



Hymn: StF 545 Be thou my Vision Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0SYERbtZGc>

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
be thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;

be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:
be thou mine inheritance now and always;
be thou and thou only the first in my heart:
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish, 8th century translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880–1931) versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860–1935) (alt.)

Prayer

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6 v. 67-69)

Lord Jesus, We come before you today as your followers, your disciples seeking your will for our lives and the life of our church. As Simon Peter said, where else would we go if not to you for you are the Messiah, the Son of God. You have the words of eternal life. You make God real to us. And, like Simon Peter, we confess that our faith wavers. We can acknowledge you for who you are but we can then give in to our human nature and let it lead us into sin. Forgive us, we pray, those times when we have let you and others down and help us to amend our ways so that we don't make the same mistakes again.

We pray that in our worship you may be gloriously revealed to us - as you were to Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration and as you were to Saul on the road to Damascus. You are King of Kings and Lord of Lord. You are the one through whom all things were made. You are the one who shows us the way of love and self-giving. You are the one who died that our sins might be forgiven and who was raised to lead us into eternal life. You are the one who will one day return in glory.

Be our vision, we pray, that your glory might be revealed in us and your kingdom expanded through us. Amen.

Readings : Luke 9 28-36 and Acts 9. 1-25

Hymn: StF 356 Jesus shall take the highest honour Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEEdS1g3xXPE>

Jesus shall take the highest honour.
Jesus shall take the highest praise.
Let all earth join heaven in exalting
the name which is above all other names.
Let's bow the knee in humble adoration,
for at his name every knee must bow.
Let every tongue confess
he is Christ, God's only Son:

Sovereign Lord, we give you glory now.
For all honour and blessing and power
belong to you, belong to you.
All honour and blessing and power
belong to you, belong to you,
Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of the living God.

Message:

Jesus takes Peter, James and John on a trip up a mountain and while they are there his appearance is spectacularly changed. Perhaps changed isn't the right word because that suggests something different from what's gone before. What was being revealed to them wasn't a change in Jesus. Rather, they were being enabled to see Jesus in all his true glory. They were being enabled to see Jesus as he truly was and always had been. Imagine how that, coupled with the resurrection, would have given them the assurance to go out into the world in Jesus' name to face whatever was thrown at them knowing with complete confidence that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

Fast forward a few years and we meet a man heading for Damascus. There is another moment of dazzling, bright light. Once again, Jesus is revealed in his glory. But this time it's not to confirm people in their faith. This time it's to turn someone's belief system completely around. For this is Saul – in future to be known as the Apostle Paul – and he has come to Damascus specifically to hunt down Christians and take them prisoner. Only now, as a direct result of that dazzling vision of Jesus, he will change sides and tell everyone who will listen that Jesus is for real the Son of God.

For Saul these events had three significant repercussions.

Firstly, as we have already noted it meant a change of side. Previously he had been fanatically anti-Christian. As a zealous Jew he believed that Jesus couldn't have been the Son of God as his followers were claiming. In his mind, the consequence of that was simple. It meant that Jesus was a blasphemer and so were those who continued to press this claim. As a blasphemer, the rightful punishment under the Law was death. Saul entered Damascus on this side of the equation and left it on the other. Now it was Saul himself who was arguing Jesus' claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God. From now on it is Saul that others would judge to be the blasphemer.

There's an old hymn that asks the question, 'Who is on the Lord's side?'. You probably remember some of the words: *Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King? Who will be his helpers, other lives to bring?* Hopefully, we can all say yes to that but then it goes on to say that being on one side naturally means leaving the other. *Who will leave the world's side? Who will face the foe?*

And notice that it's not just a case of leaving the world's side. That place has now become a place of potential hostility. Foes will arise, as the hymn has it. That's nothing less, of course, than Jesus predicted. He promised his disciples that if the world hated him for the things he said and did, then it would do so again if we reflect him in what we do and say. That's not true for all Christians all of the time but it will be true for some in certain times and in certain places.

Not all footballers are hated when they change sides. Some are welcomed back warmly and applauded even though it is recognised that they are playing in another team's colours. But some face booing and abuse every time they return. Paul Ince, for example, was never forgiven for the way he handled a move from West Ham to Manchester United.

Some, like Saul, will suffer for changing sides. Others of us not so much.

The words of our Covenant Service put it like this: *Christ has many services to be done: some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honour, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both ...*

In other words, there will be times when being a Christian will work out reasonably well for us. The world may even applaud us for doing those things to which Jesus calls us. But, there may be other times when there is a real cost to be paid for being on Jesus' side - when the world will treat us with hatred and persecution just as it did Jesus. And that's not just a case of how we handle it. It's much more a case of there but for the grace of God go I. Let's pause for a moment and remember those Christians around the world who are right now facing persecution because of the side they have chosen.

Secondly, Saul's change of side also meant a change of status and standing. He describes his previous life as being full of privilege and achievement but all that changed when he became a Christian. When he wrote, some years later, to the Christians in Corinth, that description had become one of being dishonoured, in rags, brutally treated, homeless, cursed, persecuted and slandered. We have become, he says, the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world (1 Corinthians 4).

Many Christians around the world will echo those words. In many countries being a Christian means not having the same access as other people to education, jobs, healthcare or justice.

Open Doors is an advocacy and support organisation for persecuted Christians. This was how, last year, they described the situation for Christians in Pakistan: *Christians in Pakistan are considered second-class citizens and face discrimination in*

every aspect of life. Occupations that are deemed low, dirty and degrading—such as working as a sewer cleaner or in a brick kiln—are reserved for Christians. Many are referred to as chura, a derogatory term meaning "filthy."

"We are a lower class because we are Christians," says one of the 600,000 Pakistani Christian women working in factories. "It is an insult to Muslims to eat with us off the same plate. If we touch their plate, it becomes defiled. We have no right to any privileges, and have no right to dignity. When I had my son, I was put on a dirty bed that still had blood from the woman who had given birth before me. Other women were given a clean bed, but for me, the Isai (the Urdu word for "Christian"), there was only the option of a dirty one."

Again, let's pause and remember those Christians who have little standing in their countries and who know what it is like to be treated as second class citizens – or worse - because of the side they have chosen.

Thirdly, and finally, Saul knew what it was like to lose his safety and security. At the beginning and end of his ministry there were Jewish plots to assassinate him. He had been gunning for Christians and now that target was on his own back. In this passage we are told that Saul preached in the synagogues of Damascus and that he baffled the Jews living there by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. This is what leads to the plot to kill him and the need for his nighttime escape.

Fascinatingly, he describes elsewhere that it wasn't just the Jews who were out to get him. In his second letter to the Corinthians, we read these words: *In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.*

Now, King Aretas wasn't king over Damascus. He had no jurisdiction there. Aretas was king of the Nabateans, whose empire was centred on Petra in modern-day Jordan. When Paul/Saul talks about spending some time in Arabia after his conversion, this rather than Saudi Arabia is the area to which he is referring and it would seem that whilst there his new-found faith rubbed the Nabateans up the wrong way too. We can't be certain of how this situation played out but, as King Aretas had no authority over the city of Damascus, it is likely that Saul was having to escape not just from conspirators inside the city but also Nabatean guards posted outside like cats waiting for a mouse.

Saul was able to escape but many Christians aren't so fortunate. In Nigeria, for example, a Christian is killed on average every two hours and that kind of danger is reflected in other countries too, either at the hands of the state or at the hands of religious militants.

As we close, let's pray for our sisters and brothers in the faith, that they may be strengthened and have that constant reassurance, as Saul did; as Peter, James and John did; that the Jesus they follow is truly the Son of God.

Hymn: StF 455 All my hope on God is founded Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apta533UFV8>

All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray our trust;
what with care and toil we fashion,
tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendour, light, and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of nought.

Evermore
from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the Almighty giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
at his hand;
joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all:
ye who follow shall not fall.

Robert Bridges.

Prayers : Prayers for the Persecuted Church taken from the past few days in Open Doors' Prayer Diary:

Saturday 22 February – Venezuela

When Pastor Manuel shared Psalm 119:114 with the leader of a prison gang who opposed his work, the leader cried and said his mother used to read the verse to him. He now supports the pastor, with prisoners coming to know Jesus. Pray for more salvation.

Sunday 23 February – Uzbekistan Pray for several house church leaders whose activities are being watched by the authorities. Ask God to strengthen and protect them and give them courage to keep meeting.

Monday 24 February – Malaysia Pastor Tiang*, who works among an undocumented people group, is being watched by the authorities. They know his vehicle, where he parks, even where he goes for breakfast. Pray for protection and wellbeing for him and his family, and ask God to make seeing eyes blind.

Tuesday 25 February – Mexico Father Marcelo Pérez, a well-known priest and activist, was shot dead in October, a month after saying there was 'a price on my head' for speaking out against organised crime. Pray for the protection of church leaders who are bravely seeking to counter crime.

Wednesday 26 February – Vietnam "I've learned how to lead a small group in prayer ministry," says Mai*, who attends a leadership programme run by Open Doors partners. Pray that students will 'set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity' (1 Timothy 4:12).

Thursday 27 February – Bhutan Power and water have been cut off from Pastor Rajen's home after he used it to host church meetings. He had sought permission but it was denied, and there's nowhere else for his church to gather. Pray for breakthrough and favour.

Friday 28 February – Democratic Republic of Congo "Christians come to church with fear in their eyes," says Pastor Jacob (below), survivor of eight attacks by Allied Democratic Forces militants. "You can see it when you preach." Pray that he will have 'a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary' (Isaiah 50:4).

The Lord's Prayer : Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name; your kingdom come; your will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Hymn: Yet not I but through Christ in me Watch on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zundjUFazfg>

What gift of grace is Jesus my redeemer
There is no more for heaven now to give
He is my joy, my righteousness, and freedom
My steadfast love, my deep and boundless peace
To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus
For my life is wholly bound to his
Oh how strange and divine, I can sing: all is mine!
Yet not I, but through Christ in me

The night is dark but I am not forsaken
For by my side, the Saviour He will stay
I labour on in weakness and rejoicing
For in my need, His power is displayed
To this I hold, my Shepherd will defend me
Through the deepest valley He will lead
Oh the night has been won, and I shall overcome!
Yet not I, but through Christ in me

No fate I dread, I know I am forgiven
The future sure, the price it has been paid

For Jesus bled and suffered for my pardon
And He was raised to overthrow the grave
To this I hold, my sin has been defeated
Jesus now and ever is my plea
Oh the chains are released, I can sing: I am free!
Yet not I, but through Christ in me

With every breath I long to follow Jesus
For He has said that He will bring me home
And day by day I know He will renew me
Until I stand with joy before the throne
To this I hold, my hope is only Jesus
All the glory evermore to Him
When the race is complete, still my lips shall repeat:
Yet not I, but through Christ in me!

When the race is complete, still my lips shall repeat:
Yet not I, but through Christ in me!
Yet not I, but through Christ in me!
Yet not I, but through Christ in me!