



# QUESTIONS

## for your real life journey

Episode 29: Dr Russell Rook

## How do we face change?

### 1. IF IT AIN'T BROKE, BREAK IT (12:42, 16:51)

Because he finds change exciting and is always looking for it, Russ says he generally lives by a quote introduced to him by his friend and mentor Phil Wall: 'If it ain't broke, break it.' The philosophy can enable you to take something good (like the UK government's policy for Syrian refugee resettlement) and make it even better (resettling thousands of Ukrainians by putting them into people's homes).

Part of the danger that accompanies his love of change, however, is that he can be 'very good at the start of a new project, when lots of change is needed, but when change starts to slow down, when things need to be consolidated and systems put in place, when things need to become more steady and solid, I'm not very good. I have a short attention span and I'm quite wedded to change. And I want to change things again.'

What kinds of positive impact can change *lovers* have in the world? What would the world be like if people who like to break things that aren't broken didn't exist? Do you prefer the start of new projects when things change a lot, or later on, when things start to settle down?

### 2. HAVING SENSITIVITY TO OTHERS (25:03)

Russ has learned that when he feels tempted to change things, this can often be a sign not that *things* need to change, but that *he* needs to change what he's doing, to avoid breaking things that are working perfectly well and growing steadily.

He explains that his wife Charlotte can't stand change: 'Charlotte's plan was: "Russ, you can have as much change and chaos in your life as you want – as long as my house, my family, my friends, my church all stay the same and your chaos doesn't come back to the house."'

He reflects: 'If I want to be a good team player, be married to someone who doesn't like change, or have relationships with people who generally fear change, then I have to know how to handle myself around them, and try not to mess up their lives as much as my own.'

What kinds of positive impact can change *haters* have in the world? Have you experienced someone making what you felt were unnecessary changes to something in your life – how did you feel? What might happen if people who love change weren't sensitive to what others thought?



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## How do we move through suffering?

### 3. TWO YEARS OF FAILING (21:44)

'In 2014/2015, I was trying to run a charity and it wasn't going very well. What happens at first when someone like me starts to fail, is that we fight. And if the fighting doesn't work, then you get out of there.

'It was a really difficult time. I had a very bad panic attack on a train and all kinds of things happened. I mean, I was the cause of most of my own problems. But I think one of my failures was actually not sitting and embracing that failure.

'I heard a guy talking about Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane recently. He said, "the reason why Jesus was willing to experience the psychological trauma in the garden – followed by the physical trauma of being tortured and executed – was that without going through that he couldn't truly know us. That was how much he wanted to know us. God was willing to embrace suffering even when he didn't need to, because somehow it would make him able to love us, understand us and embrace us in a whole new way.

'My biggest regret about those two years was that I didn't embrace the suffering. I found too many ways to try and get out of it, to run away. I didn't have the courage to embrace the suffering more, and I don't know what to be honest about. I just wanted to pretend it wasn't happening.

'But to give the story a bit of a more cheerful end, God did something in those days that he couldn't have done with me in any other way. So I don't regret them. I do regret some of the mistakes that led me there, and that I didn't learn more in those moments. But God is tremendously gracious.'

When you fail, what is your usual response? To feel shame? Blame others? Pretend it isn't happening? What are your thoughts on the suggestion that Jesus embraced his suffering so that he could love, understand and embrace us in a whole new way? Does it take courage to embrace suffering? How can our mistakes be opportunities for us to learn and God to grow us?



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## 4. SITTING IN SILENCE (26:23)

Russ shares some advice for those going through suffering. 'Firstly, don't run away from it. Acknowledge the situation you're in, as difficult as it is. Recognise that Jesus has already been through that and worse for you, and he's there with you in the moment. And so there is the potential of you finding him in a whole new way.'

'There was a morning I was at morning prayer at St. Martin in the Fields in Trafalgar Square. My phone was off but it was on vibrate, and text messages kept on buzzing on my phone. And I eventually couldn't not look at it. The messages were telling me about someone in the press who was going to write something not very nice about the charity I was running. And I thought "I can't wait to the end of prayers, I have just got to get out." So I got went out of the church to take a call. And it was it was a very difficult call.'

'The vicar of the church, Sam Wells, had seen that I'd walked out early, and he phoned me and said, "Are you still on the premises? Do you want to come and see me?" I went and sat in his office and explained what was going on. I remember then just sitting with him in complete silence. Neither of us said a word. And it was a deeply painful moment. Neither of us spoke because we felt one of us would start crying, and if we started we might not stop.'

'But that willingness of Sam just to sit with me in silence, and do nothing – not try and fix it, not to try to pray for me or tell me it was going to be alright – just to sit with me in silence was so profound. It was profound because it's precisely what Jesus does in those moments when we only have questions and struggles and can't see a way out. It's not that Jesus comes and makes it go away. But it is that Jesus is there with us, and he sees us and he knows us.'

'So when I talk about embracing suffering, it's not a kind of masochistic thing. It's about just acknowledging that this difficult thing is going on. I can't fix it. Jesus doesn't seem to be fixing it. But he *is* here with me in it. And he has been through that and worse, so he can help me through this.'

Have there been any tough times in your life when someone just sat with you, without trying to fix it? When silence was more helpful than words? Would you find it comforting during such a moment to know 'I can't fix it. Jesus doesn't seem to be fixing it. But he is here with me in it'?



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## How do we receive joy?

### 5. QUALITY TIME (38:20)

Russ says the way he prefers to express and receive love is through quality time: 'I enjoy time with people. So joy for me is the opportunity to be with people. I love people who inspire me, who made me laugh, who make me think, who I can share a meal or a walk with.'

He shares about a special moment of celebration when he led the ALOVE team. The Salvation Army's census had just been released and showed an astonishing uptake in youth engagement across the UK and Ireland during the time the team had been operating. They took the team on a ride on the London Eye and only shared the good news when they were right at the top.

'I think what excited me was not necessarily that sense of being on top of the world, but that I was part of a team that had worked really hard for a lot of years, against a fair amount of opposition and with no guarantees of success. There was a genuine move of the Holy Spirit going on through that period, which was astounding, and I was able to experience it with amazing people around. It was just an amazing community to be part of.'

Do you enjoy quality time with others, or do you express and receive love in other ways? What is the best celebration you've ever experienced, and what made it so good? What amazing communities have you been part of? Which would you be more proud of: accomplishing something great all by yourself, or accomplishing great as part of a team?

### 6. LISTENING TO YOUR OWN LIFE (42:16)

Russ shares his story about his decision to be ordained in the Anglican Church, something he fought against for a long time. Approaching his final interview, he had been reading the book *Let Your Life Speak*, and the author had caught his attention: 'He says: "Often we go back to doors that have closed behind us in our lives, and we try to open them again, or knock on them, or wonder why they closed, and we see if we can get them open again." And his whole point is, if the door is closed behind you, why go back?'

'A few days before this interview, I really struggled with this image of closing doors: "I'm closing my door on a political career, running an organisation, The Salvation Army – all these things will no longer be part of my life if I choose this."

'So I woke up on the morning of my interview in July 2021, and a friend of mine, Ems Hancock, who had not texted me since September 2015, texted me and said, "Ross, I was praying you for this morning. God just said to say, 'Don't be scared of closing doors. Read Revelation 3:6-7", which says "Behold, I open a door for you that no one can shut."

Have you ever had to make a choice that meant a door closing behind you? Has God ever spoken prophetically into your life through a friend (or stranger)? What doors are open to you right now?



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## How do we mature in service?

### 7. THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER (46:31)

Russ explains that as part of Anglican vows, you promise to keep the offices (habits) of morning prayer and evening prayer every day.

'For me, prayer up until now has been what you do to prepare yourself for what God wants you to do in the day. Because you want God to use you, you want to see miracles and you want to make a difference. And so you pray a bit, so that the next bit works really well, because that's the real work, right? And at the end of the day you pray again, saying "Thank you, God. Didn't I do a great job? Wasn't that amazing?"

'I've realised this year my job is actually just to spend time with God at the beginning and the end of the day. And what happens in between happens because I've spent time with God. It's about being rather than doing – and that's a real challenge for someone like me who's an entrepreneur, activist, social justice person, mission evangelist! My main job is to learn to be with Jesus, and then see what happens as a result of that. And that's what I'm trying to learn, and probably failing desperately.'

Do you have a habit of daily prayer? Why or why not? How much of your prayer time would you say is you asking God to bless the things you're going to do or saying thanks for the things you did? How much of your prayer time is just being with Jesus?

### 8. LEARNING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GIFTING AND CHARACTER (50:34)

In his first few weeks of full time employment, Phil Wall told him, 'Russ, the thing I'm praying for you over the next six months is that you'll learn the difference between gifting and character. And that you'll learn that, ultimately, gifting isn't as important as you think is, and character is everything.'

Russ says 'In truth, whilst I understood what he meant, it took me about 20 years to learn it. For the first 20 years of my ministry I was keen to be a success, to make an impression, to be liked and loved and all the rest.

'And then in the last 10 years or so, I've realised that Phil was absolutely right: it doesn't really matter how gifted you are, the thing that will sustain you is character. But you have to be prepared to do some work, to look in the mirror and see the bits that you don't like, and to look long enough to find those bits that are actually difficult to look at, that you're a bit embarrassed about and you're not very proud about.'

Do you agree that someone's character is more important than their gifting? How easy or hard do you find it to look at your own life, to identify the bits that are difficult to look at, and to keep looking? Why do you think doing that is the kind of work that builds character?



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## Act: LEARNING FROM FAILURE (53:42)

There is much written about how moments of failure are opportunities. Educational research suggests failure is actually a vital step in how we learn. When we look at the disciples in the gospels we often catch moments of them getting things colossally wrong: In the space of a few hours Peter goes from recognising Jesus as the Messiah and saying he would die for him to denying that he even knew him.

Likewise, in the podcast Russ talks vulnerably about his experiences of failing – but while he regrets some of the ways he dealt with those failures at the time, he testifies to the fact that God has used those failures to teach him and to grow his character.

1. Watch the spoken word Paper People by Harry Baker (You can [watch his performance of it from TEDx Exeter](#) – or [read the poem](#) itself)
2. Make a paper people chain (search online for instructions!) using paper and scissors. Ideally your chain will have at least three people in it.
3. Pick one of the paper people in the middle to be you.
4. On that paper person draw a face and write words on their body that represent how you feel when you fail.
5. On the other people draw faces and write quotes that represent what you think others think about you when you fail.
6. Turn over your paper people chain.
7. On the back of the paper person representing you, write different, positive words that you could tell yourself instead when you fail. Draw a different, positive face to represent how that might change how you view failure.
8. On the back of the other paper people write the names of individuals in your life who always want the best for you, who would support you even if you failed, who would be there and encourage you and believe in your potential.
9. Share your paper people chain with someone else. Commit to both of you only speaking positive encouragement into each other's lives
10. Ask the Holy Spirit to transform your mind so you can view failure in a positive light – as an opportunity to face change, to move through suffering, to receive joy and to mature in service
11. Get in touch with one or two of the people's names you wrote down to let them know how much their belief in you means.