

May–August 2023



Day by Day with God

Rooting women's lives in the Bible

FEATURING SELINA STONE, SARA BATTS-NEALE AND CAROLINE FLETCHER

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15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

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Day by Day with God

Edited by Jackie Harris

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Writers in this issue

Alianore Smith is church partnerships manager for IJM UK, having previously studied theology at Durham University and worked for the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. She is author of *Musings of a Clergy Child* (BRF, 2017).

Selina Stone is the postdoctoral research associate at Durham University in theological education. She loves exploring the Bible and Christian faith with a special focus on social justice and concern for those often overlooked in society and the church.

Fiona Barnard is a TEFL/ESOL teacher and staff member of Friends International. She works with international students, encouraging local Christians to reach out in friendship and evangelism to make disciples. She is an honorary chaplain at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.

Lyndall Bywater lives in Canterbury and works with The Salvation Army and the diocese of Canterbury, helping people pray. She is the author of two books, both published by BRF: *Faith in the Making* and *Prayer in the Making*.

Lakshmi Jeffreys began a church placement with Canon David Winter, then editor of *New Daylight*, in 1993. Twenty years later she delighted in seeing her first notes published in the same series. She combines writing with various other roles within and beyond the church.

Sara Batts-Neale is a priest in the diocese of Chelmsford and the Anglican chaplain to the University of Essex. She is married to Tim, and they live with a dog and host a cat.

Bridget Plass is a writer and speaker, appearing and touring with her husband Adrian all over the world. For the past ten years she has enjoyed being actively involved in the programme at Scargill House in Yorkshire and absolutely loves living near Durham.

Caroline Fletcher is a freelance writer with a background in biblical studies. She lives and works in Chesterfield.

Victoria Byrne is married to Tim and leads her church's ministry among older people in Twickenham. She is co-author of *Hope & Spice*, a charity cookbook for Asha Society in Delhi.

Welcome



Some years ago, I was involved in putting together a survey about women and how they read the Bible. One of the questions asked them which books of the Bible were on their most read list and which ones were rarely read. It was interesting to see that some books appeared on both lists – Song of Songs divided opinion, as did Revelation – but there were one or two that were firmly on the rarely read list.

I thought about that when I was talking with a friend about my plans for this issue. When I mentioned I was looking for someone to do a study on the book of Judges, she pulled a face and said: ‘Ugh, do you have to do that? Can’t you choose something more uplifting?’

Now I am hoping that the majority of studies we do in *Day by Day with God* will be inspirational. In this issue, we will be studying what the Bible says about beauty, focusing on God’s grace and Jesus’ healing ministry, and learning how to break the worry habit. We’ll be encouraged by Elijah, stimulated by Paul’s letter to the Colossians and heartened by the work of the Holy Spirit. There is much here to encourage us and build us up in our faith.

But I also believe we need to have a well-rounded knowledge of the Bible. We need to explore all of God’s word, for doesn’t Paul teach us that ‘all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work’ (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV)? This challenges me, particularly when I remember that the scripture Paul is referring to is the Old Testament – for the New Testament was yet to be formed. What might we miss if we relegate some parts of the Bible to a rarely read list?

I’m so grateful to Sara who took on the challenge of writing a study on the book of Judges. She not only guides us through this book, but also helps us to think through how we might approach the more challenging parts of the Bible. I hope you will find it as helpful as I did.

Let’s begin with some words of a hymn written by Timothy Dudley-Smith: ‘Teach us to love the scriptures, Lord, to read and mark and learn; and daily in your written word the living Word discern.’ Amen

Jackie Harris, Editor

Jesus is Lord! (Colossians)



Alianore Smith writes:

The title of our study – ‘Jesus is Lord!’ – is the key message of the book of Colossians. It’s a book written by Paul to the Christians in Collosae in AD 60–61. The Colossian church was founded by Epaphrus, one of Paul’s converts, and Paul had not yet been able to visit. Letter writing was his only way of communicating with them.

Jesus is Lord! That’s the message Paul wants to get across to this church he has loved and prayed for from afar.

Why this in particular? Well, Paul was writing to address the issue of false teaching. False teachers were suggesting that Jesus was not actually God, and so Paul was seeking to bring the Colossian church back to the true gospel of Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

What we will discover as we read this book together – and we’re going to read it all over the next fortnight! – is that when we properly understand who Jesus is, every area of our life will be impacted. We will see how Christ is Lord of creation, the church, our salvation and our growth. This has significant implications (as we’ll discover in chapter 3) for how we are to live our lives and relate to one another, both as a community and in more personal relationships.

If you take nothing else from the next fortnight, I pray you take this: Christ is our supreme Lord and our sufficient Saviour. When we grasp that truth, and stake our lives on that reality, we will be forever changed.

As we begin this journey together, please join me in praying Paul’s words in Colossians 1:9–14, both for ourselves and for all those doing this study alongside us:

May God fill us with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that we may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that we may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Amen

Good fruit

We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people – the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. (NIV)

What do you think your church is known for? In the parish or local community, what do people think of when they think of your church? Perhaps you have a thriving youth ministry or a busy food bank. Maybe your church is a piece of architectural brilliance. Perhaps your buildings are known to be cheaper to hire or friendly to drop in to.

The Colossian church was known by Paul for its 'faith in Christ Jesus' and for the love it had for all God's people (v. 4). He had not been able to visit the church, but he had heard of it because of the fruit of their faith, which was the community's love for one another.

This is a letter to a church working out what new life in Christ Jesus looks like. And Paul begins by saying how utterly delighted he is about the fruit of their faith. Because of this fruit – the community's love for one another – he always thanks God when he prays for them.

Before Paul gets into some of the grittier stuff to combat any false teaching, he begins with joy. The gospel is bearing fruit. Hope has given way to faith and love. This is wonderful, wonderful news!

Churches can be known for all kinds of good things: youth ministry, community outreach, beautiful buildings, friendly welcome. They can, of course, be known for negative things as well.

Paul is clear: it is the fruit that we bear as followers of Jesus that shows the truth of the gospel that we believe in. If we have fully heard and 'truly understood God's grace' (v. 6), we too will bear good fruit. May it be so.

Father God, help me to fully understand your grace once again. Remind me afresh of your mighty gospel. And help your church to bear good fruit for your kingdom. Amen

Unceasing prayer

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. (NIV)

Who do you regularly pray for? Whether family members, specific countries or people groups, friends, colleagues, or godchildren, we all have people for whom we have a specific calling to pray.

As we know, Paul is far away from the church in Colossae, and although he is encouraged by the reports he's hearing of their faith (as we read in 1:1-8), he no doubt felt somewhat helpless when it came to feeding into their discipleship. This wasn't a time when he could shoot off a quick encouraging WhatsApp or get next-day delivery on a handwritten note. This letter – which would have taken a good long while to arrive – was the only means of communication and discipleship he had with them.

And yet.

And yet we see in this letter Paul's declaration that he has 'not stopped praying' (v. 9) for the Colossians. Since the day he heard of their burgeoning faith, he has brought them before the Father in prayer. Paul may not be able to be with the Colossians, but he has a direct line to the God who is, and who has the power to work in and through them for his glory.

Notice also what Paul prays for: knowledge of God's will, bearing fruit for God, strength, endurance, patience and joy. Wouldn't you love to have someone pray these things for you? Wouldn't you love to be able to pray these things for those whom you love?

When we cannot be close to those we love and care for, we can take comfort from the fact that we can talk to the God who *is* close to them and who loves them even more than we do.

Over the next fortnight, as we read through Colossians, commit to praying this prayer (1:9-14) for a different person or group of people each day.

ALIANORE SMITH

What is God like?

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. (NIV)

It's a question which is at once profoundly complicated – theologians have spent thousands of years and millions of words trying to work it out – and yet also deeply simple: just ask a child, and I'm sure they'll tell you.

It's very easy to get caught up in the tangle of what God is or is not like. Although we have the words of the Bible, we also have other people's interpretations of who God is swimming around in our culture. We live in a multireligious society, with many people who have many different ideas of God.

What this passage tells us is simple: if you want to know what God is like, look to Jesus. He – the Son – is 'the image of the invisible God' (v. 15).

It's a bit like this: in the reality TV show *Love Island*, contestants often talk about how someone is 'my type on paper', but when they meet them, things change – they become more or less attractive based on their reality. It's the same with dating apps: you can know a certain amount in theory about a person, but until you meet them properly, you can't truly understand who they are.

This is what Jesus is for God. He is God in flesh – God with skin on. God, walking the earth. Of course, the analogy only extends so far (analogies for the Trinity never quite work!), but the point is this: the more you know about Jesus, the more you will understand about God.

Slowly reread today's passage and consider the impact of the words. What sticks out to you? What surprises you? Thank God for the truth of his word and ask that he would teach you more of who he is.

Father God, thank you for who you are and what you have done in the person of Jesus. Please teach me more of your character today. Amen

ALIANORE SMITH

Hidden treasure

My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (NIV)

From *Treasure Island* to *Peter Pan*, we grow up being told stories of pirates and long-lost treasure maps. X marks the spot. That's where the treasure's buried!

If Paul was drawing a treasure map for us in the book of Colossians, the X would be right over the person of Jesus Christ. Paul is not subtle about this, either: 'the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:2–3).

You see, Paul is trying to combat the false teaching of others in Colossae. People have been preaching that wisdom and knowledge – treasure – is to be found elsewhere.

However, rather than beginning with an admonishment or by sending the Colossians on a journey of slowly dismantling any false teaching, Paul is blunt: Jesus is where the treasure is. Anything else will fail to satisfy.

More than that, in fact, Paul is saying that everything the Colossians want to know about God himself can be found in Jesus Christ. Again, that's combatting a false teaching the Colossians were coming up against: that Jesus wasn't truly God. Paul is continuing to bang the drum: Jesus is God. Jesus is Lord. If you want to know who God is, look to Jesus. That's where wisdom and knowledge is.

We live in a world which offers us many suggestions of where wisdom and knowledge can be found. Not all of them are bad, but we face the same challenge as the Colossians did all those years ago: when it comes to our *ultimate* source of wisdom and knowledge, will we look to Christ and Christ alone? Do we truly believe that he alone will satisfy?

Father God, help me to seek all my wisdom and knowledge from things that are of you and you alone. Amen

ALIANORE SMITH

Unshakeable

When you were dead in your sins... God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (NIV)

Do you ever just read a passage of the Bible and get hit afresh by its power? As I read through Colossians, this is one such passage for me.

Paul begins by talking about how we need to *root* ourselves in Christ, remain strong in the faith and continue in thankfulness. If we do that, he says, we will not fall prey to ‘hollow and deceptive philosophy’ (v. 8). Why? Because when we understand the reality of the God we worship – the one shown in Jesus Christ, who is central and supreme in the universe (1:15–23) – we realise that we do not need to be ‘completed’ by any other system.

And Paul goes on to explain exactly why. The passage written above is a beautiful summary of the truth of the gospel: we are made alive in Christ. He has taken away all that condemned us. He has nailed it to the cross. And then, even more than that, he took all that wants to harm or rule over us by evil means – ‘powers’ and ‘authorities’ – and he triumphed over them as well.

This is huge.

And because of this, we are not bound by – in Paul’s words – ‘what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival’ (v. 16). We are no longer bound by the world’s standards; no longer do we have to reach a certain level of righteousness or perfection in order to be accepted. The world’s rules are but a shadow (v. 17). The glorious reality is found in Christ... and we are *there*. We ‘live our lives in him, rooted and built up in him’ (vv. 6–7).

Nothing can shake our foundations in Christ Jesus. Praise God.

Thank you, Father, for the truth of your gospel, poured out afresh on us. May the truth of your grace take root in my life and in my heart, and may I continue to live my life with Christ Jesus as Lord. Amen

So what?

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (NIV)

If ever Paul begins a section with the word ‘therefore’, it’s prudent to glance back quickly at what he’s just finished saying. In this case, Paul has just explained the gospel in all its glorious fullness: ‘God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins’ (v. 13).

Based on that truth, then, Paul now turns his attention to some of the false teaching the Colossians were battling: people trying to draw them back into rules and regulations.

Paul is particularly concerned that the Colossians do not fall into the same trap that the Galatians had done a few years previously: believing they had to act in a particular way *in order to* earn God’s favour and redemption, rather than acting in such a way – as we’ll see in Colossians 3 – *because of* their new identity in Christ.

And so Paul is clear: random religious rules and regulations are but a shadow of the reality that is to be found in Christ. When we understand the truth of the gospel, the centrality of Christ and the reality of the identity we now have, everything else should fade into insignificance.

What does this mean for us today? In some ways, it’s obvious: we shouldn’t be swayed by new-fangled ways to reach new heights of holiness. Nor should we try to convince ourselves that we must act in a certain way in order to be a ‘good Christian’. It’s not about *trying harder* – in fact, that’s the exact opposite of what Paul is saying here! Instead, it comes from letting the truth of the gospel take root in our hearts and letting it change us from the inside out.

Spend some time today dwelling on the truth of the gospel. Ask God to give you faith, and then wonder afresh at his glory and grace.

Thank you, Father, for the sufficiency of your gospel. Thank you that we are no longer bound by what we do but can live in freedom because of what you have done. Remind us of that truth today. Amen

ALIANORE SMITH

A new name

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is... For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God... you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (NIV)

When I got married, I decided not only to take my husband's surname (Smith), but also to change my first name from a nickname I'd had for 21 years (Nell) to my given name (Alianore).

Changing my first name meant I had to get used to answering to a name I was only really used to being called when I was in trouble. For a good few months, I had a delayed reaction to being called Alianore because I didn't associate the name with myself. Even though I'd made a decision and asked to be called Alianore, my actions and behaviour showed that I *thought* I was still called Nell.

Paul is writing here about a similar status change. When we become Christians, we are raised with Christ, and our new identity is hidden in Jesus. What is true of Jesus is, suddenly, true of us – and we have to start living as if it were.

Because of this, we need to act in a certain way – we must start answering to a new name, associate ourselves with a new identity. We need to 'put to death' our earthly nature, and instead 'set our hearts on things above' (v. 1).

Often, this will feel difficult. We may not feel like our life 'is now hidden with Christ in God' (v. 3). We may struggle to accept this new reality and act in accordance with it. But, as Tom Wright so beautifully puts it in *Paul for Everyone: The prison letters – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (SPCK, 2002), 'learning to believe what doesn't at the moment feel true is an essential part of being a Christian'.

May we trust the truth of God's word, no matter what our feelings or circumstances are telling us.

Father God, help me to trust in you and your truth, in the new identity that you have given me. Help me act in line with my new family name. Amen

ALIANORE SMITH

Love is all you need?

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another... Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (NIV)

I once went to a wedding where this passage was read and preached on. During the sermon, the bride and groom were invited up to the front and told to put on various items of clothing – hats, scarves, a jacket – to represent compassion, kindness, humility, etc. This was the clothing they were to wear in their daily lives – both as a couple and among the community.

And then, in an unexpected turn of events, the preacher brought out something else: a pantomime horse. (His name was Horace, in case you were wondering.)

The bride and groom were asked to put on the costume and walk across the front of the church. And so, a little awkwardly, and with plenty of laughs, they did. And they had to do so in sync, walking at the same pace and in the same direction, because they were *bound together* by the pantomime horse.

What was the point of this ridiculous, memorable illustration? You've guessed it: Horace the horse represented the love they were to put on.

Love is what binds together all the other virtues that we are called to put on: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another and forgiving each other. These are not just virtues that we must put on in marriage, but in *all* our relationships and in *all* our interactions.

Why? Because we are God's chosen people. We are holy – set apart – and deeply loved. We have been forgiven. And so, we too are called to forgive.

We are in Christ – and so what is true of Christ is true of us. From that position of being God's beloved, and knowledge of it, we can act accordingly. We can put on the (metaphorical) pantomime horse and continue in love for one another.

Father God, teach me to love. Amen

ALIANORE SMITH

All things

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (NIV)

What's the holiest thing you've ever done? Led someone to faith in Jesus? Read the Bible in a year? Prayed in tongues? Preached?

When we're asked to think of 'holy' things, it's easy to go straight to the usual answers – prayer, evangelism and Bible reading. And don't get me wrong, those are good and holy things to do. But this passage is saying something revolutionary: everything you do matters to God. Everything you do is under the Lordship of Christ. Everything you do – washing up, commuting, changing nappies, planning lessons, battling with spreadsheets – *everything* matters to God.

Our daily lives, in their mundanity and their mania, matter to God. Why do we know that? Well, remember Colossians 1:15–23? Paul is hearkening back to that passage here: if everything is made *through* and *for* Christ, if everything is under his lordship, then everything we do matters to him.

It can be so easy to think that our lives are less spiritually significant if we're not working full-time for a church or a Christian organisation. If, instead, we're working a full-time job in the City, looking after children or laid up at home sick and unable to do much at all, we can think we need to earn more 'Christian points' by leading a church small group or praying harder and more often.

But no, says Paul. *Everything* matters to God. And so, *everything* we do – whether in word or deed – can and should be done to the glory of God.

How would your view of your daily life change if you did it all 'in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (v. 17)? Let me tell you: it revolutionised mine.

Thank you, Father, that you care about every aspect of my life and nothing is too trivial or boring for me to bring to you. Help me to do everything to and for your glory, and may your kingdom come in my work. Amen

ALIANORE SMITH

Living the new life

Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. (NIV)

If you ever find yourself making a speech to an audience with high-profile guests (think royalty, politicians, archbishops, etc.), you would traditionally begin by addressing the most important person first: ‘Your Royal Highness, Your Holiness, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen’.

A similar custom was in place for Roman pagan writers as they wrote household codes: they would always begin by addressing the person with the most power. Invariably, that would be the male, the master, the parent.

It is no accident that in Paul’s version of the household codes, he does the opposite. By addressing the less powerful, the ‘weaker’, the more vulnerable party first, Paul is making a stark point: there is no hierarchy in Christ Jesus.

Paul has been speaking about wider Christian community. We are living as those made alive in Christ, in whom there is no favouritism (3:25). We are putting on love (3:14). And that means things look a little different from what we might expect – not only for those who are ‘weaker’, but those afforded greater worldly power as well.

In addition, Paul is saying to everyone that they have a choice about how they behave. In a world where stuff was done *to* women, children and slaves, where authority was imposed on them from above, Paul reminds us that ‘weaker’ people have power over their consciences, their motives and their devotion to Jesus. And the ‘stronger’ people – the husbands, the fathers, the masters? They too will be held to account for their actions and their motives (3:25). This is about treating everyone well – no matter what power they do or do not hold.

Whatever we do, whether we are wives or children or workers – or different things in different situations – we are doing it all in the name of Jesus, who has made us all equal in his sacrifice on the cross.

Which part of today’s passage do you find most challenging? Bring it before Jesus and ask him to help you understand it more clearly.

ALIANORE SMITH

Watching and thanking

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. (NIV)

How do you pray? Were you taught to pray in a particular way? Perhaps you learnt the 'TSP' method – thank you, sorry, please. Maybe you were brought up with liturgy and set prayers. Or perhaps you go to a church where it's mainly the priest who prays, and you just say 'amen' in agreement.

The Bible shows us that there are many ways to pray: petitions, thanksgiving, repentance, intercession... the list goes on. But here, Paul is asking for prayers for a particular thing, and in a particular way – be watchful and thankful and pray for Paul's message of the gospel.

What do you think it means to be 'watchful' in prayer? It seems that there are many ways of doing so. Perhaps it's about praying protection over people, asking God to watch over them. Or perhaps it means to be particularly aware of your surroundings and situation and praying accordingly. Or maybe it means just taking time to prayerfully understand where God is at work in the world, and joining in. Or it could be something else entirely.

Being thankful is, of course, a much easier one to understand, though not always an easier one to practise. What do you have to be grateful to God for today? Have you managed to vocalise that in prayer?

To pray for the advancement of the gospel is, in some respects, much easier. In others, it is one of the hardest. We can pray generally that God's word would go out, but how can we be praying specifically for those who are called to particular evangelistic ministry? And we must also pray in the knowledge that we are *all* called to share the good news of Jesus and that God has called us to share his gospel with those around us. Let's pray for courage and obedience in that, too.

Father God, teach me how to be watchful and thankful in prayer, and give me the opportunity to proclaim the mystery of Christ to those around me. Amen

ALIANORE SMITH

Keep going

Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord.’ (NIV)

In Paul’s closing reflections, he mentions ten different individuals. Each receives some form of context or introduction or sends greetings to the church in Colossae. Each name has a story behind it. For example, Onesimus (v. 9) is widely assumed to be the same Onesimus in the book of Philemon – a slave on whose behalf Paul pleads. It would be so interesting to learn more about the backgrounds and faith stories of each of these names.

When faced with a list of names such as these, it’s easy to skim over them, to see them as irrelevant to our lives today, an epilogue to the letter itself. And yet we know that *all* scripture is God-breathed and useful for us in our discipleship journey (2 Timothy 3:16).

So what is this passage saying to you today? Which individual do you want to learn more about? Whose context or message are you most challenged by?

For me, it’s Archippus, for whom Paul has a direct message: ‘See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord’ (v. 17). There are so many questions raised by this one short verse. What ministry? Why hasn’t he completed it? What does it mean to ‘complete’ a ministry? Why has he been singled out to receive such specific instructions? So many of these questions go unanswered and will likely remain so... at least until we get to heaven.

We have seen throughout this book Paul’s desire to convey the truth that *all* things are under the lordship of Christ, so it’s possible that the ministry is not a church-based one. He could have just as likely received a more secular or practical ministry in the Lord. We do not know.

What ministry has the Lord given you? Whether sacred or secular, pray for the strength and perseverance to complete it.

Bring your ministry – or ministries – to God in prayer. Be watchful and thankful alongside him, and pray also for perseverance for others who have been given ‘ministries in the Lord’: Amen

ALIANORE SMITH

Remember my chains

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. (NIV)

So here we are. Two weeks later and we've read through the entire book of Colossians. And what a journey it's been. Well done!

Today, we conclude by reading the beginning of the book again, along with Paul's closing words. He begins with his standard greeting, but he closes in an unusual way: 'Remember my chains.'

As we know, Paul was writing this letter to the church in Colossae from prison. He had never met these people in person but was writing to combat false teaching of a false gospel, one which argued that Jesus Christ was not God. We have journeyed with Paul through his exploration of the gospel and his conviction that Jesus Christ is central to every part of it, and we've heard him clearly explain the ramifications of this for everyday life and everyday relationships.

There was plenty that Paul could have said to end this letter. But he ends with this: 'Remember my chains.'

I think Paul ended this way because he wanted to remind the Colossians that he was willing to stake his life on what he had written. He was willing to be put in prison, be flogged, be shunned, even be executed, because he so firmly believed that what he had written to them – the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ – was true.

Are you convinced of this too?

Paul is not the only one who has been in chains for preaching – or simply just believing – the gospel. Over 340 million Christians suffer persecution purely because they confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

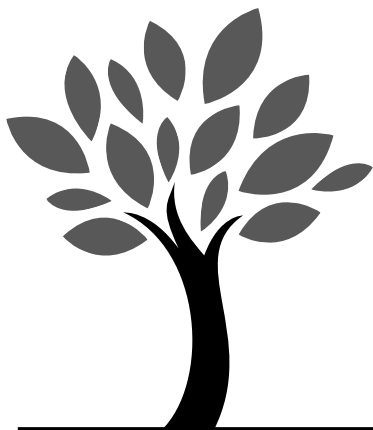
Paul asks us to 'remember his chains'. Today, how can we remember our brothers and sisters around the world who wear similar chains for preaching the same gospel?

Take some time to pray for the persecuted church. You can use resources from the Open Doors UK website if that's helpful.

ALIANORE SMITH



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Day by Day with God is edited by Jackie Harris.



Jackie is married to Ray and lives in Worthing. A freelance editor, Jackie was previously editor of *Woman Alive*, the magazine for today's Christian woman.



Contributors in this issue

Alianore Smith
Selina Stone
Fiona Barnard
Lyndall Bywater
Lakshmi Jeffreys
Sara Batts-Neale
Bridget Plass
Jackie Harris
Caroline Fletcher
Victoria Byrne



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