words are they need to hear. In fact, I'm certain of it. We all seek to hear your voice. We humble ourselves before you and ask that you would lead us.

You would speak to us. You would convict us. You would admonish us. You would encourage us. You would build us up. We are here for you. In your name we pray.

Amen. Amen. I'm going to speed up a little bit during the book of Acts, this final bit now, because he's just on a journey after journey. We're on a tour with Paul as he heads to his final destination, which is ultimately death.

And in that journey, there's some things that I think we can pick up that are actually really, really fascinating to me. We see here in these 16 verses, he travels and he goes to quite a few different places.

And the first thing that I thought when I was reading this passage, I was like, this is a real person. These are real people living real lives, facing real problems, and that they're also real friends.

[4 : 38] It made me ask the question, when was the last time I cried for a friend? When was the last time you cried for a friend? Whether it's a goodbye or whether it's just something that they're going through where you're like, it actually breaks your heart.

When was the last time that happened for you? Do you remember? When was that? Does anyone have any examples of when that could have been?

Flo, you're nodding. Yeah.

So seeing friends in difficult situations where they don't really know what to do next, you don't really know what to do next, and you're just out there and your heart just breaks. When was the last time you said goodbye to a friend and you were both crying?

That's of course a measure, not the only measure, but of just friends that have really invested in one another. You've been through times together, the good ones and the bad ones. And you see Paul here, he's going through.

[5 : 41] And actually, something interesting, as you look at the book of Acts, you see him going to these different places. There's two things that he keeps doing every time. It's kind of just his kind of MO, what he does. First thing he does, actually, what is it? What does he do?

When Paul usually, he goes into a city, what's the first thing that he really does? Kelly? I have to go to the city. He goes to the temple. He goes to the synagogue.

Why? To worship and also to engage with the people there to start talking to him. That's the first thing that he does. The second thing that he does, he goes to find friends. He's just on the lookout for friends.

Imagine Paul walking into a city. He's like, okay, what I need to do is God's given me a mission, so I'm going to go preach the good news. But I've also got to find friends as I do it. You see in Acts 16, he hangs out in Philippi.

Actually, he didn't want to go to Philippi. He wanted to stay in Asia because that's where the good food is. But he didn't stay in Asia. And the Holy Spirit in Acts 16 says, don't stay in Asia. The food is too good for you.

[6 : 38] You'll get too fat. I want you to go to Europe where you will only have fish and chips. And that's it. And so he goes to Europe and he goes to Philippi. And he's there. And actually, there's not that many Jews there.

So he's hanging around for a while. This is Acts 16, by the way. He's hanging out in Philippi.

There's no Jews. There's actually not even a synagogue. Why? Because in order for a place to have a synagogue, you need at least 10 Jews. There's not even 10 Jews there.

So there's no synagogue. So he's like, but I still want to find my people. I've still got to find friends. So what does he do? He goes to the outskirts of the city where there are a few ladies. And one of them is called Lydia.

And that's when the church in Europe begins. That's the very first church in Europe there. And then, of course, in Acts 17, he goes to Athens. And then he goes to, in Acts 18, he goes to Corinth.

And he finds Priscilla and Aquila. He's looking for friends. He's always looking for people to be around. Joe and I, we grew up in this place in England called Leicester.

[7 : 33] Has anyone been to Leicester before? Wow, you have. What did you think of it? That was Birmingham, Julia, when you came to me. So you've never been to Leicester. So, so cool.

My hopes were lifted there just for a second. Has anyone, no one been to Leicester? Good for you. No one deserves to be doing good to Leicester. Leora, you've been to Leicester? What did you think of it? Unimpressable.

Correct. There is literally, what good can come out of Nazareth and Leicester? That is in the word of God. So we, we were the only two Chinese kids in, in school, in school.

Just wide working class kind of school. We were the only Chinese kids. So naturally I would tell everyone that I was related to Bruce Lee. And they would believe it and that would be okay. I counted actually, I don't know about you, I don't know whether, because we had different schooling systems, as you can tell from the different intelligent level that we have here.

But I think I went to seven different schools. Seven. I don't know whether you counted, but for me it was, it was seven. The only Chinese kid going to different schools constantly.

[8:43] Looking back, I'm like, man, that was traumatizing. I guess that explains a lot of who I am today. And I'll tell you what my MO was every time. And this was, you know, this was six-year-old James, this was eight-year-old James, this was 11-year-old James.

I would find the guys who play football and I would try and play with them. Because honestly, if I become friends with them, I mean, they're the ones that bully people anyway. So if I become friends with them, then it's okay. Then I'll be safe.

And so every time I went to a new school, I would go find, okay, who are the kids that I need to befriend? When I came to Hong Kong, when I walked into the Society of the Friendship Group, who says, oh, who do I need to get to know so that I will be safe?

So I resonate a little bit with Paul. As he walks into these cities, he's like, I need to find my friends. I need to find my people so I can actually feel safe. So I listen to a wide range of different people during my week through podcasts and sermons.

And most of them are pastors you'll be comforted to know. But every now and again, I really like to listen to people outside who, just to remind me, it's what Keller says, you know, hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

[9:48] And just to be connected to the world. And actually, two of my favorite communicators and thinkers are actually Simon Sinek and Trevor Noah. Hilarious on different levels, but actually they just say some really, really insightful things in the most humorous way.

And it's inspiring for me. One of their recent podcasts, they talk a lot about friendship. They said, actually, friendship has completely been left out of society.

We don't even know actually how to make friends anymore. Actually, something that he said that was really interesting. He was like, actually, the breakdown of friendship is a real thing because we simply don't have time for them anymore.

Often when we're in our pursuit of career, in our pursuit of family, what's the thing that really gets left behind? Friends. Friends are the ones that we leave behind. And he's saying, actually, the problem is when you don't have friendships, actually, you're missing a key part of just what it means to be a flourishing human.

We need friendships. So what happens is when we don't have time for friends, we don't have time to be investing in friends and to be receiving what only friends can give. Spouses cannot give certain things.

[10:52] Family cannot give certain things. And so when we miss what friends can give, we put all those expectations onto our girlfriend, our boyfriend, our husband, our wife. And then the problem becomes like, why aren't you satisfying me?

Why aren't you caring for me? In the way that actually only friends really can. This week, I told you I had an up and down week and I was telling my friend. And then again, super busy guy. The first thing he said was, well, it's not a good week.

Let's jump on a call. Five minutes. That's all we need. Five minutes. You tell me what's going on. We pray. That's it. We drop it. And done. After those five minutes, to be honest, ended up being about 25. It was like, I was blessed.

Do you have friends? The Netflix show, The Live to a 100, where it talks about the blue zones, where people live to 100. Of course, healthy diet, of course, olive oil and pasta. But really, community.

Friends. A place where you feel known. A place where you know. The problem here is a lot of us, especially those in big cities, we have kind of, given up on friendship.

[11:56] Why? Because, well, actually, you find this, and we were talking about this the other day. As you grow up in school, your best friend, and who remembers their best friend in grade three? You do?

What's his name? What her name? Rain Man. Dustin Hoffman. Your friend was a movie. So you do remember?

Okay. One or two. But of course, oh, you remember. Your best friend's name? Sixty-some-odd years. Incredible. And you still keep in touch. That is incredible. What a blessing to be able to have those. And of course, also sad to say that they are rarities to have those kind of friends for that long. Agnes, you've got to... Still friends? Vincent? Huh? Vincent's not your friend? I knew it. Since primary one. Incredible. Well, then maybe it's just me.

[12:54] Maybe I just don't have friends. Of course, changing school seven times does do that to you. But actually, you realize that actually, as you get older and older, your friendship circle just gets smaller and smaller.

In fact, your actual appetite and your interest in making friends gets smaller and smaller. So by the time you reach kind of like young adulthood, you're kind of like, okay, I've been there, done that. Do you remember at university when you walked into university campus for the first time and you're like, I need to make friends. I need to survive. And then what's the saying? The saying is it takes you three hours to make a friend and then it takes you three years to try and get rid of them. But then as you get older, you're like, I just can't have that many friends. I just need two, three. Or if you're a guy, just half a friend. And we just sit next to each other and not talk. And we're okay. We're bros. But in a city like Hong Kong, you invest in friendships and then in a few years time, they leave. And then, okay, really miss them. Cry. Move on. Be a new friend. Get together. Let's get our families together. We do it again after a few years. Oh, cry. They're gone. By the third round, you're like, you know what?

[14:04] It's okay. I'm just going to watch movies at home instead. Friendships are hard. Yet I can see that every time Paul goes into a new place, he's looking for friends.

Why do you need friends? Because you need people to sit in the mud with you. This is something that Simon Sinek said. You need someone who is willing to sit in the mud with you in your worst times. Friends that are just good for you to hang out and have a laugh with and play board games with.

Good. Really good. But you also need that friend who's willing to show up at your father's funeral. Which is what happened to me. Actually, when our dad passed, actually two of our friends moved in with us for a few weeks.

I don't remember why. I don't remember how. I just remember them being there. And I remember the funeral, we had a blast. For some reason, I don't know why. Of course, the actual ceremony and the service was sad and we were crying.

But as soon as we were downstairs, my friends just kept making me laugh. And it was mildly inappropriate. And people were looking at this. Don't be wrong. Pray for James. But it was just such a blessing to me and myself that there would be friends who would be not afraid to have these awkward conversations.

[15:10] And also not afraid just to have a laugh even in the most dire circumstances such as death. Do you have those kinds of friends? I actually think Paul did.

He had Barney, Barnabas. He had Silas and he had Timmy. And actually, towards the end of his life, he had Timmy who was, of course, his mentee. He actually told Timmy, hey, come to me quickly. Of course, Paul only needed God.

We know that. And yet he would tell Timmy, please, come to me. He would tell other guys, hey, remember to bring my jacket. Remember I left it there at your house? Bring my jacket to me. You could see that Paul was just connected to his friends.

And as you see this tour with Paul, you realize it's not just a tour with Paul. It's actually a tour with Paul and friends. And you start seeing it in Scripture. You see Jonathan and David. You see Ruth and Naomi. You see Job and his buddies when he's going through the worst time in his life. And actually, for seven days, his friends, Job's friends were doing pretty well until they opened their mouths.

[16:08] And then they didn't do well. But actually, for those seven days, they were just willing to sit there with him in the mud, not saying anything, just crying with him. Just going, life does really, really, really suck.

And we have no answers. But there's one thing we can do. Our one response is that we will be here with you. Paul had friends. We see in Scripture we do that.

Paul suffered a lot. And the next example I'm going to give based by no means the same. But I remember. Do you guys remember something called COVID? So during COVID, there was a few years where none of us were allowed to leave.

Right? Well, yeah, actually, that was true. Or you could leave and then not come back for a while. There's certain parts that I really miss about those few years where none of us were allowed to leave.

Where every time we would meet, we would kind of complain because we read the SCMP article today about what the newest restrictions were. When it went from three days to seven days to 21 days.

[17:10] And the amount of cases when we followed it. It was 56 one day. And then the next day it was 200 cases. There was something about being here. Some of my closest friends right now in Hong Kong.

My fondest memories are during that time. But we had kids and we have nowhere to go. So we went to this place called Inspiration Lake. Has anyone been there? Inspiration Lake, Disney. Beautiful. The restrictions there are super loose. And so that was our refuge. That was our hiding place. And those are friends that I hold so dearly. Friends are the ones who stick with you. And you see here, Paul's about to go through something really hard. And he's about to enter the final chapter of his life. And what is he doing?

He's surrounded himself by friends. Let's just have a look. So he sets sail. Not on the Royal Caribbean. But he just sets sail. And he starts heading. And he lands at a place called Tyre.

[18:07] And then he goes to Ptolemaeus. And then he goes to Caesarea. And each time he goes, he reaches out to people. When he goes to Tyre, verse 4.

And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. So he goes to this new place. And he's like, okay, I need to find some friends. I need to find some people. So he meets these people. And he hangs out and stays with them and lives with them for seven days.

And this isn't just then small talk and chit-chat. What do you do? What do you do? But it was literally, oh, you're a follower of Christ as well. Me too. And you can tell about because straight away, you know, the next thing that they describe is, and through the Spirit, they were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

Why? Because they were having a time of prayer. Why? Because they were hearing from the Holy Spirit that actually this Paul that they'd only just met, but they had become really good friends with, he was about to suffer in Jerusalem.

So these new friends of his were like, don't go. They weren't telling him not to obey the Holy Spirit. They were saying, hey, the Holy Spirit told us that what you're going to face next is going to be really tough. It's going to be imprisonment.

[19:12] It might even be death. Please, we urge you, please don't go. Paul acknowledges them, doesn't listen to them. I'll talk a little bit more about that later.

But then afterwards, he still goes. Verse five. When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another.

Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home. I have this beautiful scene, image in my head of Paul and these new friends with their wives and their children walking along the beach.

I'm going to call this the ministry of the beach. Can you just imagine these people, these friends, these families walking together, walking to his death, walking to his imprisonment.

And they would just be on the beach. And then not caring what other people think, when it's time for him to get on the boat, they all kneel down on the beach. Just this beautiful picture of what spiritual friendship looks like.

[20:15] When you know someone is about to head into danger. And they are still, they just have this posture of resolve. I'm going.

In chapter 20, he says, I am constrained by the Holy Spirit. What does that mean? I'm so compelled, I can't not go. Do you understand? I can't not go. I've heard the Holy Spirit talk. I've heard God tell me this.

How can I not go to where God calls me? And these new friends, they basically accept it. They have a posture of humility. And they say, okay.

Well, if you still won't listen and you don't want to stay here, then we will walk with you. And we will take you as far as we can. The Western church struggles with something, which is the concept and the idea of suffering.

We struggle with it because we don't think it should happen. We struggle with it because we've heard someone say, well, Jesus is for our good. So everything, when we invite Jesus into our lives, our lives will be happy and peaceful and healthy.

[21 : 19] But the moment we get sick, the moment something happens, our first reaction is, God, are you there? Are you real? We've bought into this lie, and I'll call it a lie, that the human existence does not need to have suffering.

When actually, suffering is very much a part of the human experience. Francis Chan does this sermon, and he goes through this example of every single book in the New Testament, and he points out the points and the places of suffering that happen.

Every chapter, every book in the book of the New Testament, talks about suffering. Somehow, somewhere along the way, we've grown up in church, where now we've gotten to a point where we're like, if I follow Christ, there will be no suffering.

How? How did we get there? When we see here, time and time again, that is really all we see. A famous Christian apologetics guy said this, that actually that question of, if there is a God, then why is there still suffering?

He only ever heard that question in the first world, in the Western world. Because of the rest of the world, they are very acquainted with this friend called suffering. That the world is not in the perfect place.

[22 : 31] That it is broken. That there is pain. There is war. There is death. But somehow, in our Western church, we've adopted it.

And then we try to avoid it. And so when something goes wrong in our lives, the first thing that we say is, God, this must not be part of your plan. When actually, sometimes, suffering shows us, proves us, that actually we are right in the center of God's plan.

And you can see it. You can see the examples here. I'm so sorry. You can see it. The question is, then what do we do? When we go through suffering, do we pray, God, would you remove the suffering?

Or do we pray, God, would you give me the courage to face it? I hear about this pastor who was arrested and put in prison for his faith in Central Asia. And he was getting tired.

He was getting exhausted. He was getting discouraged. Will he ever be released? And his prayer wasn't that he would be released. His prayer was that, God, would you bring me a friend? And lo and behold, two weeks later, another pastor gets arrested.

[23 : 35] And he has put in. And he rejoiced. He didn't tell the other pastor. That was the prayer, I guess. But the accounts come out afterwards that they were released.

They both said that was the best time of their lives. Can you imagine what that even means? And you might say, oh, that's... What is that? Is that even... Well, Acts 15 and 16, you see Paul in prison with his friend Silas, with his boy Silas.

They've been beaten. They're bleeding. They're lying on the floor. And what does Paul say? Well, he doesn't actually say. He's like, should we sing some Hillsong? Should we worship a little bit? Why don't you sing the first verse and I'll sing the chorus? You worshiped. And I can imagine they were just close. Friends that are right and die.

Friends that are so close that suffer with you that they become family. That's the spiritual friendship that we're looking for. That is it. As the modern theologian says, what does he say?

[24 : 44] I don't got friends. I got family. Fasten the Furies. Do we have those kinds of people in our lives that actually, even when we disagree...

Do you have a friend who disagrees with you? And the moment they disagree with you, you still just love them and you have that engagement and that you talk to them? That's the friend that we need. Not the friend that when we have a different view to them, suddenly it becomes, oh, then we must cancel each other.

We must not belong together. In fact, I think that's the very reason why we should belong together, is when we have friends who have different opinions because that's how we grow. And so you see

this and then it carries on.

So they go on aboard the ship, verse 6, and then the new friends from Tyre return home. Verse 7, And when we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemaeus and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day.

On the next day, we departed and came to Caesarea and we entered the house of Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the sevens who stayed with them. Philip the Evangelist, we've seen him before. He comes from Acts chapter 8.

[25 : 44] My favorite chapter, where he meets that Ethiopian and he runs alongside him. It's that Philip. That Philip who wasn't afraid of following God's mission and went into Samaria and went to basically spread the good news.

That Philip. But now he's settled here and then he has four daughters and they all live with him and they all prophesy. So if anyone had any doubts as to whether women get the spiritual gifts, we see right here, there's four daughters.

Can't imagine living with four daughters in one house, but you see that he had friends there. And then you have Agabus, another friend who comes, who also was in the earlier book of Acts, in Acts chapter 11, when he prophesies a famine.

So you see these people just getting together, spending time together and coming to us. And this is where Agabus comes out with another prophecy. And coming to us, verse 11, when he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, thus says the Holy Spirit, this is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.

So a new place, a new friend, saying the same thing. That when you get to Jerusalem, you will be bound. You will be put in prison. This kind of friendship isn't the type of friendship that just hangs out and enjoys dinners together.

[27 : 05] This is the type of friendship. Can you imagine what kind of place they were in in their minds and in their hearts to get to the point where they are praying and that they hear from the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit speaks to them. These are friends that are not just on a physical, earthly level, but they're on a spiritual level where they are sharing and praying and diving into the deep spiritual things together.

And then Agabus here is a little bit intense. Borrowes Paul's belt, straps himself up and says, this is what's going to happen to you is what God is telling me. It's interesting.

Remember, who writes the book of Acts? Luke. So what you see here is then before in Tyre, Luke is saying they were trying to tell Paul not to go.

In verse 12, when we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. So Luke's kind of just recording all this and writing it for us, for our benefit. And so this is what happened in Tyre.

And then we're in the reach of this area and Agabus gives this prophecy. Luke's like, oh boy, this is for real. We and the people all tried to stop him from going.

[28 : 11] And yet here comes Paul's answer. What are you doing? Weeping and breaking my heart. For I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

He doesn't say, how dare you? He doesn't say, I reject what you're saying. He's saying, guys, don't do this to me. Don't do this to me.

You know what God is telling me to do. And yes, you also know what I'm going to face there. It's funny, just rewind a little bit. Acts 20, when he's talking to his elders from Ephesus, he says this, verse 22, and now behold, I'm going to Jerusalem constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there.

Of course, he doesn't really not know. He does know because he carries on saying, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. Joe and I, our families, we love going on cruise ships because we have children and it's just easier.

And so we go to a place, we get off, we walk around, pretend we know the place well and then get back on the ship and just keep eating and go back to the playroom. But Paul's tour was different.

[29 : 28] Paul's cruise tour was every port that he went to, he would face affliction and imprisonment. Don't you think there'd be a moment where he'd be like, guys, I think I'm not going to get off the boat today.

I don't want to get beaten today. And yet the fire that he had, the heart that he had, even when his friends, even when his boy Luke, that he's writing all this down, you can imagine him just writing, oh, I best record this for the people.

And then he's like, you know what? Paul, seriously, there's enough people telling us not to go. We should stay put here. It's pretty nice here. And yet he says, why are you doing this to him?

Well, interestingly, what happens here, verse 14, and since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, let the will of the Lord be done. And after these days, we got ready and went up Jerusalem.

And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Manasson, of Cyprus, an early disciple with whom we should lodge. His friends see that there's no, there's no turning this guy.

[30:28] There's no changing his mind. And they said, fine, we will come with you. The ministry of the beach, the ministry of just being present.

When friends disagree with you, yet still go with you into the fire. What kinds of friends are those? Not earthly friends. They are brothers and sisters in Christ who have made the same decision to follow Jesus, even into persecution.

Now, I've said this before, and I'll say this again. We live in a very comfortable setting right now. I don't know how much we've paid to be here.

Now, I also acknowledge there are people in this room who have counted the cost, who have actually turned on family to follow Jesus and are worshipping with us here right now. And I want you to know that I see you, I acknowledge you, that there has been a price that you have paid to sit here.

But I also know there's a lot of us here who don't have that experience. We've never had to really count the cost of being a follower of Christ.

[31:40] We've never really had to be in a place where, should I go to church this Sunday? Because I might get caught by the authority. We've not had the privilege of going through that.

And the problem is, when we don't have, we've not had the privilege of going through that, then there's a chance that actually our love for Him hasn't been refined in the way that those who have gone through that have benefited from, have grown through.

But, there are things that we have paid the cost for. Or at least there maybe are things that we should. Again, it's the same question that I ask. Often. What has being here cost you?

And if it hasn't cost you anything, then what is it worth to you? If our faith in following Jesus hasn't cost us anything, then maybe it isn't really worth anything to us. But, what if we lived lives in a way where, okay, we are not facing imminent danger, but, there are decisions that we're going to make, the places we're going to be at, the way we're going to act at work, that will actually slow our career progression down.

Where actually, if I do this and I follow Jesus in this way and I live in this way, actually, I won't get the promotion. Because my boss will see that I'm doing the same thing as those guys. What if that was the cost?

[32:56] And honestly, big picture wise, it's still pretty lame. But let's just go with it for now. What if it was, you made decisions in your workplace where actually, I am willingly sacrificing my promotion next so I can spend more time with my small group?

And it's okay if I get overlooked. Because what is my job anyway? I don't get to write it on my grave. It's not eternal. All it will do is take up more time for me to do things that aren't as important to me.

What if we were people who said, actually, I don't mind sacrificing that. Of course, there will be people around us who are like, what are you doing? That's less money. You've lost that job title. But what if we were people who said, actually, I've counted the cost and this is nothing compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

What if we were in positions where I am in full-time ministry in my office, in my workplace and that's my primary goal and my work will serve that, will submit to that and I will do my very best in my work and some of us here, the Lord has placed us in positions of power so that we can be a force for good, that we can show people that Jesus is Lord in a way that only you can.

What if we were those kinds of people? What if we choose God and it means we don't choose that relationship? Then actually, you know that the relationship isn't going to draw you closer to God and you wrestle and you argue with yourself and you try and rationalize it.

[34 : 25] What if that was your cost today? What if that was your cost of saying, actually, today I won't choose look, I don't know what the future holds. If I miss out on you, I don't know whether I'll have someone in the future but it doesn't matter because I count that nothing compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus.

What if we started making those decisions? Not every one of us here will be persecuted for our faith but there are costs that we should consider.

But, I want to spend a little bit of time because I don't want to just talk about that and then not actually acknowledge that there are people in this world that are genuinely facing persecution because of their decision to follow Jesus.

The same Jesus that we follow and yet their life looks so different. There's a few organizations that I looked up.

One's called Open Doors and another's called International Christian Concern and another called Voice of the Martyr where you hear about some stats about what's happening in the world right now with some people who are facing persecution.

[35 : 29] 388 million Christians are experiencing persecution. That's one in seven. One in seven people who have committed to follow Christ are facing trouble because of that decision alone.

Over half of them are women and girls. A third of them a third of them are under the age of 15. A young person who says I'm going to follow Jesus even if it means everything that it means.

We don't have the privilege of that in Hong Kong. But we should care about it. There's a nine-year-old girl from Bangladesh and actually I have young life colleagues in Bangladesh that are suffering through this where her family is a Christian in a Muslim community where they get surrounded their house gets surrounded regularly by people telling them you must go back to Islam and yet they stay.

They throw stones into their house and yet they stay. And this nine-year-old girl isn't allowed into the school in the local village because her family are Christian. Nine years old.

That's Elysia's age. But because of her family's decision she can't get the safety that she deserves.

[37 : 01] But yet there are people out there who care for these people. So this organization opened doors. They go and create communities safe homes for these families who decide to follow Jesus where they can have a place where they can be.

And she describes the church as the only place where I am not alone. 4,847 Christians were killed for their faith this last year.

Nearly 5,000 Christians. Simply because they refused to deny Christ they lost their lives. 13 people a day.

4,700 were detained without trial and arrested. Last September in a court in Iran five people were sentenced to eight years in prison for simply just attending church and being part of a prayer meeting online.

And that was it. 3,000 people kidnapped every year because of their Christian faith.

[38 : 17] I talked a few months ago about the situation in Nigeria where in November 300 school kids were taken away. a couple weeks ago two church services were raided.

172 people who were worshipping around the size of this group right here kidnapped because they were worshipping Jesus. What do we do with that?

The story shared by International Christian Concern about a pastor in Central Asia ultimately it was released but his wife shared this story where when he was in prison his story was heard and people around the world followers of Christ around the world would write letters to him to try and encourage him.

He didn't get a single one because the prison officers would just not let him read them. But they still ended up changing his life because one day one prison officer was having a bad day and was beating him and as he was beating him he said you are so annoying do you know how many letters I have to throw away of yours every day?

Oh my goodness that lit a fire in this pastor's heart because he's like I don't need to read those letters. There are people who remember me outside. I don't have to face that kind of persecution.

[39 : 59] I don't think you do either. But my fear is that then causes my faith to be stale. It doesn't need to look so extreme as I was having a conversation with Anton the other day.

Often even talking to someone who doesn't share the same faith as you, sharing the gospel with them, that forces something out of you. That causes you to double down in your faith.

Do I really believe this? Because if I don't share it, then do I really believe it? Because the very nature of what I believe is that I must share it. So if I don't share it, that means I don't know if I truly believe it. But the moment I do share it, then it forces me to decide, do I actually believe this? It doesn't mean I have to answer every single question right, but it does mean that I care enough about this, I believe enough in this, and I am willing not to put my life on the line, but at least to put my friendship in an awkward place for a few minutes where I can ask them, hey, do you this to varying degrees of success and consistency?

But that's my conviction that I'm growing in myself, going this is something that I must do. I was sharing with my life group a couple weeks ago, this idea of, actually, how can we not be hypocrites? How do we be people who are willing at any moment to share the faith?

[41:20] And I was sharing with them an epic fail that I had the other day. The other day I was playing basketball with a group of friends, and if you know me when I'm playing basketball, I'm not Pastor James, I'm just playing basketball.

And I don't really want to talk to people about Jesus when I'm just doing something like my hobby. And I met this person, spoke to them, and often they asked me, oh, so what do you do? And then I say, I'm a pastor.

And then I said, I'm playing basketball right now. But all I could eke out of me was, well, do you go to church? And he said, oh, no, I don't go to church.

And then there was like five seconds of just silence there. Because I was like, I don't want to engage in this. I've already just met him.

We're just about to go back on the court. And then I chickened out. I was like, oh. Afterwards, I sat in my car and I just felt the crushing of the Holy Spirit going, wow.

[42:21] I'm not here to guilt trip myself and say every time I speak to someone, every waitress, every clerk, I must talk to them about Jesus. But what I'm saying is, do we follow the convictions, do we follow the opportunities that the Lord gives us?

So when there is a moment where someone engages us with the faith or has an opening where we can talk about it, are we willing to talk about it? So fast forward to yesterday, I was at a birthday dinner with a friend and the theme was just Midwest Texan cowboy thing.

So I'm sat at the dinner table next to two people who I don't know in my cowboy hat and then the same question comes up, oh hi, I'm James, what do you do?

I say, well, guess. And no one ever can guess. They usually just go with mafia. And then I say, well, I'm a pastor. Do you go to church?

Have you been to church? And the woman just, starts crying. Just disclaimer here, nothing that I did.

[43:31] Good, good or bad. Ironically, I was sat, she was on one side and her husband on the other side. So after that happened, I turned to him and I was like, I'm really sorry. Your wife is crying.

But I say that not in a bad way either. I'm saying actually, it's not even me that does it. I don't have to do that much. It's the Holy Spirit that's doing and then in the rest of the evening I got to hear this beautiful story how this couple who don't know Christ are being drawn into his presence.

And that being sat randomly next to a pastor was what tips them over. I did nothing. Good or bad. I was just being obedient.

I was just learning from my mistake. Not my mistake from last week. I think that's all we need to do. There's another gentleman in the Czech Republic who serves in Sudan trying to share the gospel. They were both imprisoned, ended up becoming best friends. There would be stories about prisoners separated by a wall, preaching to each other by tapping on the wall and communicating through Morse code, encouraging each other in the faith.

[44:50] And just in case you feel as though all those were years ago, the ICC reported February 26, so a couple weeks ago, a mob of Hindu nationalists in central India attacked a Christian family after the family refused to deny Christ.

The family lost their home and their belongings during the attack, forcing them to live on the streets. 200 radical Hindus surrounded the house and attempted to force Ramsey's family to deny Jesus and reconvert to Hinduism.

The furious mob burst into the home, threw the family's food and belongings into the street, and yet the family chose to remain in Christ. Last night, all six children and my wife slept in the rubble with

no roof. God gave us courage to come thus far.

We hope that God will continue to strengthen us to remain faithful to him. What do we do with that? Apart from go to God and give thanks, okay, in this current moment, in this current season in our lives, we are in safety. But Lord, what is it that you want me to do where I can go out of my comfort zones to share the good news?

[46:03] The good news that led me from being dead to now being alive. The good news that led me from first being blind but now seeing. And if I don't feel that conviction, God, can you remind me again of my lost state?

We get so comfortable and so cushy here when God pours blessings out on us as we think we deserve them, that we're entitled to them.

The friendship of suffering that Paul goes through from city to city. And what's his ultimate comfort? His ultimate comfort is that he has a Christ, a Lord that is willing to sit in the mud with him.

In Acts 9 when Jesus meets Paul, Saul at the time and says, why are you persecuting me? Why are you hurting me? But now I'm going to choose you. You are going to be my instrument and you are going to suffer for my namesake.

Jesus himself when he was in the garden of Gethsemane. What does he need? Friends.

[47:12] Stay here with me. Keep watch with me. I'm about to do something that is going to be so painful. Blood is going to come through my pores.

please stay with me. Jesus willingly suffering for us. Willingly sitting in the mud with us.

Philippians 2 who though was in the image of God did not count God the equality that he had. He emptied himself. What is that? We translate it as Jesus the Prince of Heaven was willing to sit in the mud with us.

That's what keeps us going. That's what kept Paul going. And then later in John 15 we see Jesus say the greatest example of love is when someone is willing to lay down their lives for their friend. And now I call you my friends. And I've told you everything that I know. I've given you everything that I have. Paul had the strength to do that for others because Christ did that for him.

[48:19] but then he calls us to do the same. Some of us may be called into dangerous parts of the world.

And just before you go, oh, that's such a far-fetched thing. I was the same as you for a while until I met colleagues who were literally serving in some of these places. And it just completely broke my perspective on what I think I'm going through here.

But he calls each of us friends and he calls each of us to go and lay down our lives for someone else. And often it doesn't even need to be our lives. It just needs to be that conversation that we need to have.

It actually just means we need to lay down our egos and our fears and our insecurities. That's all we need to do. Can we do go and have an awkward conversation with someone and literally say we're going to make it awkward.

Well, don't deliberately do, but be prepared for it to be awkward and to be okay. Why? Because we believe that this matters. This world is in deep need of people who are willing to share a different message.

[49:37] We turn on the news and we see all the different warfare that's happening around the world. The world is in deep need of a different message. This week we've been helping MJ familiarize his new school.

part of that is that the parent gets to sit in this classroom for the day with them. And so this week my office was this classroom filled with two year old toddlers.

And there was one scene in the space of 15 minutes I witnessed three different kids slap each other around the face. Literally no reason.

Unsolicited. Literally because they felt like it. And I said wow. And then of course once one gets slapped the other stands up and then turns around and tries to slap them back.

Right? And then I sat there as I was reading the BBC news and I was like oh this classroom looks exactly the same as the world leaders that we have right now.

[50:52] I'm sat in the same place watching the same things happen. And the fellowship has been going through the book of Genesis and you see from the very beginning people just fighting constantly.

The world is in deep need of a different message. And what is that message? That message is that would we turn the other cheek? That message doesn't feel comfortable. That message will often lead to our pain.

But I find comfort and I pray that you will find comfort in the one we professed to follow went through that pain and suffered that pain for us. Knowing that whatever can happen to us in this side of eternity remains on this side but there is something that is far greater that awaits all of us.

Would we commit to having the posture of resolve like Paul? Would we commit to having the posture of humility and care like his friends? Would we commit to having the posture to be there for each other to sit with each other in the mud?

My final thing that I was blessed with today was before this message before this service my head was all over the place and I needed a little place to sit I sat down and as most of us do when we sit down wanting to focus on God the next thing that we do is that we open up our WhatsApp up you guys don't do that you guys go straight to the Bible okay all right cool so I opened up my WhatsApp and I was like procrastinate for two minutes just to make sure everything's set before I spend time with God I opened it up and this WhatsApp group that we have is called Scripture Club 2.0 led by our dear Paul over here and I was inspired in that moment just to open it to have a look again and so what we do and how Paul leads us is that we pick a Bible verse to memorize each week and then we just try and memorize it and then we actually voice record it into the group and I don't do this every week

[53:04] Paul but this week I just played your one for two minutes he's memorized Matthew chapter 5 verse 1 to 24 and he's just practicing and you hear him just doing it and I share it not to puff him up because his ego is already big enough and his head's big enough but it blessed me so much this morning because he recited through a sermon the most powerful sermon in the book of Matthew chapter 5 and he lists the Beatitudes and it finishes with blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you Jesus says those of us who step out to share the good news to turn the other cheek and to sit in the mud with those who are in need of a saviour blessed are you you talk about all the martyrs and all those who are imprisoned they're not doing it just to cause themselves pain because they love pain they do it because they see a glory that far outweighs the pain they're experiencing a love that far outweighs the hurt a love that covers a multitude of sins a love that drives out fear there's a new way to live and it's the Jesus way would we step out of here and be committed to following the ways of Jesus regardless of response regardless of outcome regardless of consequence let us pray

Jesus thank you for the gift of friendship thank you even for the gift of suffering when it is for your namesake when it is for your righteousness Lord would you finish by speaking to each of us would you give us our instructions for where we must go who we must engage with forgive us when we live in fear forgive us when we live in shame forgive us when we live in pride

Lord would you show us how to live in a new way in your way yeah thank you Lord thank you Lord that that you died for us and because of that we are able to yeah just be able to share the gospel to others Lord it is a news that is worth sharing Lord one that we can just place above all other things Lord one that we can forego our egos forego our pride our what we are suffering and going through Lord so I just pray that as we go forth this week that we will be able to pick up the opportunities where we get to share the gospel with others Lord may we be obedient may we be responsive to the Holy Spirit to the prompting of you yeah so that we could we can further your kingdom we thank you

Lord in Jesus name we pray amen you