

FORBIDDEN FAITH

DEVOTIONS AND
INSPIRING STORIES
FROM AROUND
THE WORLD

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM
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COMPILED BY MERVYN THOMAS, CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE

CWR

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INTRODUCTION

‘Why do good men remain silent? We want you to feel with us in our suffering and cry out when we cannot: “Enough!”’

This call in 1979 by Father Gheorghe Calciu (see page 118) personally stung me into action. It has been the inspiration behind the work of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) – to be a voice for the voiceless – for over thirty years, coupled with Proverbs 31:8–9: ‘Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.’

Around the world, millions of individuals face persecution on a daily basis because of their Christian faith. The price they pay can range from discrimination, harassment and imprisonment to torture and even death.

CSW is a Christian human rights organisation specialising in freedom of religion, and our purpose is to be a voice for justice, pursuing religious freedom for all. We document cases of religious persecution, and produce expert reports that are used to influence key decision-makers within the UK and US Governments and the EU and UN, among others. We offer support and solidarity to the persecuted, standing with them in the trials they face. In short, we encourage free Christians everywhere to pray, protest and provide for their persecuted family around the world.

About a year ago as I reflected on the incredible spiritual richness that has personally been imparted to me by so many persecuted Christians over the years, the idea of sharing some of their moving stories with a wider audience was birthed in my heart. I contacted eight of my friends, all with a passion for our persecuted family, and asked them if they would each contribute a week’s devotional thoughts to the eight stirring testimonies I had selected. The result was *Forbidden Faith*, a book which I hope will inspire, challenge and motivate you to play your part in

raising a voice for our worldwide family. As free Christians we have a responsibility to shout from the rooftops about the gross injustices being perpetrated around the world in this so-called age of tolerance.

Many years ago, a CSW delegation went to Nepal, a Hindu nation, where 130 pastors were imprisoned. At one meeting there, the Police Chief of Kathmandu told our delegation that he was surprised at their visit. He went on to say that he would never dream of imprisoning a Muslim, as the whole of the Islamic world would be up in arms about it. Nor would he think of incarcerating a Jew, as the Jews around the world were so well organised that they would make life very difficult for him. The fact was that until that time he could do what he liked to a Christian and nobody said a word!! When I heard those words, I vowed in my heart that I would do all I could to ensure I never heard them said again, because if there ever is a group of people in the world who should be standing side by side in solidarity, it is the worldwide Body of Christ.

My prayer is that once you have read this book you will be determined to join the ever-growing chorus of voices crying out 'Enough!'

Mervyn Thomas

Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide

WEEK ONE

GOD'S MISSION STATEMENT



By Charles Whitehead

AUTHOR PROFILE

Charles Whitehead travels extensively, speaking at local, national and international Christian conferences. For ten years he was President of the Council of the worldwide Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church. He is a director of Premier Christian Radio, and writes for a variety of publications. He chairs the International Charismatic Consultation, an ecumenical body promoting co-operation between the churches for world evangelisation in the power of the Holy Spirit, and served as a member of the Azusa Street Centennial Cabinet.

Married to Sue since 1966, they have four children and four grandchildren, and live in Chalfont St Peter, Bucks.

INTRODUCTION

I have enjoyed writing these reflections on Isaiah 61 for a number of reasons. The passage brings sharply into focus the remarkable prophetic ministry of Isaiah, whilst reminding me of the saving mission of Jesus and of the vital work of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in our chaotic and frequently unjust world.

Isaiah is one of my favourite Old Testament books because it contains such clear prophecies of the coming of Jesus and of His redeeming work – as we see in the first verses of chapter 61. Then, the fact that Jesus announced the start of His public ministry by quoting these same verses in the synagogue in Nazareth, speaks to me of their special significance, and places their message at the very heart of His mission. The words themselves also remind me of the dignity of every single man and woman created in the image of God, and of their basic human rights to justice and religious freedom, so effectively championed by CSW.

What more could I ask? The missions of my favourite prophet Isaiah, of Jesus my Lord and Saviour and of CSW, whom I support wholeheartedly – all fully present in these inspiring verses of Scripture.

WEEK ONE

DAY 1

DAY 1

DAY 1

THE PROVISION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ANOINTING

BIBLE READING

Isaiah 61:1–11

KEY VERSE

‘The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.’ (v.1)

Within the pages of Isaiah we find many of the themes covered in the Old and New Testaments. The prophet presents us with God, the Holy One of Israel, as Redeemer, Saviour and Lord of all. In today’s key verse, we are reminded that it is the Spirit of this Sovereign Lord, the Holy Spirit, who anoints Isaiah and inspires all his prophetic utterances. These messages from the Sovereign Lord in Isaiah 61 are

just as important for us today as they were for the people to whom Isaiah was directly speaking. God’s character does not change. The things which concerned Him hundreds of years ago still concern Him today – *all* His words are everlasting in their importance. So, what we read here is as important for our understanding of God’s heart and purposes as it was for the prophet’s audience almost 700 years before Christ. There is authority, guidance and power in the Word of God for every age and for every situation.

We, however, have experienced the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy foretelling that the Lord would pour out His Spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28), and since the day of Pentecost all of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ have the Holy Spirit present and active within us, bringing the Word of God alive in our hearts and minds. This is always challenging, but at the same time it gives us both the desire and the ability to put the Word into practice. When God calls, He also enables, and Isaiah’s clear reminder that he is speaking under an anointing of the Holy Spirit should cause us to pay particular attention to the words that follow. To give them even more emphasis, Jesus quotes these words in Luke 4:18 as He launches His public ministry.

In a world still troubled by injustice and oppression, such inspired words from Isaiah are a timely reminder of God’s concern for those who live in darkness and fear. We need to heed them, for we, too, are called to preach good news to the poor and to proclaim freedom for the captives.

Each day this week, I suggest you meditate on our Bible reading, Isaiah 61:1–11, and each day I will focus on a particular verse from that passage.

PRAYER

Thank You, Lord, for the gift of Your Holy Spirit. Help us to open our hearts and lives more and more to His prompting and guidance.

WEEK ONE
DAY 2

THE PURPOSE
OF THE HOLY
SPIRIT'S
ANOINTING

BIBLE READING

Isaiah 61:1–11

KEY VERSES

‘He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God ...’ (vv.1–2)

God’s anointing is always for *His* purposes, never just for our comfort and enjoyment. The Holy Spirit is concerned with mission – with sending us out. Seven hundred years after Isaiah spoke the words of our passage for this week, Jesus unrolled the scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth and found this prophecy and declared that ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to

the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18–19). He stopped short of reading the next phrase found in Isaiah: 'and the day of vengeance of our God'. Why? Because this phrase speaks of His second coming sometime in the future. One day, the year of the Lord's favour will give way to the day of vengeance, as Jesus returns in glory and judgment. In the meantime He has come to speak of God's love and mercy, to demonstrate it by signs and wonders, to establish God's kingdom on the earth, and to give His life so that we may have eternal life.

Today we are still living in the time of the Lord's favour, the age of the Holy Spirit, and we too are sent to announce the kingdom of God. Our mission is to bring the love of God and the freedom Jesus has won for us into every place where there is darkness and oppression. We can only do this because we have the Holy Spirit – not just to help us proclaim the kingdom in words, but to enable us to make it present by our actions. You and I are called to respond to these words of the prophet Isaiah, repeated by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, by taking them seriously and recognising that in our apparently civilised world there are still many who are imprisoned in darkness, lacking that basic freedom which is their right. They need to experience the liberating power of the gospel by encountering Christians who care enough about their lack of freedom to do something about it.

PRAYER

Help us, Lord, to speak out for those who have no voice, to extend a hand to those who cannot help themselves, and to work for the freedom of those unjustly oppressed.

WEEK ONE
DAY 3

GIVING
COMFORT TO
THOSE WHO
MOURN

BIBLE READING

Isaiah 61:1–11

KEY VERSES

‘... to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.’ (vv.2–3)

Grieving helps us to deal with the sense of powerlessness and loss we experience when someone we love suffers or dies. But, in our Western world, mourning is a discreet and rather private affair. Not so in the Middle Eastern world of the prophet Isaiah, where noisy weeping and wailing was the outward sign of mourning that everyone expected. An absence of such loud demonstrations of grief was seen

as disrespectful – the louder and more dramatic the signs of grief the better. Professional mourners, usually women, were often hired by a dead person's relatives to weep and wail as the body was carried through the streets. But the verses above tell us that God wants to take away our mourning, grieving and despair, replacing them with blessing, joy and praise. How can this happen?

One of the most frequently asked questions is this: how can a God of love allow suffering? In *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes: 'It is man, not God, who has provided racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets and bombs; it is by human avarice or human stupidity that we have poverty and overwork.' Christians know that suffering is present in the world because of our failure to maintain our original relationship with God, and to carry out the responsibility He gave us to be stewards of His creation. But God is far from indifferent to human suffering. In Isaiah 53:4 we read: 'Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ...' Yes, He did, and we know that if the world was living according to the teachings of Jesus, most of the suffering and injustice would disappear overnight. If this is to happen, every Christian has a vital part to play in the social, political, economic and cultural life around them. If a lack of commitment is always unacceptable, our present world situation makes it even more so. No Christian can stand idly by – we all need to get involved.

PRAYER

Lord, show us how to work for change in the world around us, to give people crowns of beauty, to anoint them with the oil of gladness, and to clothe them in the garments of praise.

WEEK ONE

DAY 4

DAY

THE GOD OF JUSTICE

BIBLE READING

Isaiah 61:1–11

KEY VERSE

‘For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity.’ (v.8)

Justice is important to God, and He sets the standard. Whatever He does is fair, even if we don’t fully understand it. This is a major theme in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms. Knowing how God hates injustice, the psalmists call upon Him to intervene and condemn the wicked, while upholding those who are righteous and just. God’s commitment to justice challenges us to examine our own

attitudes. Only when we are aware that we have clear obligations towards the wider community, will we look beyond ourselves and begin to seek the common good. As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his letter, *Caritas et Veritate (Charity and Truth)*: 'The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side.'

When God is accepted and has a place in public life, it is easier to contribute to the development of a just society. The marginalisation of Christianity limits fruitful dialogues between reason and faith, and puts at risk human rights and individual freedoms. As Christians we are called to reveal God's love and to speak God's truth to those around us. To love someone is to want the best for them, and to do everything in our power to realise it. To love the community of which we are a part is to work for its good – politically, economically, culturally, legally and socially. This means putting God in His rightful place in our own lives, irrespective of the attitudes in the society around us. In an increasingly globalised world, our so-called civilised societies have often developed attitudes of self-interest which have inevitably led to the rejection of others, and result in a denial of people's fundamental rights as human beings created in the image of God. When I say I follow a God who tells me 'I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity', I may need to make sure that society's wrong attitudes have not found a home in me, but that I am committed to loving and working for justice for everyone.

PRAYER

Thank You, Lord, that You are a God of justice and freedom. Guide us by Your Spirit as we try to help those who are denied their basic human rights.