

Church Weekend - Session 1

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Preacher: Nick Page

- [0 : 00] Let's give Nick Page a very warm welcome, please. Hello. Good stuff. Now, you're a speaker, a writer, a historian, podcaster, shed builder, all sorts of things.
- Yep. And yet... Malingerer. Yeah. For most of us, this will be the first time we've met you. Yes. So, can you just tell us a bit about yourself, where you're based, how you spend your time most of the week?
- Sure. Well... So, hello. Hello. My name's Nick. For those of you who don't know me... Actually, my name's Nick. For those of you who do know me, that's how it works. And I live near Oxford, in a village to the west of Oxford called Ensham.
- So, about an hour and a half south of here. And I'm a writer, basically. That's what I do. So, most of my time is writing either books, or... I spend part of my time working for an organisation called Open Doors, which supports persecuted church around the world.
- And I'll maybe be talking a little bit about some of the stuff that they do. Which is great, because I think, as a middle-aged bloke, which I am under all this foliage...
- [1 : 13] I know I look like about an 80-year-old rabbi at the moment, but, you know, it's just a kind of... It's just a phase I'm going through. So, I just got really interested in it, because I couldn't...
- I've never had a beard this long, you see. And for years, it's been... You know, it's the most long hair I've ever been growing to for years. So, I just want to... It's just totally...
- It's just very new. Anyway, so... What were we talking about? We were talking... Yeah. So, yeah, I work for Open Doors, and then I write books the rest of the time and do some other bits and pieces and do a lot of speaking and stuff like that.
- Good stuff. And you're a prolific author, aren't you? Yes. Over 70 books at last count? More than that now? It is more than that, but a lot of those are children's books. So, I've written...
- So, this year, I'm writing a book... At the moment, I'm writing a book called Unreading the Bible, which is about our view of the Bible and how we have to kind of... You know, we get... The wrong things we're told about the Bible lead us into a kind of wrong way of reading it and cause all kinds of problems, and we have to kind of come at it afresh.
- [2 : 14] So, that's quite highbrow. And then I just finished a book called Oh No, Mr. Snowman. Oh! Which is about two little kids and a snowman who keeps sneaking indoors and they keep throwing him out.
- And that's for the Christmas market. So, you know, it's called poverty, really. You end up doing... You know, cheap and available. That's what I am. Yeah, yeah.
- You may have touched on it. Therefore. What's the best and the worst things about being a writer? Presumably, most of your time is spent on your own or interspersed with speaking?
- Well, partly why I got involved with Open Doors was that I think Claire, my wife, thought, you know, you really don't want to be any more on your own. You know, I just...

He's got to learn to socialise at some point. We've got to... He's got to play well with others, basically. So, you know, stop biting. Just, anyway. So, he... You know, so I...

[3 : 11] But I'm quite an introvert in some ways. I quite like the, you know, time alone. And I think the best bit about being a writer is that you're doing something you love, really.

And the worst bit about being a writer is generally in this world, people don't pay you a lot to do the things you love. So, it can be a bit precarious at points. But God's been very gracious, so that's... That's all good, really.

Yeah. I have to say, Nick probably doesn't know this, but I've been reading his books for about ten years now. And he's... You're a slow reader. I know. Yeah. That's just the children's books as well, you know.

I'm waiting for Oh No, Mr. Snowman or everything. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. My heart will melt with that one. You should get through that in the next five years. Yeah, yeah, we'll get there. Oh, you've undercut me now, haven't you? I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I was going to get embarrassed.

I know. Yeah, you were. Because his writing, for me, has been, I think, probably the most influential in terms of my faith and my appreciation of the Bible. Thank you.

[4 : 10] Your writing has spoke to me like no one else's in the last ten years. That's the reason, really, why I wanted this guy here this weekend. So, we trust God that he'll be speaking through you.

So, very heartfelt thanks. Thank you for coming down. We'll let you relax for a few minutes and then get our money's worth. Nice one. Thanks, mate. All right. Thank you. So, yeah, it's very nice to be here.

Thank you for your welcome. It's not an area of the world that I know particularly well. By particularly well, I mean at all. Burnt wood. Burnt wood's not, you know, you want to rebrand it, to be honest.

No, you know, it's just burnt wood. Okay. I suppose you could be a centre of a barbecue industry. I don't know. But, actually, it was interesting that the Wolverhampton, how to alienate your audience straight away with the, you know, who wants a black country accent.

A while back, I wrote, I'll just tell you a little bit about some of the books. I got into sort of writing history. I got fascinated by the figure of Jesus, by who he was and everything about him.

[5 : 20] And I just started to look at that. And, you know, one of those, one of the phrases that used Jesus is that, can anything good come out of Galilee?

I said, you know. And he came from Nazareth, which was a nowhere place that nobody had ever heard of. Nowheresville. And I started, as I did some research, I realised one of the reasons that the Galileans were looked down on was because of their accents.

Because people couldn't understand their accents. And their accents made them sound, you know, really like yokels to the sophisticated people in Jerusalem. So I looked online.

I thought, how can we find an analogy for this? And I want to say, I'm going totally on empirical data here.

I looked online for a survey of the least respected accents in the UK. And the Times had one survey that they've done where they reckoned that people, according to this survey, more people preferred silence than the sound of a black country accent.

[6 : 23] Now, I don't read the Times and I don't subscribe to that point of view. What I reckon is that that makes Jesus a Brummie. Because he, and this book in the middle kind of sums it up, he came from the wrong part of the world.

He spoke with the wrong accent. He hung out with the wrong kind of people. And he just did not fit with the idea of what a proper sounding Messiah should sound like.

So, you know, be proud. Be proud, my people. Anyway, so there's some books that I've read. And I got into, just to run through a couple of books. So these are histories.

There's the history of Jesus last week. A kind of background history of Jesus. And Kingdom of Falls, which is about the early church. And then I thought, you know, it would be, I kind of looked at Revelation.

Because Revelation is one of those books that nobody really wants to go near. We don't know what to make of it. We don't know how to read it. And in fact, I reckon only two types of people write books about Revelation.

[7 : 33] Academics and nutters. And that bit in the middle of the Venn diagram, which is nutty academics. And so I kind of wanted to look at Revelation.

What do we make sense of it as ordinary people? So I decided to do that as a travel book. And I went on the road through the seven cities that I mentioned in Revelation. Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Milton Keynes.

I can't remember where they were. And then ended up on Patmos. I thought, I'll go to Patmos for two weeks. Patmos is where John the Elder had his vision. I'll go to Patmos for a few weeks and see if I can have a Revelation.

Didn't quite work out. But I met a lovely horse. Who lived opposite where I was living called Shakira. Anyway, I remember her more than the rest of it. Anyway, so I wrote that book.

And that's a kind of, again, looking at the history in Revelation. We make a big mistake about Revelation because we think it's all about the future. But it's not. It was very much about the present for the people who read it. And it's very much about that for us today.

[8 : 37] And then more recently, I've done some histories of Christianity, a nearly infallible history of Christianity. And then my last book out is A Nearly Infallible History of the Reformation, which was a brave attempt to do a history of Reformation with a lot of stupid jokes in it.

Not sure it came off, but anyway. There we go. And then this book is something that I'll be talking a bit more about. This was a much more personal book that I wrote a few years ago. Dark Night at the Shed is a book about men, midlife, spirituality and sheds.

And it was written because I kept seeing that so many of friends, people I encountered at teaching events, lose their way in midlife.

You know, so unhappy. And I wanted to think about what Christianity has to say to that. Just yesterday we had the news of a guy called Anthony Bourdain.

I don't know if any of you have ever read his books. He's a chef, a very famous chef in America. Got to travel the world, wrote a wonderful book called Kitchen Confidential. It looks like he's got it all. He's sitting on his own ultra cool guys.

[9 : 55] You know, he's got everything and he commits suicide. Because the outside was not what was happening on the inside. Because he was so unhappy. And so Dark Night at the Shed is really about that.

And I do quite a lot of men's weekends and try and get guys to sort of open up a bit. You know, one of the problems we have as blokes is that we have lots of, you know, we have lots of mates but not enough friends sometimes.

We don't have enough people that we can be really honest. And part of what I want to talk about over the course of today is how we get the strength to be really honest and open with each other and how we can establish communities. You know, we're just saying about the kingdom of heaven on earth.

What does the kingdom of heaven on earth look like? It looks like this, you see. That's the point. That's the job of the church is to show people what heaven looks like.

What the resurrected life looks like. That's quite a big responsibility. That's quite a big thing. But, you know, this is what it's about. So, you know, I'm really into sort of building communities like that.

[10 : 56] And one of the other ways that I do that is through a podcast called Mid-Faith Crisis, which I do with my friend, my long-standing friend and disgraced ex-minister. Well, he's still a minister, but, you know, the Baptists, they'll have anybody.

A guy called Joe Davis. And we set it up for people who really get to that point in their life when they look around and they go, well, is this it? Is that it?

Is this what it's all about? That could be a very lonely point to get to. Especially, by the way, if you're standing here and preaching at the time, which was an experience I had. You know, where you suddenly look around and, hang on a minute, is this the best it gets?

Is this what it's all about? And a lot of people have that kind of thing. And I believe very strongly that the Mid-Faith Crisis, like the Mid-Life Crisis, is a call, a call to recalibrate your life.

To find out where life really, where the real heart of life is. Let's read the Bible together. And we can do so without actually opening it.

[11 : 58] Isn't that wonderful? Technology. But I might. Jesus says this, I wonder what you think Christianity is.

What is Christianity? Christianity. I don't think Christianity, it's not a set of rules. You know, it's not a set of, I talked about reading the Bible.

Often you'll say the Bible is a rule book for life. But the Bible contains loads of stories. It's mainly story. The rule bit is actually quite, you don't have a set of rules that begins once upon a time.

That doesn't work. I don't think the heart of Christianity has a set of rules. Although there are things that we should do, and ways in which we should behave, that really grow out of that. But it's not a set of rules.

I don't think it's a collection of doctrines and dogmas, and good, you know, total theology. Because actually, again, the more you read the Bible, the more you understand you can't fit it into a system.

[13 : 13] It doesn't work that way. Which is not to say that Christianity doesn't have solid doctrine, and doesn't have truth. Of course it does. But that's not what the heart of the gospel is.

It's not a philosophical system, although it contains ways to help us think better, and to be wiser. And to deal with a lot of the reality around us.

It's not a political theory, although it has a lot about justice, and how society should be. Society should look like heaven. May your will be done on earth as in heaven.

And that's a very political statement, when you start to look at it. But Christianity is not a political theory. It's not, crucially, a method of sin management. Which is how we sometimes treat it.

That we come to Christianity to have our sin dealt with, and then after that we just sit around for a bit. Now I believe Jesus saves us. I believe in forgiveness. I believe in salvation.

[14 : 15] I believe in all this great stuff. I'm never quite sure how it's worked. I haven't worked it out. But the cross did something fantastic. And I'm still exploring, even now, what that is.

But Christianity has nodded its heart a method of sin management. It's not that I can just go to church for a synectomy every week. You know, and I walk in with his sin and I have it cut off and then I go out.

The trouble is it keeps growing back. Sometimes it grows back during the service. You know? It's not about sin management.

I think at its heart, Christianity is an invitation to life in all its fullness. An invitation to life in all its fullness.

I grew up in a church where, you know, a good evangelical church. And obviously you learn the verses, you know, which is a big thing about Bible learning. Which is great to do, actually. I encourage you to do it.

[15 : 14] But, you know, and the key verse you learn, John 3.16. Yeah? John 3.16. For God so loved the world that whosoever believes in him should not perish but should have eternal life.

And it's a great, it's a great verse. It's a great verse. But that's just part of what the gospel is. Eternal life and salvation is part. Salvation is bigger than what we think, I think.

This is the point. See, Jesus also said this in John 10.10. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. Abundant life is the invitation of Jesus.

Life as it should be lived. Life with meaning and purpose and significance. We are here to show the world what abundant life looks like.

I believe, I have this idea, you know, that Christianity should make your life better. There should be a measurable, quantifiable difference.

[16 : 14] If you follow Jesus, your life should be better. I don't say it should be perfect. And better is not what we think it is. Not free from pain. Jesus never promises us this. He never says that.

But it's quite interesting when the disciples identify who he is, which we'll look at later on. He immediately goes on to tell them, well, I've got to go and die now. I've got to go and be executed. By the way, you know, they're following me.

It's not all sunshine. I talked about working with Open Doors. And so working with Open Doors, I get to meet and to tell the stories of some of the people who have suffered enormously for their faith.

People in Nigeria and India and Pakistan and North Korea and Afghanistan and places around the world. I've also met some of the most joyful people I've ever met.

Some of the most life-filled people I've ever met who are living in places of oppression. So it's not a pain-free life necessarily.

[17 : 14] It's not a life without obstacles. It's not an easy life. But it is an abundant life. Somehow the abundant gospel of Jesus Christ can absorb all the darkness and the death and the pain and the general crappiness of life that it throws at us.

And we can still have abundant life in the presence and friendship of God. Which is remarkable. It is incredible. And this is what Jesus offers us.

Who doesn't want abundant life? Who out there doesn't want abundant life? We go out into Burkwood and say to people, would you like life in all its fullness?

Would you like a really full and abundant life? Would you like a great life? I'm not sure we do that. I'm not sure we feel we could promise that. But that's what Jesus says. Jesus says, I invite you to, I came, they might have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus does not call us, you know, to be a church goer. Just to be, you know, Jesus doesn't call us to be an evangelical or an Anglican or a Methodist or a Catholic or anything.

[18 : 29] He calls us to be a disciple and to follow him into abundant life. Yeah, I have this sort of radical idea that following Jesus could be a good thing to do.

And it's often, it's not presented that way. But, you know, it could make life better. It's an invitation to life. It's about life, not life insurance. All right? It's about life, not life insurance.

It's not about, it's not just about, you know, we know there's a future awaiting for us. We know that our bodies will be resurrected. We know that we will live with God. We know that there is life after this.

But it's about starting it now. I don't want to just go and say, so often we treat Christianity as like, well, are you saved? You got saved. You were a sinner. Now you're saved.

And then you sit for however many years in some kind of heavenly waiting room. You know, and there's a few sort of theological magazines on the table that you can look at, perform.

[19 : 29] And then eventually you get there, you get this call. Well, Mr. Nick Page, come to treatment room for final treatment room for. And you get up and you go, and then you go through.

That's, it's not a waiting room life. That's not abundant life. Eternal life starts now. It starts here. The kingdom of heaven can be seen here.

On earth, through us. It's an invitation to life. Jesus has a word for abundant life, and he calls it discipleship. That's what he calls it. The life of discipleship is what we're called to.

And there's a big difference between church going and discipleship. And that's what I want to look at this morning, what discipleship actually is.

Let me just swap slightly to a different, just go to a different moment here in the Gospels here. I'm leaping around slightly.

[20 : 26] John 1. I'm just going to read you this passage. It's from the beginning of John. And what you have is you have two disciples of John the Baptist.

So they're followers of John the Baptist. And John is with them, and then he sees Jesus walking by. And this is what happens. It's the start of verse 35. The next day, John, again, was standing with two of his disciples.

And as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, look, here is the Lamb of God. And the two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, what are you looking for?

And they said to him, Rabbi, which means teacher, where are you staying? And he said to them, come and see. They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. I wonder what those people were looking for. That's a great question that Jesus asked us.

[21 : 31] And it's a question I want you to start reflecting on today. What are you looking for today? What are you looking for in your life? We're all looking for lots of things.

And sometimes we're told this is not a good thing. Sometimes we're told you shouldn't say what we want. It's not about us. It's about following the Lord.

And that's a vision of God that I want to address in the next session, that actually is a God who essentially wants to make life like a boot camp. You know, just test us, test us, test us, keep pushing us, pushing us. I don't think that's really what God is about.

I think God is passionately concerned with, what do you want? What are you looking for out of your life? Where are you living? The idea of these comments in this passage are very interesting.

So these two disciples, they had been following John, and now they go to Jesus, and he says to them, what are you looking for? And they say, where are you staying? And he says, come and see.

[22 : 33] Come and see. Now, what's behind this? Well, we have to understand what discipleship was in the time of Jesus. Discipleship, to be a disciple of someone, was to be basically a trainee, an apprentice.

But it's a bit more than we would see now. To be a disciple of someone was to literally move in with them. You would go and live with them, basically.

And you would assign yourself to a master, usually a rabbinical teacher or somebody like that. And then you would move in with them, and you'd live with them, and you'd copy them. You'd basically base your whole life around what they did.

You'd imitate them. You'd learn to imitate them. And some disciples took this to rather extremes, really. There's stories of one rabbinic disciple who would follow his rabbi into the toilet.

And then another one hid under the marital bed of the rabbi to see what went on. And there's a thin line between discipleship and stalking. But, you know, there was that. And when he was discovered under there, he said, but this is the law.

[23 : 40] And I must see. I must understand. Okay. You know, but what it meant was they would look at the life of someone and put it into practice themselves.

It's an imitative relationship. It involves high commitment. You're expected to give up stuff. Really, you move from one place to another. You might have to give up your job or your home, your previous home, and you move in.

It's active learning. There is stuff that you do. There's stuff that you do. And there's stuff that we do as a Christian based on looking at the life of Christ. There are things that we do.

We'll maybe touch on those. It's imitation. You copy the rabbi. You learn from him. And you live together in community. That's discipleship.

Discipleship is a conscious relationship as well. Intentional. Nobody drifts into discipleship. People can drift. That's why it's not like church going. People can sort of drift into church going.

[24 : 44] They can suddenly find they go one week and then they go back the next week. And then suddenly they're there for the rest of their lives with no remission. And, you know, that's... No, no. You know. Anyway. Enough of me.

Enough of my issues. But, you know, there is... You can drift into... But nobody drifts into discipleship. Because discipleship is about making a conscious decision to be yoked, as it were, to Jesus, to refer back to that first reading.

I wonder how you'd answer that question, though, that Jesus asks. What are you looking for?

I wonder what you're looking for today. Are you really... Because the answer may be that Jesus is calling you to move. To move to a different place.

And that what you need to do today is an active movement to be a disciple of him. To make that movement from being a churchgoer to being a conscious disciple.

[25 : 46] To say, I'm going to live with you. I'm going to move in. This is a great thing. We can move in with Jesus. We can actually live with him. And what happens was, when you live with somebody, then you learn from them the whole time in the Torah.

Not the Torah. In the Mishnah. Which is the first century collection of... Well, second century, rather. The collection of Jewish oral law.

So, it's kind of teachings that the rabbis had given to expound on the law that was in the Torah. The first five chapters of our Bible. There's a verse here that says, Let your house be a gathering place for sages, and wallow in the dust of their feet, and drink in their words with gusto.

So, there's some interesting stuff in here. So, in other words, you get together. Firstly, you gather together around this rabbinical master. And you wallow in the dust of their feet. Now, people don't know quite what that means.

What they think is two... It might mean two things. One is that you follow them around. And literally, as they walk, they kick up dust. And you just sort of... You're that close to them that you're going to get dusty as their sandals flip up the dust.

[26 : 53] Or they think it's actually that you sit at their feet and learn. And drink in their words with gusto. I think it's probably... The sitting at their feet is probably key here.

And actually, that always, for me, opens up another story in the Gospels. You know that story of Mary and Martha. The story of Mary and Martha, which is generally told as a call between the active life and the contemplative life.

You know? And that Mary somehow chooses the contemplative, and that's a better life. I don't think that's what it's about at all. I think Jesus lived a very active life. So he's not likely to say one bit's better than another.

What's happening, if you read the story, is Mary sits at Jesus' feet. And in the first century world, women could not be disciples.

Women could not be a disciple. And that's why Martha's so shocked. That's why Martha wants to get her out of there. She's taking a place that she should not have.

[27 : 50] She's sitting as a disciple at your feet. And Jesus goes, yes. And she's chosen the better path. So it's a pretty radical statement from Mary. And in fact, one of the radical things about Christianity was that they did have female disciples.

In the Gospels, they're never called disciples. But there were loads of people who operate in exactly the same way. We know that Jesus had groups that went around with him, which included women. The Greek word for disciple, *methetis*, is a male word.

But in fact, Luke, in Acts, invents a female version. So he invents a female version of that noun. So we know that there were female disciples among the church.

But you sit at the feet of the master. And you take that in. And Jesus opens that possibility to everyone, to all of us. To sit at his feet and learn from him.

And it's imitation. In Luke, he says, a disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who's fully qualified will be like the teacher. The expectation is that you become trained and you become like the teacher.

[28 : 58] That's why it's like an apprenticeship, really, that you learn that. And as I said earlier, the costs can be quite high.

If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. In this context, taking up your cross... You know, I used to... We found one of those phrases.

People say, oh, it's just a cross I have to bear. Or something like that. About their leg pain or something. I don't think taking up your cross in the Gospels means I've got a bit of lumbago.

And I've got to deal with it. The only people who took up their cross in the first century are people who are going to be killed. Because you lifted up your cross beam and you took it to your place of execution. You know, there's a high level of commitment here.

There is a high level of commitment. In my work with Open Doors, we meet all kinds of people and I tell their stories and do all kinds of stuff. And each year we issue a list of the countries where Christians are most persecuted.

[30 : 03] It's called the World Watch List. And it's the top 50 countries where Christians face the most persecution. Number one for the past 14 years has been North Korea. North Korea is the worst place in the world to be a Christian.

Interestingly, it's only just at the moment beating Afghanistan. Which is equally hard, but for different reasons. If you become a Christian in North Korea, you know that you are taking up your cross.

Because you know there is a very, very high percentage that you will be put in a labor camp. And essentially work to death. Some people come out.

We have miraculous stories. Some people don't. And do not be fooled. You know, there's a lot about Kim Jong-un that just looks funny because of the haircut. And we kind of fall, we always fall into this trap with dictators.

They did it in the 30s with Hitler. We did it in the 70s with Idi Amin. You know, there's something buffoonish about them. But there's an evil there. And we just need to pray for our brothers and sisters in North Korea.

[31 : 09] But in North Korea, in Afghanistan, in so many places, in Somalia, in Sudan, so many places around the world. You become a Christian, you are taking up your cross.

You do not drift into church going in those places. So to be a disciple is a very, very high commitment. But it is where abundant life is to be found.

And it's in imitating Christ. And we see this theme that goes right through the New Testament. Paul writes this, be imitators of me as I am of Jesus Christ. And you kind of look at that and you think, oh, you big head.

You know, look at me, look at me. I used to think this about Paul. But the point is, Paul's just operating in the way of learning that he knew. He was a disciple of a rabbi called Gamaliel. So he did that.

And he's now saying, you look at us and you imitate us. Now, it's a big call on us because that's part of, I know now, that other Christians younger than me and young as I am and alive and vibrant, you know, there are Christians younger than me who strangely will look at me and learn what it is to be a Christian, be a follower of Jesus.

[32 : 19] It's ill-advised, but they do it. And we pass it on. We pass it on to our children. We pass it on to our neighbours.

We pass it on to each other. I don't know how many of us would be clear on saying that. I don't know how many of us would turn around and go, you know, be imitators of me as I am. Imitate Nick as he imitates Christ.

I'm more likely to say, don't look at me. But actually, I've got to take up that role. And in doing so, that's where abundant life is.

You know, I won't overload you with any more verses, actually. I'd like to go back to that original one if I can find it. When Jesus talks about joining him, he's talking about discipleship.

Churches don't really talk very much about discipleship, or at least they sort of mention it, but quite often you hear about discipleship courses and they're things that you're supposed to believe. Okay, you know, I've read quite a lot of discipleship courses in my life and they're all about theological notions that we're supposed to believe.

[33 : 30] They don't really tell me what to do with my money or give me different methods of prayer or tell me what it means to act as a Christian. They're not tremendously good at that.

When I was 14, I became a member of my Baptist church. That's what sort of Baptist churches do. You have to join up like the AA. And you get baptized.

And I got this little blue membership card. And I remember it very well because it's all about how you should behave in the church meetings. I don't know how many of you. Do we have some ex-Baptists here or current Baptists?

So you get the Baptist church meeting, which is basically a point where everybody gets together and punches the minister. And I think that was the point. It was a kind of ritual violence.

Anyway, and it was all about how you behave. This little card I got, this blue card, was all about how you behave in church meetings. You know, no swearing, no spitting. Clothing is not optional. It was that kind of stuff.

[34 : 27] And I might be misremembering it. But anyway, you know. It didn't say, oh, by the way, you know, your prayer life really matters. And get some good teaching on that.

And get some good advice and try out that. It didn't say about, you know, read the Bible. It didn't say about all the, you know, spend time in choir. It didn't say anything about that.

You know, discipleship is really important. It's really important, but it's active. It's stuff that we do. And in churches, we tend to talk about the ABC and not the D. We talk about the ABC, attendance, buildings and cash, but not the discipleship, not the D, which is really where we need to focus.

How do we act as a community? How do we imitate Christ? What does it look like to imitate Jesus Christ in Burntwood? What does it look like? That's a really important thing to think about because people will look at it and that's where they'll see what life is really about.

There are three things you need to have in order for transformation to happen, in order to become a disciple, I think. Three things. You need vision, intention and means.

[35 : 44] This is true of all transformational activities, all things that change you. You need a vision, you need the intention and you need the means. Now, so I don't know if there's any... Is there anyone here who goes out cycling?

You know, have we got any Lycra wearers here is what I'm actually asking. Like, really? Like, really? I don't think that's advisable, but anyway.

I just wanted to say to you, because part of the middle-aged stuff, you know, you get this, what are called mammals, middle-aged men in Lycra. And you don't look good in it.

You know, whatever your wife says, you do not look good in it. Your wife is just hoping that it's a phase you'll go through and eventually you'll turn into George Clooney. You might turn into George from Rainbow, but not George Clooney.

Is that a joke older people get? You know, but in order to transform, a lot of people have this around the beginning of the year. They think, well, I'm going to change my life. I'm going to go to the gym. And so the vision we have in front of us is the vision of, you know, a man with a six-pack.

[36 : 53] And I don't have a six-pack, I have a keg. But, you know, that's just life. You know, six-pack, I'm going to get fit. But the vision in itself is not enough. The vision itself is not enough.

A lot of people have visions, but they don't really intend to do it. I meet a lot of people who say to me, I want to become a writer. And I go, well, I'm not stopping you. You know, just do it. It's not hard.

Get a piece of paper and a pen and away you go. But actually, they don't really. It's a vision. So the vision on its own is not enough. You've got to have the intention. The intention is what gets you out onto the bike when you really don't want to do that.

What gets you going to the gym when you really don't want to do that. You might have the vision of learning a new language. The intention is what gets you learning the vocabulary when you'd rather do something else. So you've got to have the second part, which is the intention.

And thirdly, you've got to have the means. The means is the bike. The courses, the teaching, the gym. So many people sort of don't get all three of these things.

[38 : 00] And therefore, transformation never really happens. Sometimes we buy the equipment without ever thinking that's enough. You know, I'm sure a lot of us have done that. You know, you go and you buy the exercise bike.

Anybody done that? You go, we've got an exercise bike at home. It's the least used item in the entire house. I tell you that. You know, it's right up there with the pasta maker. You know, because you think that's enough.

That's going to inspire me. But the means don't inspire you. For discipleship, it's the same thing, actually. And this is kind of what I'm going to talk about over the course of the day. You have to have a vision, an intention, and a means. The vision is the life of abundance.

Live with a God who loves us. That's the vision. That's a great vision. But actually, you have to have the intention. There is stuff that you do.

There is stuff that you have to do. You know, you have to pray. You have to have a prayer life. You have to have times of quiet with God.

[39 : 00] You have to read your Bible. You know? And I could happily talk about this, and maybe I'll try and find the time. Because it doesn't mean you have to read the whole Bible. You know, the trouble is we tend to sort of give people these tools and these techniques and say this is what everybody has to do.

There is no one way of praying. Prayer is a relationship. Prayer is a relationship with God. It is spending time with God. There is no one correct way of praying.

You know? And the Bible reading is the same. You know, we have to serve one another. That's what Jesus did. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples.

Jesus washed the feet. We have to serve one another. Okay? We have to... There's a whole load of stuff that we could talk about. In the second session, I'm going to be talking about this a bit more, because we get it a bit wrong.

But you have to have the vision, the intention, the means. And the vision is a God who loves us and who offers us abundant life. That's the invitation of Christianity. That's the first part of the thing.

[40 : 04] You know, the means... So what I'm saying to you about the stuff that we do, I want you to be clear. These are not ways of earning God's love, of earning God's approval or earning salvation.

These are things that we do to accept his love, to deepen our relationship with him, and to become more Christ-like. That's the call. That's the call. Jesus says, Come unto me and I will give you rest.

Rest for our souls. When you look at that, initially, you kind of think, hmm, there's the yoke thing going on here, isn't there, really?

You know, like, come unto me. So the image there is of cattle, yoke oxen, yoked together to pull the plough. All right? You have two oxen with a wooden thing over them, yoked together, so they move in the same direction.

They move in concert with each other. I can imagine, you know, people hearing this and thinking, this is not the most compelling image. You know, come unto me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and we will do some ploughing together.

[41 : 13] You can sort of imagine the disciples going, could we tweak this a bit, Lord? We were, you know, we've got, you know, here's Thaddeus, he's head of marketing for the disciples.

He's going, well, it's a good concept. What about, come unto me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and we'll have a sit down under that tree over there. Or I will give you a mattress.

Because abundant life isn't about sitting and doing nothing. It isn't just about relief. It is about transformation. And a lot of people, a lot of times in our life, we don't really want transformation.

We want relief. We want the pain to stop. I really understand that. We are so tired. And physical tiredness is a huge thing in our society, and I would urge you, so quite often I meet Christians who are feeling oppressed, and they, oh, I'm oppressed, I'm under all this, and they're just tired.

Go and have a sleep. You know? But it's pretty tough. So there is a physical side to this, but we are so weary of all kinds, we can be weary of all kinds of stuff, can't we?

[42 : 21] I wonder what you're, what are you weary of today? Are you, are you weary of pretending that everything's okay?

You know, of having to put that mask on. We'll talk about this in the final session today. Having to put that mask on the minute you walk through those doors. Perhaps you're weary of feeling guilty about things you've done, about who you are, about the way you behave, about things that you can't sort of master in your life.

Perhaps you're just weary of being bored. You just want some action. You want something to happen. You're just tired of the same old life. Perhaps you're weary of struggles at work.

And you've been struggling so hard and so long. And it's all going nowhere. Perhaps you're weary of superficial religion.

You're weary. You know, you can sit in churches a long time. I think this is part of the challenge for us in churches and for church leaders. Is that there are only so many sermons to give.

[43 : 27] You know, I've only got four. And three of them are about the same subject. And two of them have the same jokes. So, you know, there are only so many things.

And I suddenly realised some time ago that actually, I was sitting there. I've been a Christian since a minute past midnight on January the 1st, 1980.

That was when I got serious about following Jesus. So I've been a Christian a long time. I was two, obviously. No, I, you know, and I started realising that I've probably heard it all.

And that the time for that kind of teaching is changed now. I need to do something else. I need to have some other kind of thing. And that's pretty, I'm saying that as somebody who goes and speaks, you know, but, you know, just being honest.

Perhaps you're tired of superficialities. You want to go more. Perhaps you're tired of pretending you believe in things that you no longer believe in. And one of the things that as churches we need to do is provide forums for people to be honest about the things they believe.

[44 : 28] To say, look, this bit, really? Really? Are you sure? And I'll be talking about honesty later on as well and the need for that. Honesty and courage.

You know, perhaps you're tired of signing up to that. I've argued in the past, you know, we have alpha courses for people who are thinking of joining churches. We really need an omega course for people who are thinking of leaving.

You know? And Mid-Faith Crisis, the podcast we do, is all about people who have left church. Now, I'm not saying it's all the church's fault by any means or anything like that, but I am saying that if you, you know, we have the biggest growing denomination in the UK today is Christians who no longer go to church.

They still identify as Christians, but they do not go to church because it's not, it's not helping them. It's not doing, and maybe that's their consumer mentality going on. I'm not saying, please hear me, I'm not saying it's all one side or the other, but I am saying that I think if you leave church, by which I mean a community of believers, if you leave a community of believers and become isolated, there's really only one way, one direction your faith is going to go, and it's not going to grow.

It's going to descend because we need each other. We need community in order to help us to do this stuff. But maybe you're just tired of church.

[45 : 51] Maybe you're tired of that. Maybe you're tired of work, tired of the rat race, tired of the pressure to conform, the pressure to succeed, the pressure to go through everything, the hoops that society puts in front of you.

You're tired of pain, you're tired of suffering. I really understand all that. You're weary, and you just want some relief. What I want to say to you today is Christianity is an invitation to abundant life, and abundant life is not just the absence of pain.

Abundant life is not an anesthetic. Abundant life is not just the absence of noise and all the stuff that goes on. It's the presence of peace.

It's not just the numbing of pain, but it's the presence of life. And energy. It's not just the absence of despair, as if for one moment you can just put that aside and feel okay about life.

It's the presence of hope. There is hope. It's not just the sort of a momentary diminution in the sadness, but it's the presence of joy, and that is what Jesus offers.

[47 : 05] That is what the life of discipleship offers. And I have to remind myself of this on a daily basis. I struggle quite a lot in my life with anxiety, and I have done for some time. And most of this year has been great.

I've been really good. And then just recently, this last week, I've been waking up. And you know, I don't know how many of you are familiar with this feeling. I hope not many of you. But I describe it as waking up with stage fright. I wake up, and I don't know what's going to happen, but I don't think it's going to be good.

And of course, part of the thing about anxiety is it's an overactive imagination. You know, I catastrophize stuff. So the minute, I don't know if anyone's like this, the minute I'm driving along, I hear a noise in the car.

I hear a car making a noise it didn't make before. Oh, that's it. That's the car gone. In my head, in my head, I've got this showreel going on of all the disasters that as the wheel falls off, and I just drive into, I'll then drive into a tree.

There'll be a massive explosion. There'll be a nuclear power plant just nearby. It'll trigger it. At the end of the world, it's the end of the world. You know, I, you know, some of the things about worry and anxiety is because we've got good imaginations.

[48 : 17] So there's always a, you know, some of the gifts that we have actually also come with a kind of burden sometimes. People, I meet people who have enormous gifts for serving others.

Just one of the, they're needs-driven people and of course the flip side of that is they can't stop. They don't know when to stop. I have a gift for storytelling, a gift for imagination, a gift for, you know, I don't feel proud about it actually because it's just like being able to run fast.

I didn't really do anything to earn it. I've done stuff to hone it. I've trained it. But I have a gift for that and I now recognise in my life that the flip side of that is I can, my imagination can run away and I can tell myself all kinds of stories all the time and I have to really invite Jesus into my life to sort of help with that and recognise that.

I've prayed a lot about it and I wanted, like I was talking about the synecdome, I wanted God to come in and just take it away but I don't think he's going to do that because I think it would take away the other bit. You know, and so you have both these things and what we do is, what I want is to be transformed.

I don't want, you know, I don't think it's just about the relief, it's about the transformation, it's about becoming more Christ-like. That's the invitation that is in front of us, that's the invitation that's there, I need to wind up but I'm going to just, you know, I just want to say that Christianity is not an anaesthetic, it's not that, like we're sitting in the waiting room, we dull the pain of this world until we get to the next world and then it's all glorious.

[49 : 52] I think it's about abundant life right now. It's about discipleship. Discipleship means this, let's get through a definition. Discipleship means arranging your whole life around the presence, the teaching and the example of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship means arranging your whole life around the presence, the teaching and the example of Jesus Christ. That thing, you know, we used to, people used to have on the bracelet, what would Jesus do?

You know, people used to sneer a bit at that, I thought it was a great question. I thought it was a really good question. But the only thing it lacks is that Jesus isn't there to do it. So it's got to be me doing it as if Jesus, it's like stars in their eyes, isn't it?

Okay? Do you remember, just come to me, this may not work as an analogy. I may be going wrong here. But you know, if stars in their eyes, people would come on and sing as somebody else.

Do you remember this? They would come on and say, tonight Matthew, I'm going to be Frank Sinatra. And it's some short bloke from, you know, Dudley. And he's there. And he'd come out and the make-up would have done the best they could, really.

[51 : 07] But you know, it's a tall ask. It's difficult. I used to go, I went to university in Warwick. So, you know, down near Coventry. And we used to go to a pub called The Rising Sun where there was this newfangled thing called karaoke.

It had just come in. And this bloke used to sing and he just said to me once, he said, you know, I just think I'm really like Tom Jones.

And he was like Tom. He had a great voice except that he would always sing in a cardigan and with carpet slippers on. And I said, look, I never saw Tom Jones rocking if I'm honest.

But anyway, these guys go back and they come out and, well, you know, each morning I sort of say to myself, today, I'm going to be Jesus Christ.

I'm going to be playing the part of Jesus Christ. And I'm just going to be seeing how much I can remind myself of that. How much I can understand myself to invite Jesus into those moments and so that people will see him.

[52 : 08] That's the call of discipleship. And that's where abundant life really is. We are invited to fullness of life, to share and to show that life to others.

I'm going to throw a question out to you. Now, that passage that we have from John 1, what are you looking for? Where are you staying?

When I wrote the shed book, I built a shed in my back garden, basically, and I thought that the shed would be a place where I would write great works of deathless prose.

And, in fact, it turned into this place that I just go and pray. I just go and be there in the mornings. And part of what I do, as I'm now thoroughly indoctrinated by the Anglicans, my background, by the way, is that I'm now, people say to me, what's your denomination?

I say I'm an Anglo-Baptist. I'm an Orthodox Anglo-Baptist with this beard. Anyway, but I go down and pray, and the Anglican morning liturgy has this line in it.

[53 : 18] It's from the Psalms. One thing I ask, one thing I desire, is to live all my life in the house of the Lord. And I used to think, what does that mean?

What does it mean to live your life in the house of the Lord? Because the temple's gone. That's what it was about. It was originally about the temple. But the temple's gone. How do we live in the house of the Lord today? And I think it's moving in with Jesus.

Moving in. This is what these disciples ask. They say to him, he says, what are you looking for? Well, we know what they're looking for. They're looking for a Messiah. And the Messiah that they came to was very different to the one they imagined.

But they ask him, where are you staying? Can we move in with you? And the invitation to us is to move from the house that we're in to the house of the Lord.

I'm going to give you a few moments. I just want you to think, what house are you living in today? What's the name of your house? Some of us are in the house of worry.

[54 : 17] Some of us are in the house of pain. Some of us are in the house of boredom. Some of us are in the house of change. What's the name of your house?

And Jesus invites you to move out of that house and to move into his house, the house of Christ, the house of the Lord. He says, in my Father's house, there are many rooms.

And we always interpret that to be about heaven or about some afterlife. But I don't think it's about that. Because he says, and I'll take you there when I come back.

And when was the next time they saw him? It was the resurrection. So we can move in with Jesus today. And there are many rooms that we can live in. So let me, in a moment of quiet, I'd like you to think, what house are you living in today?

What house are you living in today? Perhaps you'd like to just turn to one another and just maybe talk about that for a moment. Where are you today?

[55 : 18] If that's too much of an abstract concept, just, you know, what are you feeling, what are you looking for is a good question to think about. But talk to one another. If you had to name the place where you're living today, what would it be? What house are you living in today?

Let's give that a few minutes. You have to talk to one another. I'm sorry. Otherwise, I'll just carry on for hours. Okay, let's, I wonder if anyone would feel brave enough.

I haven't told you what it is yet. I said, I wonder if anyone would feel brave enough. People said no. I wonder if anyone would feel brave enough to share the house that they're living in. Where are you?

Yes, down here. You might have to shout a bit. Not straight away, but I was saying to me that I was living in the house of despondency. Okay. Because I am 71 now, I'm not as well physically as I used to be.

Yeah. Or mentally, I suppose, really. My husband's coming up to 75 and he's not fit either. He's worse than I am. But, I shouldn't be looking at that. I should be in the house where I only worry because today has got enough worries of its own.

[56 : 27] And I must live for today and not worry about tomorrow. Yeah. Thank you. To move from the house of despondency, which is often a fear about what's going to happen or visions of the future that, you know, or that fear that you've kind of passed your cell by date.

You know what? And I personally, one of my aims is to grow old disgracefully. Right? I think one of the, we've talked about this in session three, one of the liberating things about getting old is I don't care what people think anymore.

and, you know, so, but, you know, it can get wearying. But to move to a house at just the moment, living in the moment is so key. Really important. Anything else? Anyone else want to share where they're living?

That would be great. Over there. Morning all. House of broken record. Okay. So it's, just going round. The record spins round, goes to a spin, and it spins back round, and it spins back round, and it spins back round, and it spins back round.

We used to have this thing called records. It spins back round. Okay, I'll just, yeah. You know, I'll just, you've rediscovered them. I don't know why. But anyway, so you feel like you're going the same.

[57 : 30] Yeah. You're hearing the same things, or are you sort of living in the same way? It's the living, it's, well, life is, can, can be almost monotonous, can't it?

Yes, yes. And I mean, you know, it just goes round, and it goes round, you get to Monday, you get to Friday, you get to Monday, you get to Friday, you get to Monday, you get to Friday. I've got, probably just shy of, just under four years to do my current role, and I'm thinking, I want to break out, I want to do something else.

Yeah, yeah. I've got, I'm, you know. House of change. House of change. Yeah, yeah, great, brilliant. Thank you very much. Okay, that's fine, I'm not going to dwell on that, but I think to identify, the first thing today is to identify where we are, where we're living, what our situation is.

Jesus always invites people into movement, the whole thing about, whenever he invites a disciple to join him, he's nearly always on the move. There was active learning, following his footsteps, the dust gets kicked up as we follow him.

So I'd like to pray for you now before we break, and then we'll come back, and we're going to come back and look at, you know, I talked about that vision thing, which is the vision that compels us.

[58 : 40] And what I want to look at in the next session is our vision, who we think God is, who we think Jesus is. Because actually, the call to live with Jesus is key, the key part of that is that we want to live with him.

We want to live, we want to spend more time with God. And to do that, we have to get a good vision of him. So let me pray for us all now, and then we'll have some coffee, and then we'll come back, I think, about midday. Lord, I thank you for my friends here, and for their commitment, for their desire to follow you, for their honesty, for their, you know, willingness to walk in your footsteps.

Lord, I pray for them, myself and for them, that today you would show us the path we need to go. Lord, through conversations together, through things we sing, things we hear, thoughts that occur to us, we ask you to speak to us, to move us from a churchgoer to a disciple, from someone who just has things they believe about you, to someone who has things they do to follow you.

Lord, work in us through the power of your Holy Spirit, so the people who encounter us, encounter you, because we are imitating you, and we're showing them what you are like, what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Amen. Thank you.