



## Week 4 - Deep Love

Bible Reading: Acts 16:9-34

TEACH - Content to help inform a sermon or small group

### Introduction

- ‘Infinitely more’ is an invitation to new heights; it’s a clarion call to go ‘further up and further in’. It’s the journey of a lifetime, gratefully learning to live out our life’s calling. It’s the challenge to let God redeem our failures, confront our prejudices and redraw our boundaries. And it’s no guarantee of an easy ride; in fact, it’s the promise of hard times.
- God’s heart aches for a world living in despair, surviving only on meagre rations of comfort and hope. The invitation to discover ‘infinitely more’ isn’t about being airlifted out of life’s problems; it’s about living something different - something hope-filled - right in the middle of life’s problems. Only then can our lives be beacons of hope for those around us.

### Exploration

Paul describes the love of Christ as ‘deep’. At its most enticing, that’s the image of a deep lake of the purest water on a boiling hot day, just waiting for us to dive in. Yet for many of us, we only experience the depths of God’s love when we hit the lowest lows in our own lives.

#### 1) Detours and dark times

- Acts 16 may represent something of a low in Paul’s ministry. Having believed he’d been called by God to change his plans, he ended up in Philippi, where the simple act of setting a young girl free got him thrown into jail, on the same night as an earthquake happened. By all reckonings, that seems rather unfair.

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- Yet even in the darkest part of that dungeon, in the deepest trouble, Paul and Silas were singing. Perhaps it was partly to keep everyone's spirits up, but it was more than that. Those songs of worship came from strong faith - faith that the love of God was deeper than the deepest darkness they could face. And that kind of faith didn't materialise overnight; it was the product of digging deep: reading the Scriptures, opening their hearts to the Holy Spirit and praying.
- When we open our hearts to God's 'infinitely more', we discover that we are cushioned by fathomless love, love that reaches to the deepest places; love that lights up the deepest darkness. When life seems at its most unfair, deep love promises that hope is still possible. The only thing is, we aren't well equipped to feel it or believe it. Our fragile humanity means we feel the fear and hopelessness more readily than the vibrations of deep love.
- Yet it doesn't have to be that way. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be 'rooted and established' in that love. There are things we can do, often called 'spiritual disciplines', to push our roots ever deeper into deep love. Here are just a few:
  - **Prayer** - choosing to step out of the busyness of the day to spend time with God, giving thanks, confessing our sin, pouring out our concerns and listening for the voice of love to steady us.
  - **Scripture** - reading the Bible, soaking in God's words, absorbing them and acting on them.
  - **Meeting together** - regularly spending time with other believers in worship and in friendship, because walking together makes the darkest moments brighter and singing together brings the prison walls down.





## 2) Resurrection and hope

- Dark times can open doors to opportunities we've never even imagined. Paul's detour to Philippi was fruitful in the end. He met Lydia who became a key person in the first-century Church, he saw a young girl freed from slavery, he witnessed the miracle of prisoners surviving an earthquake and he brought the jailer to faith in Jesus. Had he gone where he'd originally planned, who knows whether any of those things would have happened.
- It's often when we're walking through the deepest darkness that we can speak most convincingly of light and hope to those who don't yet know it. The people around us don't need to hear from a bunch of 'successful' Christians who have got it all sorted and who are insulated from life's problems; they need to hear real stories from real people about how God's deep love has brought hope and healing into the darkness.
- And when you've encountered the deep love of God in your darkest experiences, it's much easier to have faith that God can do miracles in other people's lives too. Paul's detour ended in several miracles. It's as though the darkest times became the backdrop for God's Spirit to break through in power.
- Deep love helps us turn our darkest experiences into opportunities to bless others:
  - When we go through painful experiences, we are better able to understand and empathise with others who are suffering. Deep love grows compassion in us.
  - It's in our painful experiences that we're most likely to learn to pray. Deep love grows persistence in us.

When we meet God in our most painful experiences, resurrection hope is born in us. Deep love grows faith in us so that we can pray big prayers for others.

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## Conclusion

- The message of God's 'infinitely more' isn't just something for us to aspire to in our walk with God. It's the message of life to a dying world. Jesus went to the cross - the darkest experience any human has ever had - because he longed for all of creation to come to life, to 'infinitely more' life (Romans 8:18-21). 'Infinitely more' is resurrection - life and hope overcoming death and darkness. We've lived it ourselves and now we're called to go and tell others about it.
- Let's sing songs in our dungeons of pain, because deep love has not forgotten us. And let's tell the stories of miracles, light in darkness, freedom from captivity, life after death, because deep love is God's gift to the world.



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**REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups**

**Personal**

- Has God ever taken you on a detour in your life which ended up proving surprisingly fruitful?
- What helps you most when you're in a dark time? (The answer doesn't have to be something 'spiritual'.)
- Have you ever found yourself helping someone else cope with a situation you yourself have been through? What was it like to be able to draw on your own experience to help them?
- Is there a favourite Bible verse which you hold on to, or a song you sing, when life feels like a prison cell at midnight?
- Can you remember an experience in your life which has helped you grow in compassion towards someone else?
- What's the biggest prayer you're praying at the moment and who are you praying it for?

**Community**

- What miracles have you seen God do in the life of your corps or centre as you reach out to the local community?
- Has your community experienced a tragedy in recent years? How did you process that experience together? What would you say God has done as a result of that experience?
- Communities often find it difficult to pray persistently. In our busyness we forget to keep on praying for the same thing over a long period of time. What could you do to keep those long-term prayers on the agenda in your praying together?



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## ENGAGE - Interactive ideas for prayer, worship and mission

- Form two groups of up to four people and give them different materials such as an envelope, a newspaper, a rubber band, a nail, a piece of string... Ask them to write down at least three creative ways they can use each object apart from the conventional purpose of the item. Challenge them to stretch their imaginations, and think beyond what they know or can see. Whoever comes up with the most ideas wins!
- Select a minimum of three or five people (always an odd number) and ask them to stand in a line facing the same direction. When you say **switch**, the person at the front and the person at the back exchange places. When you say **change**, the entire group turns the opposite direction. When you say **rotate**, the person at the front will go to the back and the person in the middle will go to the front. You can make it more complicated by asking people to walk around in line while they wait for your instructions, or you could create two lines to play against each other. The activity is a reminder that life's journey isn't always straightforward, and that sometimes God can surprise us in unexpected ways.
- Invite people to go on detours this week. Instead of going direct from A to B as they normally would, either in the car or on foot, invite them to set aside time to go the long way round, using the detour as an opportunity to pray for parts of the local area they don't normally visit.
- Have a testimony time; but instead of asking for stories, ask people to stand up and read out their favourite Bible verse. Give them due warning at the start of the meeting though, so they can find the verse in time.



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- Create a visual representation of light in darkness:
  - Find a large pane of glass, a glass table or an internal window / glass door.
  - Give each person a piece of coloured tissue paper and invite them to write on it one or two words which denote a situation they're finding dark or difficult at the moment.
  - Stick the pieces of tissue paper all over the glass, preferably slightly overlapping each other so there's no clear glass between them.
  - Switch on a light behind/under the glass, so that it shines out through the tissue paper and brings the colours to life.
  - As you put the light on, pray that God will shine light into every situation, and that people will see God's light shining out through you, even in your toughest moments.
- Prepare a ribbon tree. This is a place for people to express their need for comfort and hope without having to write their prayer in words. The tree is usually metal or wooden, and there are ribbons laid at the bottom, with a sign inviting people to tie a ribbon to the tree if they need God's help in a particularly difficult situation. The ribbon becomes their prayer, and the tree becomes a visual prayer on behalf of all those who are suffering. If you have people going in and out of the building during the week, you could also place the 'ribbon tree' in the foyer, prayer space or café area.
- Paul's visit to Philippi brought him face to face with slavery and imprisonment. Spend some time thinking and talking together about those in your local community who live in slavery or captivity of any kind. What might you do to help them find freedom?



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## PRAY - Prayer liturgies for different contexts

### Words of faith

There are Christians who have hysterical reactions, as if the world had slipped out of God's hands.

They are violent, as if they were risking everything.

But we believe in history. The world is not a roll of the dice on its way toward chaos.

A new world has begun to happen,  
Since Christ has risen.

Jesus Christ, we rejoice in your definitive triumph;  
With our bodies still in the breach, our souls in tension,  
We cry our first 'Hurrah!'  
Till eternity unfolds itself.

Your sorrow now has passed. Your enemies have failed.  
You are the definitive smile for humankind.  
What matter the wait now for us?  
We accept the struggle and the death,  
Because you, our love, will not die!

We march behind you on the road to the future.  
You are with us. You are our immortality.  
Take away the sadness from our faces.  
We are not in a game of chance;  
You have the last word!

Beyond the crushing of our bones,





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Now has begun the eternal 'Alleluia!'  
From the thousands of openings in our wounded bodies and souls,  
There now arises a triumphal song!

So teach us to give voice to your new life throughout the world,  
Because you dry the tears of the oppressed for ever,  
And death will disappear.

(By Luis Espinal, a Jesuit priest)

### A prayer

God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is and not as I would have it, trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will, so that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with you for ever in the next. Amen.

(A variation on the 'Serenity Prayer' by Reinhold Niebuhr)

### A prayer

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,  
for all the benefits thou hast given me,  
for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.

O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,  
may I know thee more clearly,  
love thee more dearly,

and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.

(Richard of Chichester)

