

“All our yesterdays,” according to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, ‘have lighted fools the way to dusty death’. Not so, writes Tim Chester—instead we hear the voices of the past telling of the mighty works of God and helping us to fix our eyes on Jesus. Every page of this book is an opportunity to sit and learn at the feet of saints of old as Chester brilliantly guides us from the foot of the cross to the empty tomb. In *An Ocean of Grace* we discover one blessing after another.”

ALISTAIR BEGG, Bible Teacher, Truth For Life;
Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

“This collection of prayers from the past is a gift that stands out in a world of quick and casual words. Tim Chester has provided a profoundly beautiful way to help lead the church in prayer during the Lenten season. The prayers of these men and women are not only saturated with biblical truth; they are also shaped with imagination that awakens us and love for Jesus that pierces our hearts.”

KATHLEEN NIELSON, Author; Speaker

“Lent is a great time to slow down and take time to think again about the events of the first Easter. This book helps us to do just that. After a typically clear and thoughtful introduction by Tim Chester, each day there is a treasure from a great Christian writer of the past. Each of these prayers, poems and mediations makes us slow down and take time as we get to grips with the richness of the language and the depth of thought, and allow these writers of old to bring us fresh insights into the wonders of the gospel.”

CLARE HEATH-WHYTE, Author, *Old Wives’ Tales*

“When I read books like this, my desire is to learn more about Christ and to grow in my worship of him. This collection of prayers and writings from brothers and sisters that have gone before us does both. Each contribution serves as a wonderful daily devotion to lift your eyes to Christ. I thoroughly recommend this book.”

**OLLY KNIGHT, Musician, song-writer and Worship Team Leader,
The City Church, Canterbury, UK**

“We live in an age of superficiality and ‘chronological snobbery’, which tends to treat the past with disdain. This series of Lent readings is a wonderful antidote to the spirit of our age. From Gregory of Nazianzus to Catherine Parr and from George Herbert to Charles Spurgeon, we meet a galaxy of men and women whose lives were moulded by Scripture and lived out in fervent devotion to Christ. As you listen to these voices, your heart will blaze as each witness shows you Jesus. This book is highly recommended.”

PAUL MALLARD, Author; Pastor, Widcombe Baptist Church, UK

“Voices from the past provide great encouragement in the present as we navigate our way into the future. In this devotional book, Tim Chester has drawn collected writings from those who have gone before to inspire us as we run the race set before us. Here are classic meditations designed to prepare our hearts for celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ at Easter. In these pages, I am certain you will find strength for your journey of faith.”

STEVEN LAWSON, President and Founder, OnePassion Ministries

TIM CHESTER

An
Ocean
of
Grace

the goodbook
COMPANY

An Ocean of Grace
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Published by:
The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | thegoodbook.co.uk
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

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ISBN: 9781784985790 | Printed in Turkey

Design by André Parker

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INTRODUCTION

A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”
(Hebrews 12 v 1-2)

The Christian life is a long race. But we’re not running on our own.

According to Hebrews 12 v 1-2, we need to do two things if we’re to keep going as Christians and so complete the “race” marked out for us. They’re flagged up by the two “let us” phrases. First, we’re to turn away from distractions, especially the distraction of sin (“let us throw off everything that hinders”). Second, we’re to turn instead to look at Jesus (“let us ... [fix] our eyes on Jesus”). Lent and Easter are a great opportunity to do this with a special focus.

To help fix our gaze on Jesus, we are surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses”. For the first readers of Hebrews, these witnesses were the saints of the Old Testament, whose faith in God’s promises had sustained them through troubling times and had enabled them to achieve great things in God’s name. But as readers today, we can add names from across the pages of church history to that crowd of cheering spectators. Two thousand years on, the cloud of

witnesses is larger than ever. This book is an opportunity to hear their voices. It contains prayers and meditations from across the centuries of church history, all with a focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The key thing is that such people are “witnesses”. Like the witness in a law court, they have evidence to present and in this case, their testimony concerns Jesus Christ. Their purpose is not to draw attention to themselves but to him. Their lives may inspire and their words may inform, but their true value is that they point us to Jesus.

Why should we read the words of dead Christians when we are surrounded by living ones?

First, because these people are our brothers and sisters, as much part of the community of saints as the people in your church. God worked in them and through them in the past, and he does so again when their words are heard.

Also, because it’s as if these people speak with a different voice. The language which can sometimes sound strange to our ears has—for that very reason—the power to speak the truth to us with fresh vigour. The phrases we have heard a hundred times are replaced by new expressions that renew our thinking and engage our imagination.

Finally, because “sitting at the feet” of those from other times allows us to view our times from outside. These saints of old give us a perspective on ourselves—our foibles and assumptions. The emphases we miss are highlighted, and the preoccupations that distract us are put into perspective.

In editing these readings, archaic language has been removed (with the exception of poetry and hymns), while retaining the distinctive “voice” of the original author. In many cases descriptions have been turned into a prayer addressed to God or an exhortation addressed to our own souls. Some chapters are made up of selected highlights from longer passages. In every chapter the aim is to direct our

hearts to the Lord Jesus Christ. I recommend reading these meditations aloud. You might like to read them through once and then reread them more slowly, responding section by section with prayers of confession and praise.

My primary aim has not been to provide new information or explain in detail the nature of Christ's work. Instead, my hope is that familiar truths will come with fresh power to capture our imaginations and captivate our hearts. Above all, let us make it our prayer that we would fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

ASH WEDNESDAY

HEAL ME

*“It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him
that has completely healed him.”
(Acts 3 v 16)*

Ash Wednesday has traditionally been a day when people have reflected on their conduct and confessed their sins to God. This renews our sense of relationship with God as well as humbling our pride and exalting our Saviour. For Christians, confession need not be done with a sense of fear or doubt, for we have been saved by the name of Jesus. In the Bible a person’s name often represents their authority, character or office, and this is especially true of Jesus. In Acts 3 Peter heals a lame man “in the name of Jesus Christ”. In today’s prayer the English Reformer Thomas Becon leads us in confessing our sin, but also reminds us of how the different names of Jesus bring comfort to wounded sinners.

*Heal me, Lord, and I shall be healed.
Save me, Lord, and I shall be saved.
Oh, good Jesus, I confess my sins are great,
but your merits are much greater.
My wounds are many and grievous;
but you are the good Samaritan,
full of pity and compassion;
able to heal my wounds,
even if they were ten thousand times greater.*

*I am a sinner; but you are a Saviour.
I am sick; but you are a Physician.
I am blind; but you are the Light of the world.
I am Satan's prisoner; but you are a Redeemer.
I am dead in sin; but you are the Resurrection and Life.
I am hungry; but you are the living Bread.
I am thirsty; but you are the Well of life.
I am poor; but you are the Lord of all wealth.
I am a barren tree; but you are the true and fruitful Vine.
I am a lost sheep; but you are the good Shepherd.
I am the prodigal son; but you are the gentle Father.
I am by nature a child of wrath;
 but you are by nature the Son of the living God.
I am by nature a sinful person;
 but you are by nature the righteous and innocent Man.
I am a daily offender; but you are a continual Mediator.
I am a breaker of the law; but you are the Fulfiller of the law.
I have lost my heavenly inheritance through sin;
 but you have recovered it by your death.
I have brought about my own destruction;
 but you have brought me salvation by your precious blood.*

*Oh, most merciful Saviour,
Though I find in myself nothing but sin,
 death and damnation,
yet I find in you grace, mercy, favour, reconciliation,
 forgiveness and everlasting life.
Take away therefore all that is mine, which is all nothing,
 and give me all that is yours, which is all good.*

*You are called Christ, the anointed One:
 therefore anoint me with your Holy Spirit.
You are called a Physician:
 therefore heal me according to your name.
You are called the Son of the living God:*

*therefore according to your power deliver me
from the devil, the world, and the flesh.*

You are called the Resurrection:

*therefore lift me up from the damnable state
in which I miserably lie.*

You are called the Life:

*therefore awaken me out of this death,
in which, through sin, I am detained.*

You are called the Way:

*therefore lead me from the vanities of this world,
and from the filthy pleasures of the flesh,
towards heavenly and spiritual things.*

You are called the Truth:

*therefore do not allow me to walk in the way of error,
but let me walk the path of truth in everything I do.*

You are called the Light:

*therefore put away from me the works of darkness,
that I may walk as the child of light
in all goodness, righteousness and truth.*

You are called a Saviour:

therefore save me from my sins, according to your name.

You are called the Alpha and Omega—

*that is, the beginning and end of all goodness:
therefore begin a good life in me,
and finish it to the glory of your blessed name.*

*So shall I, receiving these benefits at your merciful hand,
praise and magnify your blessed name for evermore.*

Thomas Becon (c. 1512-1567)¹

THURSDAY

I WILL CALL UPON CHRIST

*“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance:
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I
am the worst.”*

(1 Timothy 1 v 15)

Are you the worst sinner you know? Perhaps you are immediately starting to name all the people whom you consider worse than you. When we compare ourselves to other people, we can pretend that we’re not too bad. But what about when we compare ourselves to Christ? That’s what Catherine Parr, the sixth wife of King Henry VIII, does in her book *The Lamentations of a Sinner*. Comparing ourselves to Christ in this way might drive us to desperation as the extent of our sin is exposed. But when we look to Christ, we see not only our model but also our Saviour. We see the one who came into the world to save sinners. Our sin may be great, but his mercy is greater.

*Eternal God, as a loving Father,
you have heaped on me innumerable blessings;
and I have heaped up many sins.
I have despised that which is good, holy, pleasant
and acceptable in your sight,
and I have chosen that which was delicious, pleasant
and acceptable in my sight.
It was no surprise that I did this*

*for I refused to know you and learn your ways.
I loved darkness better than light.
Indeed, darkness seemed to me to be light.
I embraced ignorance as knowledge;
 and rejected true knowledge as pointless.
I had little regard for your word
 but gave myself to the vanities and shadows of the world.
I abandoned you, in whom all is truth,
 and followed the foolish imaginations of my own heart.
You spoke many pleasant and sweet words to me,
 and I would not hear.
You called me in many ways,
 but I would not answer.*

*I count myself one of the most wicked
 and miserable sinners in the world
 because I have been so contrary to Christ my Saviour.
Christ was innocent and empty of all sin,
 and I wallowed in filthy sin
 and was free from no sin.
Christ was obedient to you, his Father,
even to the death of the cross,
 and I was disobedient and stubborn.
Christ was meek and humble in heart,
 and I most proud and self-serving.
Christ despised the world with all its vanities,
 and I made it my god because of its vanities.
Christ came to serve his brothers and sisters,
 and I longed to rule over them.
Christ despised worldly honour,
 and I delighted to attain it.
Christ loved the lowly and simple things of this world,
 and I esteemed the most fair and pleasant things.
Christ loved poverty,*

*and I loved wealth.
Christ was gentle and merciful to the poor,
and I was hard-hearted and unkind.
Christ prayed for his enemies,
and I hated mine.
Christ rejoiced in the conversion of sinners,
and I was not grieved to see them revert to sin.*

*Shall I fall in desperation?
No, I will call upon Christ,
the Light of the world,
the Fountain of life,
the relief of all careful consciences,
the Peacemaker between God and man,
and the only health and comfort
of all true repentant sinners.*

*By his almighty power he can save me
and deliver me out of this miserable state.
For this is the life everlasting, O Lord,
to believe you to be the true God,
and him whom you sent, Jesus Christ.
By this faith I am assured,
and by this assurance I feel the forgiveness of my sins:
this is what gives me confidence,
this is what comforts me,
this is what quenches all despair.*

Catherine Parr (1512-1548)²

FRIDAY

ROUSE YOURSELF TO THIS END

“They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”

(Zechariah 12 v 10)

Lent is a time to reflect on the sufferings of Christ. Today the 16th-century Reformer Martin Luther gives us advice on how to do this. First, Luther says we must see our sin reflected in Christ’s suffering. The depth of our sin is exposed at the cross because the cross reflects everyone’s attitude to God—we reject his reign in our lives and so, when we get the opportunity, we murder our Creator. Second, our sins are exposed at the cross in the sense that the fate of the Christ is the fate our sins deserve. So Christ’s sufferings bring us to recognise that we are morally bankrupt. This is an important realisation, but it’s not the end point (otherwise we might despair). We must then, thirdly, move on to see God’s love expressed in the Christ. God gave his Son for us, and Christ was willing to suffer for us. So as we look at the cross, we are led away from self-confidence, and then we are led towards confidence in God.

*You meditate on the Passion of Christ aright
when you become terror-stricken in heart at the sight
and your conscience sinks in despair.*

Recognise you are the one who martyred Christ,

*for your sins most surely did it (Acts 2 v 36-37).
Therefore, when you see the nails piercing his hands,
firmly believe it is your work.*

Do you behold his crown of thorns?

*Believe the thorns are your wicked thoughts.
Now see that where one thorn pierces Christ,
more than a thousand thorns should pierce you,
yes, and they should do so eternally.*

*Where one nail is driven through his hands,
you should eternally suffer this same fate.
Jesus commanded the women who wept for him,*

*“Do not weep for me; weep for yourselves
and for your children” (Luke 23 v 28).*

In other words,

*“Learn from my martyrdom what you deserve
and how you should be rewarded.”*

*But, just as an awareness of sin flowed out of Christ,
so should we pour our sins back again onto Christ
and set our conscience free.*

*So then, cast your sins from yourself onto Christ,
believing that your sins are his wounds
and that he carries them and makes satisfaction for them.*

*You must rely on God’s promises (e.g. Isaiah 53 v 6)
with all your weight,
and so much more when your conscience martyrs you.*

*For if you miss the opportunity to still your heart,
then you will never secure peace
and must finally despair in doubt.*

*For our sins will become too strong for us to manage
and they will live for ever.*

*But when we fearlessly believe that our sins are laid on Christ
and that he has triumphed over them by his resurrection,
then they are dead and have become as nothing.*

*Now if you are not able to believe,
then you should pray to God for faith.
But rouse yourself to this end.
First, do not behold Christ's sufferings any longer,
for they have already done their work and terrified you.
Instead, behold how full of love
is Christ's friendly heart toward you—
love that constrained him to bear
the heavy load of your sin.
In this way your heart will be sweet toward him,
and the assurance of your faith will be strengthened.
Then ascend higher through the heart of Christ
to the heart of God.
See that Christ would not have been able to love you
if God had not willed it in eternal love.
There you will find the good, fatherly heart of God,
and so be drawn to the Father through Christ
(John 3 v 16).*

*When your heart is established in Christ in this way,
and you are an enemy of sin
(out of love rather than out of fear of punishment),
only then should Christ's sufferings
also be an example for your life.
Then you should meditate on his sufferings in a different
way. So far we have considered Christ's Passion
as a work of Christ that we receive;
now we may consider it
as a work that we should imitate.
For example, if a day of sickness weighs you down,
think how trifling that is compared with the nails of Christ.
If you must do something that is distasteful to you,
think how Christ suffered for your sake.*

Martin Luther (1483-1546)³