

“Depending on God”

how to live a life of greater dependence and trust, and how to stay conscious of his forgiveness



Intro (10 min) : As last time, the leader

- introduces the title of the workshop,
- tells the keynote story (it's in “Resources” at the end of these notes),
- then reads the first key verse (Zechariah 3:2) and plays Audio Clip 1. If you choose not to use the audio, and would rather do your own introduction, you should make these points:

- “A burning stick snatched from the fire” is a pretty good description of a Christian! Satan’s accusation against Joshua is based on his unworthiness: what right have you to stand before a shining angel? Look at your clothes – they’re filthy! But the angel responds that Joshua is a member of a city that has been specially chosen by God. In the same way, we often feel unworthy, as if we have to prove ourselves to be accepted by God. But we’re citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, and kings and priests to God (1 Peter 2:9).

- Our view of ourselves should be completely different now that God has changed our *past*, *present* and *future*. Our *past* is the fire of God’s wrath, but we’ve been snatched out of it. Our *present* is that we’re in God’s hand, like a stick that he’s snatched from the blaze. And our *future* is rescue – he’s saved us eternally - and also a new purpose – you take a stick out of the fire because you have a new purpose for it, instead of destroying it!

- This means that our confidence, and our sense of worth and value, is based not on our own talents or achievements; but on the mercy of God who has saved us and called us. As we go on living, we need to learn to live in dependence on him, in area after area of our experience – rather than trusting to ourselves. Tonight we’ll look at four key areas where this learning process needs to be operating!



(1) Depending on God in our battle with evil (10 min)

Read Galatians 2:20-21, then discuss:

(a) The Apostle Paul actually did plenty – founding churches, writing large chunks of the New Testament, charging round the ancient world evangelizing, teaching and serving prison sentences! He was very much alive! So what does he mean by saying, “I no longer live”? *(Potential answer: he was no longer trying to please God by the impressive things he did, or the sacrificial lifestyle he followed. He wasn’t relying on his own sense of commitment or drive or ambition or anything else. He was simply allowing Jesus to supply the power for living which he needed day by day.)*

(b) “I live by faith in the Son of God” could also mean “I live by *the faithfulness of the Son of God*”. How would that change the meaning? Could both of these things be true? If so, what is Paul saying?

(Potential answer: it would mean that Paul's daily existence depended on Jesus' faithfulness in supplying the new life that Paul couldn't just conjure up from within himself. Moment by moment, he was dependent on the grace God supplied through the Jesus that Paul had faith in. So yes, both of these possible meanings fit together! Paul is saying that his constant exercise of faith in Jesus brings the faithfulness of Jesus into his daily living, to empower him and help him live in victory over his old sinful nature.)

(c) Paul's problem with the Galatians, to whom he is writing this letter, is that although they started out living in that same way, they had "set aside the grace of God". Why would a Christian do that? What sorts of pressures might tempt us to go back to living as Christians by our own power, rather than the power of the risen Jesus? *(Possible answers might include: conceit and complacency; guilt feelings, making us think we must do more and try harder; the expectations of others; a loss of confidence in what Jesus is doing within us; self-dislike and self-distrust, failing to grasp the wonder of God's mercy and his love for us...)*



(2) *Depending on God in our relationships (10 min)*

After telling her story, Corrie ten Boom said this:

"And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't.

"If there's one thing I've learned at 80 years of age, it's that I can't store up good feelings and behaviour—but only draw them fresh from God each day."

Read Philippians 2:12-13, then discuss:

- (a) If you're a Christian already – as these people clearly were – you don't need to be "saved" all over again. So what does Paul mean when he advises them to "work out your own salvation"? *(Potential answer: when we become Christians, our salvation is certain for the future; but here and now we need to "work it out" into every aspect of the way we live our lives.)*
- (b) Why do we have to do this with "fear and trembling"? *(Potential answer: Paul gives the reason in the next phrase! It's because God himself is making this happen – it isn't something we organise for ourselves, by our decisions, will power and strength of character. So we can't take charge of the process; we must simply submit ourselves to God's authority.*
- (c) So who is it that makes our lives change – God or us? *(Potential answer: both! We allow it to happen, and open ourselves up to whatever God wants to do with us. He gives us the desire ("to will" v. 13) and the power ("to act" v. 13) so that we can do what we otherwise couldn't.)*

In pairs, or small groups, discuss: what are the main reasons that you sometimes feel it hard to forgive people, or to relate warmly to people who aren't like you, or to open up honestly to

others around you? Are there difficult or awkward relationships in your life that you think God might want to heal with his power, if you were willing?

If time allows, share any conclusions with the rest of the group!



(3) *Depending on God in our service (10 min)*

Read Romans 1:11-13. What does this tell us about the frustrations of Christian work? (*Answer: Not even Paul was able to do all he wanted to! The circumstances of life limit our ability to do as much as we might want.*)

Where are the commitments in your life that you need to keep in balance with your desire to use your gifts in serving God? Discuss with one other person what the difference is between “What I’d like to do” and “What I can realistically do”. Share with the whole group any interesting ideas you come up with...



(4) *Depending on God in our circumstances (10 min)*

Read Philippians 4:11-13 and discuss:

- (1) Paul says that he has “learned the secret” of knowing how to be content in all circumstances – and the word he uses really means “I have been initiated into the mystery...” Why is it so difficult for humans – even Christians – to learn to be content with what they’ve got?
- (2) It’s obviously difficult to be content when you have *nothing*. But when Christians are well off, why do they still have to learn to be content?
- (3) Verse 13 obviously explains where Paul gets his contentment from. But how exactly does Christ give us strength to face good or bad circumstances with joy?



Wrap-up (10 min): The leader reads the second keynote verse (John 15:5) and plays the second audio clip. If not, please point out in closing that this verse makes these three points:

- *Branches connect to the life of the vine;* Jesus uses this picture to make it absolutely clear that “apart from me you can do nothing”. In every area of our experience – including moral pressures, relationships, service, and circumstances - the life of the vine needs to be pulsating through us, bringing branches to life that would otherwise be withered and dead.

- *Branches connect to each other too;* the whole vine works as a unit. Jesus doesn’t address individuals in this verse – “you are a branch” – but all of us together – “branches”. We’re all interconnected through our relationship with the vine, and a solo, Lone Ranger branch (verse 6) has no future. Disciples need to be together.

- *Branches are supposed to produce "much fruit" – that's their raison d'être. You could define "fruit" as "anything a Christian life produces that we couldn't produce by ourselves" – whether it's changes in our character, others brought to the Lord Jesus, enrichment of the lives of others, or anything else. It's all "fruit" and we're supposed to bear a lot of it – all of us. Which is possible only if we "remain in him". The fruit ceases to appear if we cut ourselves off from the vine, and start trying to produce it by ourselves.*

Resources

The keynote story. (You can also play this story being told on video: download it from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ue8msG9HgDM> if you wish to do so!)

In 1944 Dutch girl Corrie ten Boom was sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp because she had been sheltering Jews. Her sister Betsie died there, and her aged father died in prison too. After the war she addressed a meeting about her experiences, and was approached at the end by a man she recognized. He had been an extremely cruel guard at Ravensbruck, but now, he explained, he was a Christian. Could she forgive him for the damage he had done? Corrie tells the story like this:

"And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?"

"It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

"For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. 'If you do not forgive men their trespasses,' Jesus says, 'neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.'

"I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

"Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

“And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“ ‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“ ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’”

“For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.”

Sometimes we need God’s power to help us do what we can’t.

What I'd like to do
for God with my life

What's realistic in
my circumstances