

## Monthly contemplation

These contemplative exercises are on the lines established in the Fellowship of Contemplative Prayer. We pray with the same Word for contemplation for a month, deepening our experience of it, then with the next month move on to another Word, thus gradually expanding our "vocabulary" of Words.

We can pray with the Word for an hour, like when a group meets for Contemplative Prayer together. Or we can pray with the Word each day, perhaps for 10 minutes as part of our regular pattern of prayer. In this way God's Word becomes increasingly a part of our life, influencing us, changing us, working through us.

Each exercise will begin with a period of becoming still.

Then we take a Word spoken by God in the Bible (directly or as a command), first of all into our Mind to understand for ourselves, secondly into our Heart below the level of thought and feeling simply to receive as we repeat the Word inwardly, and thirdly into the Will as we use the Word in intercession for others.

This structure is made clear in the printed exercises that will come to you, with a page for each section.

I have also put in suggested timings, simply to help people have a structure and not worry about the length of time they should spend on each stage. This is not a rigid timetable, but simply a framework to help people focus on the Word without being distracted. These timings assume you will be taking an hour for the contemplative exercise. If you want to take less time, simply scale it down and reduce the time of relaxation to the bit where you breathe out slowly and sense the relaxation spread through the body.

## **Contemplation for December 2020** “I will strengthen you and help you” (Isaiah 41: 10)

*10 minutes* BECOMING STILL

First let us get into a position that is relaxed and alert – probably on a chair with our back upright and relaxed, our hands open on our laps, both feet firmly on the floor. And we remember why we are here.....

.....The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14) .

To receive that Word we need to be still. Just as water can only reflect the image of what is around, when it is still, so we can only be aware of God's Word if we are still.

So let us become still by breathing out slowly and sensing the relaxation spread through our bodies. We do this over the next 2 or 3 breaths.

Now let's just listen. What do we hear? Notice the noises and sounds and identify them. Once we know what they are, we can lay them on one side. They need not disturb us any more. If they distract us later on, let's just identify them, and lay them on one side.

Now to become physically still, let's focus on each part of the body in turn....

First the area around the eyes and nose – we don't often have time to notice the small sensations. Let's just focus all our attention on that area for around a minute.....

Now let's focus on the neck and shoulders. Be aware of any stiffness. What is the quality of the sensation? Keep the focus just here for another minute....

Now focus on the arms and hands. Just be aware of the sensation in this area.....

Now focus on the back, and the sensation of the back pressing against the chair.....

Now focus on the chest and stomach.....

Focus now on the seat and thighs.....

.....On the knees and calves.....

.....and on the feet, right down to the toes. Even the smallest toe has its own sensations if we take time to notice.....

Now we are physically still, let's allow our minds to become still as well.

As with the sounds, let us actually notice the trains of thought in our mind, not to follow up and get involved, but simply to notice, identify what they are, and lay quietly on one side. They can always be picked up again afterwards. For now, just leave them on one side. And if they come back to disturb us during this contemplation, simply identify and lay them on one side.

Now we are more still physically and mentally, we remember that we are meant to be here. Jesus says to each of us by name 'Come to me you that travail and are heavy laden, and I will re-fresh you'. We are meant to be here, and we are welcome.

We are ready now to take into the silence this month's word, .....

**December 2020** “I will strengthen you and help you” (Isaiah 41: 10)

15 minutes MIND

**I will strengthen you and help you**

First we prepare to take this Word into our Mind, to understand for ourselves.

Our word for today is **I will strengthen you and help you**

These are the words of God spoken by the prophet Isaiah to his people in a time of darkness. They were in exile with no end in sight, unwilling refugees in a host country which was set on eliminating Israel's identity. We also are in darkness, exiled from normal life and contacts, in the hands of policies that vary with Covid itself, offered hope by the prospect of a vaccine, but in reality having to settle to this uncertain way of life. In these conditions people's faith loses vigour and like the psalmist we say

*I think upon God and I groan; I ponder and my spirit faints.*

*You will not let my eyelids close;*

*I am so troubled that I cannot speak.*

Our circumstances are different from the psalmist's; but the effect is the same. We wilt. What the psalmist does about this is to look at the bigger picture and not be deceived into forgetting all the great things God has done already:

*I will consider all your works, and meditate on all your mighty deeds.*

And so words of scripture take our featureless futureless spiritual mood and turn it into prayer.

There is nothing that cannot be turned into prayer, making our lives special with the presence of God. God's Word in Scripture strengthens us to face up to bad circumstances and to see them, in the context of God's greatness, as another facet of God's working. **I will strengthen you and help you**

**you**

Speaking to the Israelites in the darkness of exile, Isaiah speaks God's words:

*Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel,*

*“My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God”?*

*Do you not know? Have you not heard?*

*The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.*

*He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.....*

So God strengthens us when we are weary. Not only that, Isaiah goes on to say that God has chosen us. God strengthens us not simply to make us feel good. God strengthens us because he has chosen us, and therefore has a purpose for us, of which our current circumstances are only a part, but an important part. Thus God says:

*..... I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you.*

*I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.*

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.*

***I will strengthen you and help you.***

How has my faith reacted to the Covid situation?

What are the great things that God has done that show me the bigger picture?

What am I now learning about God's purpose for me?

How does God strengthen me?

**I will strengthen you and help you**

We take this word into the silence for a period of time, to understand for ourselves

**I will strengthen you and help you .....**

**I will strengthen you and help you .....**

We have taken this Word into our minds to understand for ourselves. We now prepare to take this word this Word into our Heart,

In the book of Revelation we read that plagues and disasters are visited on the world at the end of time, yet people refuse to repent and glorify God. Plagues may not be simply a punishment for sin. However, Covid19 has made people think with new urgency about serious issues. For instance, people now ask how we could seriously improve our environment and address divisions in Society, once we get past Covid19. The chaos of Covid19 calls for a re-set, for a recognition of our real values and a serious reordering of our lives in line with those values. This is what repentance is – recognising that we are going in the wrong direction, and turning round, reordering our lives in line with God's word. Perhaps it takes something like Covid 19 to wake us from our drugged state slipping away from God. Jesus said we are to "Keep awake" – one of our Advent themes – precisely because, if we are alert, circumstances will give us strong clues as to whether we are living our lives in line with God's word. And God is there to help us in this. **I will strengthen you and help you.**

If repentance is what Advent shows us, then Christmas shows God's response. Coming not in vindictiveness but in humility, living in the constraints of our world, heard not by Power but by faith, God comes to strengthen and help us. So Christmas is not primarily a big treat, but God taking seriously how far we have drifted from him, yet coming with love to strengthen and help us, in our darkness, to fulfil what he has chosen us to be. God's strength and help is not just gentle empathy, but being side-by-side with us in the darkness, restoring our purpose and courage. If some of our Christmases turn out to be more solitary than we had hoped, perhaps we can remember that it is precisely in the darkness that God chose to be with us.

**I will strengthen you and help you.**

For the next period of time, as we focus simply on the words as we repeat them silently within ourselves, we take this Word into our heart, below the level of thought and feeling, receiving the strength of God deep within us.

**I will strengthen you and help you.....**

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15 minutes INTERCESSION, as we take the Word into our Will

**I will strengthen you and help you**

This Word speaks not just to us but to all those who are part of us because we love them, or because our lives are affected or benefitted by what they do. Let God speak these words through us to those for whom we pray. The following areas of intercession come only as suggestions. You will have your own areas of intercession to offer to God.

For our families..... **I will strengthen you and help you**

Those who are particularly on our hearts..... **I will strengthen you and help you**

For our church..... **I will strengthen you and help you**

All of us coming out of Lockdown into different tiers of restrictions..... **I will strengthen you and help you**

Perhaps we might also focus on:

Those infected with Covid19..... **I will strengthen you and help you**

National and Regional Government, and National Health Service personnel..... **I will strengthen you and help you**

Leaders in business and industry and those whose job is threatened.....**I will strengthen you and help you**

Those in financial hardship as a result of Covid19.... **I will strengthen you and help you**

Teachers and pupils in our schools, staff and students at our universities ...**I will strengthen you and help you**

All these and others for whom we wish to pray..... **I will strengthen you and help you**

When we have finished our prayer for others, let us thank God for his Word speaking and working in us and in our world,  
and then finish with the prayer used by the Fellowship of Contemplative Prayer:

Lord, we thank you for all your unsearchable riches  
which pour forth from you as light from the sun,  
in boundless profusion and generosity,  
whether received, ignored or rejected.  
And now we offer to you, in so far as we are able,  
as an emptiness to be filled by your Divine fullness ,  
ourselves, our souls and bodies;  
all that we are, all that we have and all that we do.  
Amen

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Finish

Actually this is not the finish – call this Word to mind at times throughout the day and join God's work. God, whose Word formed all things, is continuously at work, the life within our life.

**Scripture references:** *Psalm 77: vs 3-4, 12; Isaiah chapters 40 & 41; Revelation 16;  
Matthew 24: 37 – 25: 46*