

Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

Autumn 2022



This edition of Ascend is on the theme of perseverance. The Christian life isn't just about a single prayer of commitment. It is about following Jesus until the end.

In preparing this edition, I've been reminded of the classic book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where the hero Christian faces many trials, temptations and adversaries before reaching the Celestial City. It is in part because of the encouragement of his friend, Hopeful, that Christian keeps going along the narrow way to reach his destination. I know that we can help to inspire other members of TFT when we press on in our walk with Jesus. My hope is that the articles in this magazine will hearten each of us to persevere in our faith, so that we too may finish the race (Acts 20:24).

By Stuart, TFT Director



Falling down and getting up

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Charles shares his story of getting back up after every fall, trusting each time in the grace of God.



Strength for the Journey

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Hannah reflects on the story of Elijah and how we can draw strength from his story.



Steadfast review

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Connor reviews our recent 'Steadfast' conferences, where we were encouraged to stand firm in God's truth and grace.

Persevering through challenges

The week, before my daughter's sports day, we practised her race on a local running track. She had signed up to run the 200m, and wanted to feel prepared for the big day. So we put our trainers on and headed to the track. As we set off together, I explained the importance of starting well and finding a comfortable pace she could maintain. She set off well, worked up to a sprint and stayed strong. Her pace slowed a little as we approached the corner, so my encouragement came loud and clear. *"You can do this. Keep going!"* I cheered. She held the pace, and her form remained strong and confident. Before I knew it, she was picking up speed; her head lifted, eyes focused on the finish line. She took off, striding past me as I shouted, *"GO, GO, GO!"* And she sprinted down the home straight whilst I trailed behind, very out of breath!

As Sports Day arrived, parents, supporters and classmates gathered at the sidelines, eagerly awaiting the final race to begin, the 200m. I could just about see my daughter take her place on the staggered start line on the opposite side of the field; my eyes fixed on her bright green t-shirt. As the children took their marks, the horn sounded and off they went! A wave of raucous cheering travelled across the school field, encouraging the runners on.

I could see my daughter speeding up, overtaking on the bend. She quickly and confidently picked up her pace to a sprint, running past the others and taking the lead. My loud cheering quickly turned into unashamed and frankly embarrassing shrieks, cheering her on as she flew past me, confidently striding towards the finishing line, winning the race! It was exhilarating to watch, and I felt immense joy for her at that moment. I was incredibly proud of her achievements that day, and so was she!

In this story of preparation, training, focus and success, we can draw out personal encouragement, applying it to our faith journey, specifically within the context of both a post-pandemic world, and as Christians face mounting opposition because of the biblical views we seek to uphold. It is Paul, in his letters to the early church, who uses similar analogies to encourage the believers, and repeatedly calls us to action – to *"...press on towards the goal,"* to *"run as though running for the prize,"* and *"...forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead."*

Forgetting what is behind

In Philippians 3:13-14, Paul is writing to the church, expressing what he finds helpful in his personal pursuit of being more like Jesus. He says:

“One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize...”

The word Paul chooses here is “forgetting” in its present-participle form. He is explaining to us the practical steps he consciously takes to repeatedly lay down his sins, pain and disappointments of the past and give them to Jesus by placing them at the foot of the cross, again and again, so that he can press on. As we continue in Paul’s letter, he later says,:

“All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.”

Paul is instructing us as believers to share in his attitude towards living as a friend of Jesus. In choosing to ‘forget’ what has already happened, I don’t believe Paul is suggesting we should completely erase from memory the last few years, or ignore it, like it never existed. In this post-pandemic world that we are navigating, I don’t believe Paul would want us to block out the painful and traumatic season we all experienced, which affected every life to varying degrees. We simply cannot be in denial about the impact it will have had on individuals, churches and our own spiritual health.

Persevering toward the prize

Paul’s desire for the believers is that we give no opportunity to the things that might weaken or damage our spiritual health and

maturity in the faith. Paul knows the danger of dwelling on the past, which can cause believers to turn in on themselves rather than looking outwardly to Christ. Why fix our eyes on the past when the best is yet to come? Why tie ourselves to the past when the future is brighter than what has been? Paul wants us to be found “...*straining towards what is ahead... to press on towards the prize for which God has called us...*” There is a mandate here in scripture for us to take hold, to persevere despite our circumstances, and to keep going until the very end, no matter what opposition we might face.

Before her race that day, my daughter had to choose to forget that it was raining on her sports day, and that she had lost her school jumper that morning and was probably wet and cold. She chose not to focus on the potential hindrances, but set her mind on running a fast and successful race. Again, we can look to the Bible and the words of Paul and focus on the instruction he gives:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.”

It is this very attitude that Paul is honing in on across his letters to the early church. It isn’t just about the prize itself, but rather that our attitude towards our faith should be one of commitment, perseverance and determination as we take hold

of all that God has in store for His people.

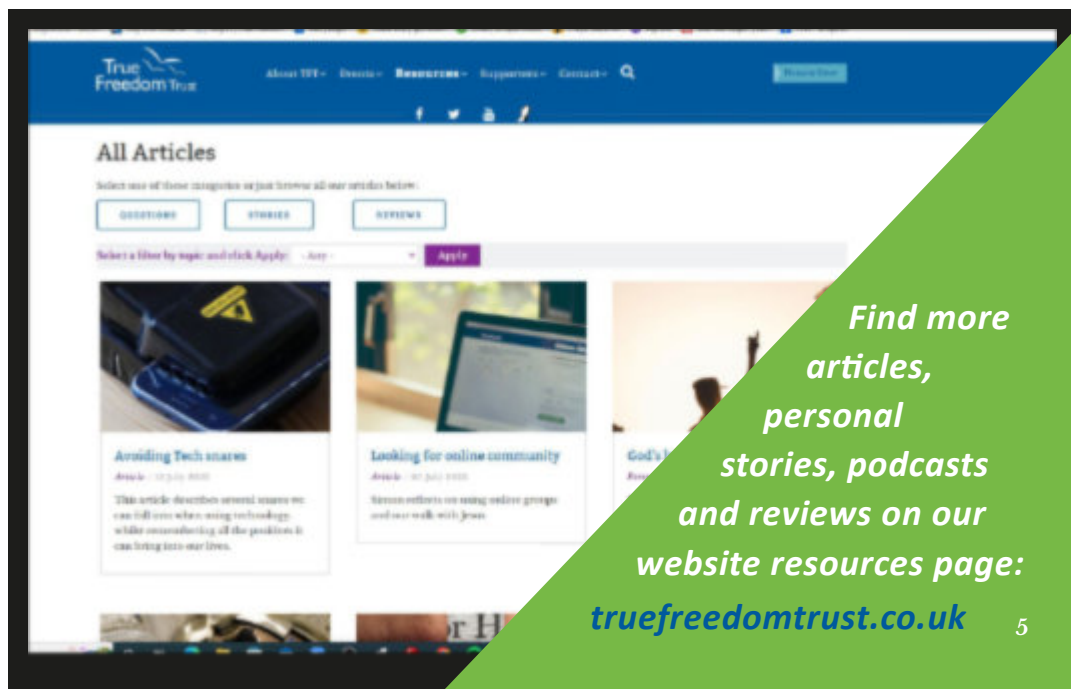
So, as we learn to live again in this post-pandemic world, mindful of the mental and physical toll the last few years have taken, and as we strive to uphold and defend the biblical model for our lives as Christians, let us look to our church families to cheer us on in this race. Paul encourages us to “...*join with others in following my example,*” united by the word of God and covered by the redeeming, healing blood of our sacrificial lamb, Jesus.

Finishing well

Let's take our marks together at the start line and run the race set out for us, without hindrance or distraction, to win the prize. Let us run, daily forgetting what is behind, and pressing on to take hold of that

which Christ Jesus took hold of for us. Hallelujah! Jesus has won the ultimate race for us, living a life of purity but not without temptation. Straining on towards the goal set before Him, He took up His cross, carrying it to Calvary, where He won the prize over sin and death, once and for all. In Jesus' glorious resurrection, we share in His victory, inheriting eternal life with our Lord and Saviour. May we always fix our eyes on Jesus, championing each other when we might grow weak and weary, celebrating our victories together as the body of Christ.

Hannah is passionate about up-cycling and restoring old furniture, giving it a new lease of life. She loves a tidy house to entertain friends in, and devours documentaries, especially about war!



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Falling down and getting up

If you have never heard of Alexander Whyte, let me introduce him to you. He was Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland in the latter years of the nineteenth century, and he is one of my heroes.

I've been a Christian for a very long time, and I've constantly struggled with same-sex attraction. I'm in my seventies now and I reflect in this article on how I've survived, both spiritually and emotionally. The reason that Alexander Whyte is a hero of mine is the following comment he made on how we survive as Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction and who want to be obedient to God's Word:

"The perseverance of the saints is characterised by ever new beginnings."

Or, as a friend of mine expressed it, with less finesse but much greater clarity:

"Falling down and getting up, falling down and getting up, falling

down and getting up, all the way to heaven."

To put it simply, that's my story.

It's all about grace. In fact, the whole of the Christian faith is about grace, but grace is something we find very difficult to understand. It's taken me a lifetime to begin to come to terms with it, because it doesn't seem to make sense.

Years ago, I was working in Brighton, and my struggle with same-sex attraction was intense. Temptation was all around me, because gay pornography was freely available. Martin Hallett (whose faith and inspiration founded *True Freedom Trust*) happened to be in the Brighton area, and I needed someone to talk to, because I had messed up badly. So, I met him in his caravan, and he listened as I poured out my tale of woe.

When I was done, we prayed that my repentance might be sincere, because I found it difficult to accept that I was forgiven. Gently he said,

“Charles, don’t you understand, this is just New Testament Christianity?” By that, he meant that this is how every Christian, gay, straight, bisexual etc. person lives every day of their lives. We live only by grace. Grace saves us, and we persevere by grace.

I have to admit that, for me, biblical truths are sometimes more memorably expressed in the hymns we sing than in the text we read. A couple of Joseph Addison’s verses from the 17th century describe my experience best:

*“When in the slippery paths of youth
With heedless steps I ran,
Thine arm, unseen, conveyed me safe
And led me up to man.*

*Through many dangers, toils and deaths
Thou gently cleared my way;
And through the pleasing snares of vice
More to be feared than they.”*

The older I get, the more conscious I am of God’s guiding, protecting hand. While I smart with shame when I remember how many times and how grievously I’ve been wilfully disobedient, that’s nothing to my amazement at the way, time after time, I’ve been saved from utter disaster.

Two things stand out for me as crucial to understand.

Firstly, the almost unbelievable scope of God’s grace. Secondly, the measureless extent of His willingness to forgive.

Another little verse sums it up. (This one’s a bit more up-to-date!):

*“The arc of sky above our heads is
infinite and free
There is no end to outer space that
human eye can see,
But wider, deeper even yet, more
infinite than space,
The constant overflowing of God’s
abounding grace.”*

I know it’s a contradiction in terms. Nothing can be more infinite than infinity. But so is the life of a believer whose deepest longing is to live in obedience to their Creator, yet struggles as we do. Part of our nature which casts a shadow over our relationship with Him.

No worse than anyone else

One trap our spiritual enemy is fond of setting for Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction is to convince us that our sexuality marks us out as worse sinners than anyone else. That is the opposite of the truth. We are no worse than anyone else.

We haven’t chosen the attraction to members of our own sex. Our choice lies in what we do with that attraction. Do we let the Holy Spirit use it to teach us the reality of grace, or do we allow Satan to deny us grace?

What defines us as human beings?

One of the great mistakes of our age is to define yourself by your sexuality. The prevailing culture insists that our sexuality makes us

who we are. Nonsense! What makes me who I am is the fact that the Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me. My faith in His atoning sacrifice makes me an adopted child of my Creator. In other words, what defines me, what makes me who I am, is my relationship with God. From first to last, that is something in which God takes the initiative. I belong to Him by adoption and grace, and nothing can change that.

That assurance is the most important thing that has enabled me to survive my struggle with same-sex attraction, which is not over even now, in my seventies!

When I was dead in transgressions and sins, my Creator reached out to me in sovereign grace. I was in peril of His judgement but, through the touch of His Spirit, He caused me to respond in repentance and faith. He gave me new life, and through the Spirit, He fashions and matures it so that, increasingly, Christ's risen life becomes the stimulus of my own.

Dealing with failure

My relationship with Him is the bedrock of everything I am, and Satan knows that. That is why he makes it the constant target of his assault on my soul. He never tires of trying to undermine and, if possible, destroy my relationship with God. Through constant temptation and failure, he tries to produce a sickeningly repeated experience of defeat and shame which is familiar to all Christians.

The good news of the Gospel is that genuine repentance guarantees total forgiveness every time. I stress “genuine repentance” because repentance doesn't mean merely saying “sorry” to God. Instead, it requires a change of direction. It involves not just that we recognise and confess our sin but that we determine to turn away from and reject it altogether. However, as we all know from experience, that is easier said than done.

**“Genuine repentance
guarantees total
forgiveness every time”**

Submission leads to victory

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks about struggling to be free of an unwanted aspect of his life, his “thorn in the flesh”. Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction know just how he felt. As a young Christian, I prayed for the strength to resist temptation or, even better, for it to go away altogether. I felt ashamed that I seemed to want something of which God disapproved. What did that say about me? How could God love me if I wanted what He found offensive? I couldn't be more wrong!

We are all sinners and that means all of us, no matter what our sexuality, are in rebellion against God. The wonderful truth of the Gospel is that God proves His love for us in that

“...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)

So, what do I do with this part of me that just won't go away? I thank God for it! I treasure it! It's the one aspect of my life that, more than anything else, makes me admit my weakness and need, and the more I admit my weakness, the closer I am to my Saviour. The closer I am to Him, the more I depend on Him. The more I depend on Him and submit to His Lordship of and in my life, the greater spiritual victory I achieve.

Our spiritual enemy is always on the watch to discourage us, but we must remember that, as my friend put it:

*“Falling down and getting up,
falling down and getting up, falling
down and getting up, all the way
to heaven.”*

If you find this hard to accept, believe what the Bible makes clear:

“My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins...” - 1 John 2:1-2a

God is always ready to forgive, if we give Him the chance and sincerely ask to be forgiven.

I know it's difficult to accept, because it contradicts our idea of justice, but so does the Gospel itself! God's ways

often don't make sense to us, but these verses couldn't make it clearer:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.” - Isaiah 55:6,7

A verse in one of Paul Gerhardt's hymns sums it up best:

*“Still let Thy love point out my way.
How wondrous things Thy love hast wrought!*

*Still lead me, lest I go astray.
Direct my mind, inspire my thought,
And if I fall, soon may I hear Thy voice
And know that love is near.”*

Yes, love is near – love is always near!

Charles is a retired URC minister who has been accused of getting more of his theology from the hymn book than the Bible. His interests include buying second-hand clothes and reading the novels of Charles Dickens to his grandchildren.



Book Review

“Take care of yourself” by Pablo Martinez
£4.99 paperback. £1.99 Kindle. 104 pages, 2018
(Hendrickson Publishers)

There is a small section of my bookshelves that is designated “Helpful books with unhelpful titles”! I think I’m going to be adding this book to that shelf.

The title is based on Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders, where he writes, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock” (Acts 20:28a). The context is that Paul was predicting that “fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (v29). So, for Martinez to reduce these verses to “take care of yourself” seems to miss something of the mutual emphasis of Paul’s encouragement to look out for one another. And that shift in emphasis is probably the weak point of this book. Many of us, in various forms of Christian ministry, know that burnout is not so far off. The Bible’s answer is not to “try harder to look after yourself”. Rather, it encourages us to guard one another. But, in this book, there is just a passing reference in chapter 4 to mutual support and accountability.

That aside, there are many things that I love about this very readable book. Firstly, it is short! The last thing an overloaded person needs is a long technical book. Pablo Martinez is an experienced

psychiatrist, and he clearly has helpful insights into both how people struggle and how to break free from bad habits.

Secondly, the tone of the book is gentle, without encouraging us to be self-indulgent. The first chapter normalises the reality that we are all fragile and in need of rest. The second chapter explains the “empty pool” concept that, when we are depleted more than we are refreshed, we are heading for burnout. It also describes some symptoms of overwork.

Chapter 3 looks at unhelpful attitudes and activities that will leave us drained. In balance to this, chapters 4 & 5 look at healthy approaches to life that will refresh us. Chapter 4 is mainly about relationships with those around us, and chapter 5 looks specifically at our relationship with God.

The third reason that I love this book is that the author packs it with plenty of memorable and godly wisdom. It will especially appeal to those who love imagery. Martinez clearly has an eye for memorable pictures from the Bible, from being jars of clay (2 Corinthians 4) to keeping our own vineyards in order (Song of Songs 1:6b). There are also

extra-biblical images, such as the robin's nest under the waterfall (p.71).

This book contains many jewels, which have clearly come from hours of mining Scripture and art for rich metaphors. Indeed, one can imagine a companion inspirational calendar with Bible quotes printed over evocative images!

“This book contains many jewels of wisdom mined from scripture and art”

Overall, this is a handy little book that I would eagerly encourage fellow Christians to read and apply to their lives. But I have to confess that I'm a bad example of someone who has read the book, underlined a few inspiring quotations, and then remained largely unchanged in my ingrained habits of over-committing myself.

There is a brief set of application questions at the end of the book, but the author does not explicitly link them to the earlier chapters. If you want to apply the good ideas in this book to your life, I would recommend working through it, one chapter at a time, with a few like-minded Christians who know you well. You could then help one another to digest the most relevant material and hold one another accountable for changing unhealthy patterns. With the help of brothers and sisters in Christ, this book has

the potential to be a catalyst for improved godly balance in our lives and in the lives of those close to us.

Stuart is TFT's Director and the editor of Ascend magazine. He loves maps, but is notorious for getting lost on walks.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Survive and thrive in Christian ministry



PABLO MARTINEZ
Foreword by Lindsay Brown



Strength for the journey

‘**S**teadfastness’ has been a helpful focus for us within TFT recently, and it was intriguing to discover that God used our Spring Women’s Weekend to pick up on the same theme. The title for our devotional time was ‘Strength for the Journey’.

We looked at 1 Kings 19:1-18 and Elijah’s weariness soon after his victory over the prophets of Baal. Many of us had arrived at the Women’s Weekend tired from the week’s commitments, a familiar pattern for weekends away. However, the passage helped us to recognise that many of us felt more than ‘tired’. Like Elijah, quite a few of us felt deeply weary.

1: Underneath the broom bush

We looked at the passage across three separate scenes. The opening scene is pretty desperate: Jezebel is out for revenge after the death of the prophets of Baal, so Elijah decides to flee for his life. He seems to have given up hope that God’s plan was

working, even though he has just witnessed God’s power, and travels into the wilderness alone, wanting to die under a bush (1 Kings 19:4).

We considered whether we could identify with Elijah’s weariness. Elijah felt the cost of his ministry. He wasn’t popular; as a prophet, he was named the “troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18:17) because he was causing disruption. He was calling people back to worship God in a culture which was going the opposite way. God’s people were abandoning their faith and worshipping a false god; they were even going through a famine because of it. Elijah wasn’t just living counter-culturally; being faithful to the Lord meant he faced persecution from the authorities.

We couldn’t relate to being a prophet, and none of us had faced persecution to this degree, but we related to the part about living in a culture that is turning away from God. Sometimes we know how hard it is to be an oddity, to be in the

minority as a Christian and, on top of that, to be a same-sex attracted Christian living a single and celibate life. This is so at odds with our culture. It's costly to keep following Jesus, and there was a sense of unease amongst us that the environment is likely to get more challenging in the UK.

“We know how hard it is to be an oddity – to be a same-sex attracted Christian living a single and celibate life”

During our prayer time, we wrote post-it notes to share any circumstances that were making us feel weary. We stuck the post-its on a noticeboard around a picture of a broom bush in the wilderness. It was striking how many post-it notes were added, and how many themes we covered: isolation and frustration as the pandemic continues, the war in Ukraine, mental and physical health struggles, financial pressure, responsibilities at work and home, concern about current debates about sexuality, and gender in politics and within the Church.

Thankfully, we didn't stop at making a depressing list! We also used the noticeboard to pray for one another. We reminded each other that we are living in unusually tough times, and we agreed that it was a real comfort to know what happens next in the story.

2: “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you”

The second scene in the passage is of God ministering to Elijah (1 Kings 19:5-8). God doesn't let Elijah die, and he doesn't leave him on his own in the wilderness struggling. He sends an angel to be with him, an angel who knows he needs the comfort of physical touch, and who prepares him a meal of freshly baked bread and water. This is amidst the backdrop of famine, and while Elijah is in the desert. Elijah is so exhausted that he eats and drinks and goes back to sleep. But the angel comes back a second time to revive him. Again, he touches him and says, “Get up and eat”, but this time he adds, “...for the journey is too much for you” (v7). We found it especially comforting to observe that the angel doesn't give him a pep talk. The angel doesn't say, “You've got this, you can do it!” He actually says that Elijah *can't* do it. The journey is too much for him, so he needs to be strengthened for it by the physical and spiritual food and drink that the angel provides. Sure enough, this strengthens Elijah for the journey, and he travels for forty days to the next place.

As a group, we tried to help each other see how God might minister to us in some of the challenges we were experiencing, but we found it very difficult to see this in some areas of suffering. What was clear to us, though, was that God was not only speaking to us through this choice of passage (which was an amazing provision in itself), but he was also

practically demonstrating his love and care through the format of the weekend. God sent an angel to revive Elijah with hospitality when he was weary. Our weariness was met with an abundance of hospitality: home-cooked meals, cups of tea, beds for a good night's sleep, as well as time enjoying each other's company. The whole weekend away provided refreshment for us to keep going.

The angel doesn't give Elijah a pep talk saying, 'You've got this!' The journey is too much for him and he needs to be strengthened by God"

3: "Go back the way you came"

Scene three is at Horeb (Mount Sinai). Elijah has come back to the mountain where God gave the Ten Commandments and used to meet with his people. God then asks Elijah, "What are you doing here?" (v9). It's not because he doesn't know the answer! He is meeting with him and asking him what he's doing *here*, at such a significant place. Elijah speaks what is on his heart. He has faithfully served the Lord and been zealous, but God's people are turning away from him. They're destroying places of worship and turning to a false god instead. Elijah's the only faithful one left, and now he's next to be killed! Elijah is

effectively saying, "Where are you, God? The plan isn't working!"

Again, God makes His presence known. First, in the extraordinary passing-by passage, where He isn't in the powerful wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but in the gentle whisper (v11-13). At this point Elijah has to cover his face because God is too holy to be seen. God is present, as present as He was when He gave his people the Ten Commandments, but we are reminded that we shouldn't always expect Him to be loud and obvious. The pattern repeats itself. God asks Elijah again what he is doing here, and again Elijah says, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (v14).

God has already shown Elijah that He is present. What does he still need? He needs hope. God graciously shares a picture of his future. He tells him about changes of power. New kings will rule and put the opposition to death, and a new prophet, Elisha, will be his successor (v16). Even better, God shares that Elijah is not the only one left, so it does not all fall to him. He has company among the 7,000 people in the kingdom of Israel who have not yet turned to worship Baal (v18). He thought he was alone, and it was hopeless. But God answers Elijah's prayer by showing him he has a

good plan that will succeed. In fact, this has always been the plan. God tells Elijah to retrace his steps and return the way he came (v15), because Elijah was already where he was supposed to be for God's plan to come to completion.

What is the message for us? We talked about how sometimes we might doubt God's presence because we're hoping for an obvious, dramatic revelation or because we're leaning on our own understanding and can't see how God is at work. But we know we can trust that God's salvation plan is working. After all, Jesus has come, died for our sins and risen!

We have the Holy Spirit making us more and more like Jesus. And Jesus is building His Church in these times, adding more and more to our numbers until we're with Him in the new creation. God promised Elijah the fellowship of 7,000 believers

who had not yet turned to Baal when he thought he was all alone. 7,000 might have been a few too many for our Women's Weekend, but it has been hugely encouraging to see the growth of the women's ministry in recent years!

This is a tiny fraction of God's mission story. We are not promised that the Christian life will be easy; actually, we are told to expect suffering, and so it's OK to find it hard, but we are shown what will happen in the future. The plan is working. God invites us to be part of building his kingdom wherever He has placed us, and He *will* strengthen us for the journey.

Hannah came to faith in her mid-twenties and works for a Christian charity. She makes excellent guacamole and her taste in trainers has been described as 'party on your feet.'





Steadfast Conferences

If the Christian life is the ‘fight of faith’, then I’ve always felt like a lone soldier in the realm of same-sex attraction, not knowing any other Christians struggling in this area. This meant I felt extremely blessed by the London Steadfast conference which I attended in June.

It was my first time attending something run by TFT and I didn’t really know what to expect. But I was super excited by the prospect of being able to meet other people with similar struggles, to hear their stories and to sit under solid Bible teaching. These all occurred on that day. We spent the bulk of our time looking at Psalms 27 to 29 under the Steadfast theme: ‘Steadfast in our Waiting’, ‘Steadfast in our Wanting’ and ‘Steadfast in our Worship’. These talks were such great reminders of who our God is and what a great hope we have as Christians. We also praised our God in song together, broke off into small groups for discussion about the talks and got to know each other over lunch. In the afternoon, we had a time of Q&A and heard from both TFT workers and a partner organisation from Denmark.

I think the most helpful part of the conference was the small group discussions after each talk. There was such a breadth of personalities,

ages and experiences to learn from. It was really encouraging to see so many brothers and sisters, who have been in the fight longer than me, continuing to hold fast to the gospel. It reminded me afresh of how much it is worth being a Christian and that I am not alone. Don’t get me wrong. There are a few people in my life already who are faithfully walking alongside me, reminding me of the gospel, and helping me to “set my mind on things that are above” (Col 3:2). But there is sometimes a notable unfamiliarity in conversations about struggles, since they don’t experience same-sex attractions. And there can be a certain awkwardness after prayer requests and a mutual uncertainty about what accountability looks like. Being around people who are older and wiser and ‘get it’ was really refreshing, and the whole conference was a big answer to many years of prayer. Following on from the conference, I have since continued to keep in touch with some folk and I look forward to being able to attend the next TFT conference.

Connor loves poetry, prose and the colour yellow, so naturally joined a Korean martial arts club in the hope of evangelising people as he beats them up or (more likely) as he gets beaten up!



Bumps in the Road

Growing up, I lived opposite an incredibly house-proud lady. We could regularly see her, rain or shine, sprucing up the front of her home. She would clean the windows, ensure no weeds were growing, and even go out onto the pavement with a hard scrubbing brush to remove all the dirt from the concrete flagstones. I'm not going to criticise anyone for maintaining high standards of cleanliness, but it used to amuse us that the fastidiousness of her home didn't match that of the homes surrounding it.

We made comparisons between her and Hyacinth Bucket, a character from a sitcom in the 90s, who used to go to extreme lengths to impress her neighbours and hide her true social standing. Hyacinth was also a terrible back-seat driver. She would constantly tell her husband, Richard, to "Watch the road" and point out hazards which he was already well aware of. Our invitation to follow Christ is like a road that leads to an incredible destination as, in the end,

we spend eternity with God in the New Creation. However, it is a road fraught with hazards that seek to stop us dead in our tracks, and the pavements are lined with enticements to get us to turn in a different direction. All Christians face potential pitfalls and temptations on their discipleship journey, which distract them from the final destination. There may be times when the cost of our discipleship feels too great. For many, a life of singleness and celibacy contributes to feelings of loneliness and isolation. How can we stop our journey from being disrupted? What can we do to keep going?

Pack some snacks

Whenever I go on a road trip, I pack some snacks for the ride. After all, we all need to eat. Food and water for the journey are an important part of our self-care. As best we can, taking care of ourselves will help us making unnecessary stops. The times when we are most tempted can be those when we are the most

drained, be that spiritually, physically or emotionally.

Jesus emphasises the importance of self-care in Mark 6. The apostles had been busy sharing the good news of Christ in the villages. They return to Jesus and give him an account of their actions, but they still have people coming to them. Jesus suggests they take some time out to eat, rest and find quiet (v31). Jesus himself often moved away from the busyness of his ministry to find time to pray. We must build time for rest into our lives if we are to persevere in service. We ought to be mindful of our spiritual, physical, and emotional needs and not leave ourselves running on empty.

“The times when we are most tempted can be those when we are the most drained”

Pick your route well

Smartphone mapping apps are great for any journey. Type in where you want to go, and they will let you know the best way to get there. They often give you options so you can choose the route that best suits you. Want to avoid that 50mph stretch on the M6? Sure. Want to take the scenic route through the peak district? Just tap. As Christians, some things can seriously disrupt our discipleship journey that we would be wise to avoid.

There is no shortage of scripture verses reminding us of our need to flee temptation. Romans 13:14 says, “...clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” The words are strong. We’re not to even think about how we might gratify the desires of the flesh. Are there choices we can make that might help us to keep well clear from temptation? For instance, some might need to limit their internet access. Others might need to avoid a particular part of town. Being deliberate in keeping well away from ungodly influences is all part of self-care.

Bring some passengers

Travelling mile after mile on the motorway by yourself is no fun. I find myself clock-watching and working out how many more hours or minutes there are until I reach my destination. Journeys are much better when you have some good passengers by your side. Surround yourself with the right people, and the conversation will make you lose track of time and help you keep going in the right direction.

God designed people to live in community with one another. 1 Corinthians 12:4-27 shows us that community is essential to how God has ordered his church. Each person is different, and each brings something to the table. It takes the whole body of Christ (the church) to accomplish God’s purposes. Galatians 6:2 suggests that we can

fulfil the law of Christ through carrying one another's burdens.

Hebrews 10:24-25 stresses the importance of not neglecting to meet together as we spur one another on. It shouldn't come as a surprise that not having those people around us spurring us on can lead us to fall into temptation. This is a challenge for the whole church. We need to foster good intimacy with others and walk as a community to stop each other from seeking intimacy in unhealthy places.

**“Keeping well away from
ungodly influences is part
of self-care”**

Focus on the destination

Often, when we set out on any journey, there is a destination worth reaching. Maybe you are going to visit a friend you haven't seen in a long time. Maybe you are going on a mission trip that will advance the kingdom of God. Maybe you're just going to work to put some food on the table. Some of my close friends live several hours away. The journey to see them can often feel tedious, but I do it because I know we'll have a great time once we're together.

In Luke 18:29-30, Jesus says: “...no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many

times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.” Setting out may be costly, but we do it for the sake of the kingdom of God. His Word gives us confidence that the road leads to something wonderful as we join him in glorious fellowship in the age to come. As we fix our eyes on this, we will surely want to keep going.

And there you have it, my top tips for a healthy road trip. Of course, other things can cause bumps, setbacks and frustrations on a journey we can't plan for. Sometimes the car breaks down. We may face periods of ill health that compromise our ability to resist temptation. In those situations, help is out there. TFT can provide support if you are currently wrestling with same-sex attraction in the light of your faith convictions. If we can help, we'd love to walk the road with you as we give thanks for the grace and compassion of God, our Father.

Simon leads TFT's Speaking & Teaching Ministry. He's always happy to receive new music recommendations for his driving playlist.



Understanding my life backwards

The Coronavirus pandemic was my introduction to TFT and the *Women of Light* group, and I have enjoyed wonderful fellowship across borders, at the online conferences, as well as support on the Facebook page.

There is a Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, who is known for this quote: “Life is lived forwards, but understood backwards.” I start with that quote because I was recently diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, which now helps quite a few things in my life make sense.

In my school years, I loved most lessons but dreaded break times; I actually did not know how to spend them. The class queen bee left me out, and I really only had one friend. At some point, when I was about twelve, I knew I was a girl, but I really wanted to be a boy. I dressed like a boy for at least a year and only wore skirts three times in five years. I also played with the boys when it was our turn on the football field, as it was too difficult for me to deal with the two-faced girls.

I have just discovered that this is pretty common for girls with Asperger’s, and it makes sense to me, both the longing to be a boy and the knowing deep inside that I am not a boy. I thank God it was not a possibility to get male hormones then!

“I knew I was a girl, but I really wanted to be a boy”

Finding peace as a woman

As a teenager, I developed a personal relationship with God, which is the best thing that ever happened in my life. Realising that this good God has made me female, and declared that to be good, made me open to exploring being a woman. I also took steps to wear dresses occasionally, a little make-up, etc. Part of the healing has also been being a member of a Christian dance group in my church for over 15 years, and through this knowing a healthy and physical fellowship with other women, with God/Christ as the centre. “What was broken in a group setting is only healed in a group

setting,” somebody said, and I believe there is truth in that.

“I first discovered an attraction to women as a teenager watching an opera”

I have been attracted to both men and women. I first discovered an attraction to women as a teenager watching an opera, where a lady played the man’s part and then, of course, kissed a woman. It gave me a special feeling and made me open to accepting homosexuality. Shortly after, at a Christian camp, some of the girls talked about homosexuality. One of the girls who was my age said, “I do not think God likes it”. She gave me some scriptures (from Romans, I believe), and encouraged me to go home and read them. Back home, I looked at them and found that God did not want us to live in same-sex relationships. To me, knowing Christ was far more important than a sexual relationship with another girl/woman. I also had a couple of boyfriends, but on a very platonic level. Unfortunately, people with Asperger’s are fooled more easily. When I was a child, I had my sexual boundaries broken down by some older children, including one of my brothers, which may have cast a shadow over male sexuality for me.

Receiving and offering help

When I was about 30, at a weekend with one of the Christian groups I

belonged to, I met a friendly and lively lady. She was a married woman, nine years older than me, with three children. We had a fun weekend with lots of talk and laughter. Afterwards, we kept in contact. She would text me up to five times a day and make excuses to leave her home so we could meet. She was very forward, with lots of physical contact, such as hugs and holding hands. After a while, I felt a bit suffocated and worried. So, I contacted a Christian psychologist who could help me. He was the one who pointed out a Danish Christian ministry to me, called *Basis*, for people with same-sex feelings. I then joined that organisation, even though I did not feel I was primarily homosexual.

Basis shut down a few years ago, but then KNUS (Christian network for challenged sexuality) started in March 2020. It has a similar work to *Basis*, but it is interdenominational, independent and run by people who can identify themselves as people with challenged sexuality. I am now a part of KNUS. I hope we can support a lot of young Christians who struggle sexually and help them see that their only option is not just to follow their same-sex feelings.

Rose lives in Scandinavia and is a single woman in her 50s. She is a teacher and is active in her church. She finds this quote true and important: “What has been broken in groups can only be healed in groups.”



Are you a good waiter?

What sort of waiter are you? I'm not a very good one. Have you ever joined in with a group singing, "Why are we waiting?" Perhaps you were hungry, the food had not yet arrived and you were impatient! We live in a culture of impatience.

Perhaps you have cried out these words as you wait in the queue at the supermarket or maybe, if you are getting back to travel, waiting at the airport in one of those queues that snake around the building. It is so frustrating. Still we ask, "Why are we waiting?" even when we have all the facts about the reasons for the queue. We are impatient, and impatience is part of the human condition in a fallen world.

Perhaps even more seriously, we have the same view on our desires:

- "I want sex, and I want it now?"
- "I want a sexual high, and I want it now"
- "I want a partner, and I want him/her now?"

Our culture responds by providing on-tap pornography and dating

apps. For example, here's a quote from an online fashion magazine:

'Whether you're after a hook-up or no-strings sex, there's an app for everyone.'

They go on to review no fewer than seventeen sex hook-up apps! I know what I want, and I want it now! We glare with envy at those who have paid for the fast track when we are stuck in the normal queue. And, if we are able to walk through fast track, we are prone to pride as we say to ourselves, at least we don't have to wait like them over there. We scowl with envy at those who seem to have found the intimacy we long for, as we say to ourselves, "It seems so easy for them."

The real and painful experience of waiting for our lives to be complete, for continual happiness and satisfaction, is our ongoing state as human beings. It is part of how sin has broken our world. In fact, it is reassuring to note that the Bible tells us that the whole of the planet is waiting and groaning.

Romans 8 gives us a glimpse of this:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” Romans 8:22-23

The image of childbirth is very helpful, with the mother-to-be in pain for hours on end waiting for the child to be born, longing for her desire to be fully present to her and the world. Just as the earth is groaning in its waiting, so are we. Seeing and knowing something great is about to arrive, but experiencing a great deal of pain before the fulfilment or completion of what is to happen.

So, what is the purpose of all this waiting and suffering? The ‘waiting’ can be a form of suffering. Perhaps waiting for the pressures and temptations of same-sex attractions to ease. Perhaps feeling that the waiting is too much, like a pot about to boil over. I feel the pressures of the need for intimacy. I feel I can’t wait. And so, the temptation to enter a same-sex relationship or some other sinful way of meeting what we see as the things we must have.

King David’s suffering and waiting often go hand in hand in the Psalms. The text I am focussing on is the very end of Psalm 27:

“Wait on the Lord; Be of good courage, And He shall strengthen

your heart; Wait, I say, on the Lord!” Psalm 27:14 NJKV

“Wait for the Lord” is that expectancy of the Lord coming. He is there in the distance and we look out for Him in the future. Waiting for the Lord gives a sense of trusting and resting on Him. But, in tension with this expectancy, we also know that He is with us now, and we are called to rest in Him now and to be held in His arms. Both meanings are helpful to us.

Going back to Psalm 27, we see how David learned from the waiting. How did waiting and suffering affect His behaviour?

In verse 1, David reminds himself that “The Lord is the strength of my life”. When evil men advance, he draws close to God. He learns that God is the person to trust. So it is with us; when the enemy comes to overwhelm us, we can turn back to God and He proves himself time and time again.

In verse 4, trouble prompts David to seek the Lord in His temple or dwelling place. The trouble prompts greater devotion and a greater sense of worship and appreciation of the Lord.

In verse 7, we see that trouble prompts prayer, which leads to a closer relationship with God, “Hear my voice when I call, Lord.”

In verse 11, trouble prompts David to become teachable – open to

instruction in God's ways: "Teach me your way, Lord."

Verse 13 shows David's faithful response: "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

In the New Testament, we see all these benefits of waiting underlined in red ink for us. There are these well-known verses from James 1:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." James 1:2-4

There is, of course, a salvation purpose in the waiting:

"The Lord is not slow to fulfil His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." 2 Peter 3:9

So, when we cry, "Why are we waiting?", part of the answer is that it gives time for other people to come to, and grow, in faith.

For whom are we waiting?

Jesus is the Lord for whom David is ultimately waiting, and we too wait for Him. It does not need red flashing lights for us to see this. So let us look at how Jesus fulfils the truths of the first verse of Psalm 27.

Firstly, the verse says, "The Lord is my light and salvation". We know Jesus is "...the light of the world" John 8:12, and that He came "to seek and to save that which was lost" Luke 19:10.

Secondly, it tells us that "The Lord is the stronghold of my life". We know that Jesus is the rock upon which we build our lives Matthew 7:24.

God inspired David to write Psalm 27, and he wants us to wait expectantly for Jesus.

"God desires to see a willingness to wait as part of the fruit of His work in our lives"

How are we to wait?

From Psalm 27, we can take the following applications for our lives:

1. Firstly, we should continually remind ourselves of who Christ is. He is already our light, our salvation and our stronghold (v1). This leads to confidence in Him, and a corresponding reduction in fear, "...though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear" (v3).
2. Secondly, the psalmist sees being in the temple as crucial to his safety (vv4-6). And so must we, although we don't have access to a physical temple in Jerusalem like David, Jesus himself is the temple, but His church is that

living temple, the body of Christ, so we must be fully immersed and joined to a local manifestation of His body, the local church (1 Cor 12).

3. Thirdly, faithful waiting involves praying (v7). David pleads with his voice to the Lord.
4. Fourthly, David was teachable. In verse 11, he said, “Teach me your way, Lord.” This means we also need a teachable heart. Sitting under God’s word being preached weekly is one way we might do this, joining with our brothers and sisters.
5. Fifthly, let’s remember that we are still waiting for that time when Christ will come again, when He renews the groaning earth and God will perfectly satisfy all our needs. There will be no waiting ever again.

We must remember that God desires to see patience and a willingness to wait as part of the fruit of His work in our lives. We know that love is patient (1 Cor 13:4). Waiting is not something neutral. It is part of God’s design to make us more like Christ. So, as God works in us to look more like Christ, one characteristic that will grow in us is patience, a willingness to wait.

The resolution of all our waiting comes in the second to last verse in the Bible. Here Jesus tells us, “Yes, I am coming soon” (Rev 22-20). Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

This article is a shortened version of a talk Stefan gave at the Merseyside “Steadfast” conference in May 2022.

Stefan is busy discovering the joys of the North after living mainly in the South for most of his life. He is, evidently, a big fan of large Yorkshire portions and cake!

“Steadfast in our waiting”

We interviewed Stefan about his talk on how we can be better at waiting for God. In particular, Stefan explains more about how to carry on being patient, even when many people around us are gratifying their sexual desires in defiance of God. To listen to the conversation with Stefan, you can subscribe to “Ascend Higher” on the major podcasting platforms. Alternatively, try listening directly from the TFT website using the link below:

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts



What keeps you going in your faith?

We asked TFT members what keeps them going in their walk with Jesus and sticking to biblical truth when life is hard, our culture discourages us, and even when friends walk away from obeying God. Here are some of the answers we received:

"What keeps me going is knowing that God is faithful even when we are not. Other things that help include: the richness and depth of friendship, the inspiration which comes through travel and adventure, plus gorgeous food and drink." – Sean

"I remind myself that only Jesus knows me completely, loves me unconditionally and will never, ever leave me." – Anne

"I know I can call on God when I am feeling low or tempted. He loves me and forgives all my failings. He is faithful and full of love and mercy. I know I can live free from the punishment for sin. And, if I ask Him, He gives me the strength to overcome" – Tony

"My answer is only a few words: I'm still here! Had it not been for God I would have been long gone. Thank you Jesus" – Mark

"What keeps me going, is that I know what I know. My faith may be shaken. Things may seem to be difficult from every side. But I remember Jesus died for me, and that He loves me, even when it seems to make no sense" – Paul

"I remember that I am deeply known and deeply loved by God, that I am in the inner ring with Him when faced with FOMO and that I find true rest for my soul with Him." – Joe

2 Corinthians 4:17 has been such a help to me as I persevere in my walk with Jesus. Keeping an eternal perspective really helps me to put the temporary trials of this world into perspective: *'For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.'* – Josh

"What keeps me going when things feel tough is that God is still fighting for me. Even if I think about giving up, He'll never think about giving up on me" – Esther

"What keeps my faith going is the knowledge I have a God who listens and understands my experiences" – Anna

"God has reminded me through His Word, the Holy Spirit and brothers and sisters, that my identity is not in my profession, my family, my financial status or indeed my sexuality. My identity is in Christ Jesus. When I fall, the Holy Spirit is so ready to restore me and set me going again." – John

"I'm encouraged by other Christians that have the same issues as me - it helps me to know that I am not alone. God loves even me! The TFT Married Men's Support Group is also an important help!" – Tony

"What keeps me going is that I believe Jesus is the Truth. Also, Simon Peter asked '*Who (else) shall we go to Lord, for you have the words of eternal life?*' He showed that all the alternatives eventually wither when compared to Him." – Trevor

"What keeps me going in my faith is knowing that God is a solid rock I can always rely on. Also, that no matter what changes around me, and in the world, I know God will remain constant and his love for me will never change" – Tim

"The ministry of TFT has been invaluable in keeping me going and helping me to see I am not alone. Amazing teaching, support and friendships have helped massively. – Steve

What keeps me going when things are difficult is my baptismal verse - '*...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ*' - Philippians 1:6" - Alison



Night prayers

Night Prayers started in October 2021. A group of TFT members felt we could encourage and support one another by gathering online for a few minutes at the end of each day. This is a time when many of us feel particularly alone and perhaps tempted into unhelpful places. We wanted to end each day well with God, accompanied by fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord. We find it works!

We meet for 15 minutes (and no longer!) at 9.30pm Monday to Friday on Zoom. A few of us share the leading and bring a reflection, share some prayers or liturgy and normally invite a time of open prayers. You can just be present or join in as you feel able. You can join in as little or as often as you like. We represent a range of church backgrounds. Any TFT member is welcome, male or female, of any age.

For details of the Zoom login, contact the staff team via info@truefreedomtrust.co.uk or 0151 653 0773



Support our Work

We depend on the gifts of Christians, churches and other charitable trusts who share our vision for promoting biblical sexuality. As we make no formal charge for providing pastoral support or teaching, we rely on donations to be able to provide services to individuals and churches in the UK and beyond. These include biblical teaching, pastoral support, groups and conferences. You can donate on the link below, or contact us for a single or regular donation to our bank account. If you are a UK tax payer, we can claim Gift Aid on your donations. Your gift will help us continue this valuable work.

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