

Out of the Depths

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Preacher: Jonathan Aitken

[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening everyone. Welcome to our first evening of our week of opening celebrations here at St. George's Tron. If you're new to us here, perhaps you won't realize that we're celebrating 200 years of the past.

It was 200 years ago, almost, at least 200 years in the year 2008 that this building was built, and almost exactly to the year we've managed to reopen it and refurbish it, and we hope for, well, at least the next 200 years or so.

So we want to welcome you tonight. We're glad to have you here. And it's my particular pleasure to welcome to our platform this evening Jonathan Aitken. Jonathan has come to us all the way from London for the day, and we're most grateful indeed for him being with us.

I suspect that to those of you who are here, he needs little introduction. You will know that he comes from a family of some political pedigree, and he himself, having read Law in Oxford, became a member of Parliament.

He, among other things, is an accomplished writer, and one of his earliest investment books, I suppose, was his very well-received biography of Nixon.

[1 : 1 6] He served in the government as Minister of State for Defence under John Major, and then as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, when he resigned to fight the now infamous libel case.

And, of course, I suspect that he is now sadly more famous for the result of that case than perhaps for all that went before. As you know, he was imprisoned for perjury, and he's written of those experiences in his book, *Pride and Perjury*, and then the follow-up, *Porridge and Passion*.

But one of the great things, the great thing, in fact, the greatest thing of all these experiences was that it was through that that he came to a knowledge of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and came to the place where he would call himself a follower of Jesus, a Christian believer.

However, since then, he has continued his writing, and having studied theology, has entered into many and various ministries, not least with Prison Fellowship International, through probably the originating of that was his great friendship with Chuck Colson, a man with whom he shares much in common, but above all shares faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those of this congregation here have heard me quote from some of his books several times. My current favorite is his biography on John Newton, which I was delighted to hear from Jonathan earlier on. He has recently received a prize for it, and was in the United States picking that up.

[2 : 5 4] And I'm glad to say that we have many copies of most of his books in the bookroom at the back there, and if you'd like to take the opportunity of buying some of those, I'm sure perhaps he would be glad to inscribe them for you, if you'd like that at the end of our meeting tonight.

But let me just explain the evening. In a moment I'm going to just have a brief word of prayer, and then I'm going to hand over to Jonathan Akin to address us this evening on his subject, Out of the Depths, which is a personal biopic, and also a talk on the words of Scripture from Psalm 130, which contained those famous words.

Then after that there'll be an opportunity for question and answer. And so if you have burning questions on what is said tonight, or indeed on other things that you would like to ask Mr. Akin, then there'll be an opportunity for that before the end of the evening.

We're delighted to welcome you to our building here, and we hope that you'll have a chance to stay behind and look around if you'd like to. There'll be coffee and tea available, and you're most welcome to avail yourself of that.

But before I hand over to Jonathan Akin for our talk this evening, let me just have a word of prayer, if we might. Let us pray. Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, God of heaven and of earth, creator of all things, we do indeed thank you that you are the God who made us, and the God also who sent your Son, that we might be redeemed, that our past might be forgiven, that our future may be mapped out and made clean and new.

[4 : 34] And we praise you for the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for the transformation that you have affected in the lives of countless men and women all through the ages and all across our planet.

And so we pray, Lord, tonight that as we listen to Jonathan speak to us from your words, so you would fill our minds and hearts with interest, with delight, but above all, with a new understanding and a new contemplation of the message of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we ask it in his name. Amen. Jonathan, let me invite you to speak. It's with a very real sense of joy and thanks that I play my school part tonight in your celebrations, this week of celebrations and thanksgiving for the refurbishment of this church.

I think I was lost here about six years ago and I can really say I barely recognize the church I've come back to. It's really wonderful to see all this light flooding in to think of the wonderful efforts that have been made in really transforming the physical nature and the lighting and the airy spaciousness of this church.

So I congratulate all of you who played your part in this or supported it in prayer and I'm going to be speaking in a moment about spiritual transformation but in terms of physical transformation I feel that I'm already seeing a bit of a miracle here tonight and coming back to the Tron and a very different kind of physical church to the one I came to some years ago.

[6 : 24] I'm going to talk tonight on the theme of Out of the Depths and I'm going to begin by reading some famous biblical words about Out of the Depths and the short verses of scripture I'm going to read and I dare say they will come up on the screen in front or behind me soon is the words of Psalm 130 and I'll read it first and then explain why I've chosen this.

It may sound a rather improbable theme at first to be celebrating about but I think by the time we've got to the end of the psalm you will see why I've chosen it as being a suitable theme for celebration.

Psalm 130 Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord O Lord hear my voice let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy If you O Lord kept a record of sins O Lord who could stand but with you there is forgiveness therefore you are feared I wait for the Lord my soul waits and in his word I put my hope my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning more than watchmen wait for the morning O Israel put your hope in the Lord for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption he himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

As I just said it may seem an unlikely theme out of the depths for an evening which is opening your celebrations this week but I've chosen it for several different reasons first of all I think it's a timely and topical theme we seem to be living through a period of being in the depths all these news stories and often unhappy realities of people being made redundant the economy and the world economy in a mess banks in trouble there are probably all kinds of great public reasons why the words in the depths strike a chord and then secondly we are still in Lent and this is thought to be a particularly suitable Lenten psalm it's one of the five or six great penitential psalms thought to be particularly appropriate for the season of penitence that is Lent and thirdly and perhaps most importantly of all whatever may be going on publicly all of us know something about being in the depths all of us have had our down times our difficult times when you look out across a sea of faces as large as this evening's gathering you know that there will be somebody out there who is going through it and is themselves in the depths and so perhaps maybe bits of this psalm will strike a special chord with you and all these things strike a sombre note so let me almost immediately try and change the mood and tell you a true but amusing story about this psalm this dates to the time when I was in prison coming to the end of my 18 months sentence for perjury and while I was in prison and I wouldn't minimize the pain and the difficulty of it but nevertheless

I also had along with the punishment journey and the painful journey I also had a very enriching spiritual journey and a lot of it was due to the fact that for the first time as long as I could remember I had lots of time on my hands to read and to think and to pray and to read the Bible and I had a particularly good journey with the Psalms and the prison chaplain where I spent two thirds of my prison sentence knew this and in the last few days of my sentence he suddenly came up and said look I know you've been thinking deeply about the Psalms I know in particular that you've reflected a great deal on Psalm 130 how would you like to give a talk about it on your last Sunday in the prison chapel well unaccustomed that I had become to public speaking I said I would be up for it so they went round on all the prison notice boards a notice saying Sunday evening in the chapel at 6.30

[11:19] Jonathan Aitken will give a talk on Psalm 130 now this advertising had the effect of enlarging the Sunday evening congregation far beyond the usual Christian suspects instead of the rather slender meager gathering of 20 maybe 30 people on that particular Sunday night when I arrived the chapel was as crammed full as a underground train at Russia it was absolutely jam-packed and the crowd were not in what might be called a reverential mood at all they were in a ribbled raucous sort of mood and the noise and the cat calls in the moments before the service seemed to be getting so bad that I almost thought I was going back into Prime Minister's questions again but as I grew more and more nervous suddenly sort of seconds before the service was due to begin all these noisy tough eggs suddenly fell completely silent and the reason for this pin drop silence is that there had barreled into the front row of the chapel accompanied by two of his barely minders a gentleman universally known in the prison as the big face

I should explain that term every prison including Scottish prisons has a big face the name goes back to the days when big criminals had their big faces up in wanted posters and the big face is the sort of head honcho of the jail and this particular head honcho or big face had been a sort of gang land boss and he was a man who was greatly respected which is code for feared and everybody as soon as he arrived immediately was amazed as indeed I was amazed that the big face had turned up so they all dropped into complete silence this silence had the effect of making me the speaker even more nervous so I plucked up my courage and got going in a rather faltering kind of way and I thought somehow that maybe I ought to establish my strict credibility as an interpreter of scripture so I began by saying

I'm going to talk about Psalm 130 this has become my favourite psalm in prison but I said it's not just my favourite psalm it has also been the favourite psalm of Augustine Luther and of Calvin and the big face nodded gravely at this information so I continued and as I got going and moved towards the end of my talk far from making any and I don't think I exaggerate to say that I could see that he was visibly moved there was a bit of moisture around the eyes and when I finished indeed he came up to me and gave me a bone cracking handshake and said to me oh Jono that was beautiful that psalm of yours I think he thought I had written it and he said it really got to me out he really did and he said now I've got a favour to ask you I know you're going out on Thursday but before you go I wonder if you'd come over to my

Peter on B wing because I've got a couple of my best mates and I know if you said your piece all over again to them you'd really get to their hearts just as you've got to mine alliance and you can't refuse so I rather nervously agreed but the big face detected that I wasn't entirely overjoyed at the thought of spending an evening in the company of him and his two best mates so picking this up in this intuitive way he sought to reassure me and he said John just to make yourself feel at home when you come over why don't you bring a couple of your best mates along with you to keep your company how about bringing those geezers who said like the psalm so much Augustus and whatever his name was well needless to say I could not produce

Augustus or Calvin or Luther but we had a wonderful evening in the big faces cell that night looking at the psalm together with different verses speaking to different villains and different ways and it just reminded me something I now know to be profoundly true the psalms have an amazing way of being able to speak to people at all levels in all kind of different ways as I hope perhaps these verses may speak to some of you tonight I said a few moments earlier that this was my favourite psalm and perhaps you'd be interested in the circumstances and how it became my favourite psalm I'm now going back to my first night in prison which was a pretty uncomfortable culture shock in all kinds of ways sort of everything that could go wrong seemed to go wrong but eventually after a pretty sort of rough kind of few hours eventually

[16 : 45] I was taken and put into a cell and I'll remember the moment when that thick steel door slammed shut I think that's probably where the word the slammer comes from and I really felt well and truly imprisoned and locked up and I sat down on the edge of the bed and said well it's been a pretty tough day probably the worst day of my life but at least I'll now be able to get my head down and get some sleep no such luck because owing to the activities of the media to whom my sentence had not gone unnoticed everybody in the prison was alerted to the fact that I had arrived there and my next door cell neighbours on the right and left of me took it upon themselves to inform the entire prison precisely where I was in the jail and they did so in setting up a sort of sing-song Afro-Caribbean chant which very quickly spread along the landing along the wing all through that house block then other house blocks in different parts of the prison across the exercise yard seemed to be adjoining in this was

Belmarsh prison in South London and as I listened to that chant my sort of blood started to chill as we're in a church tonight I think I'd better spare you the fruity details of the chant but the gist of it was that expletive deletive eight kin has now arrived in cell 321B on the threes tomorrow morning lads let's show him and then followed a stream of very heavily shouted sometimes obscene sometimes sinister sometimes violent suggestions about what they would do to various parts of my anatomy in the following days to show me what they thought of Tory cabinet ministers that is a highly edited version of the chart that I listened to that night and I make light of it now but I show you at the time I was scared really scared and I don't think I've ever felt more frightened or more vulnerable in my life and I did the only thing that I thought might be the slightest use to me in those very dire circumstances which was that I knelt down on the concrete flagstone floor of that prison cell and said a prayer actually I exaggerate

I was so frightened that it would be more correct to say I tried unsuccessfully to say a prayer because I couldn't even get the words of the Lord's prayer right my train of spiritual thought was so derailed by all these expletive deletives thundering around me and I was just about to give up when in the back pocket of my prison uniform trousers I suddenly felt a little bulge which I knew what it was it was a pamphlet that somebody had pushed into my hands earlier that day when I was going into the old daily to plead guilty and to be sentenced and I pulled out this pamphlet which I had been allowed to keep and it had the title praying the psalms I'm not sure at that particular moment I knew quite what that phrase meant anyway I pulled it out and looked at it and it was a calendar type booklet and it said Tuesday the 8th of June 1999 that was my sentencing date read psalm 130 and it begins out of the depths I cried to your lord lord hear my voice and within seconds that psalm really started to speak to me in the way that verses of scripture sometimes can speak to you and

I suddenly realised that the psalmist had been here before me maybe his depths had been far worse than mine after all there are many worse depths than a short and finite prison sentence in this world depths over which we have no control bereavement serious illness broken relationships and so on and I realised that he'd got through them with not by his own willpower which had been my way of solving things all these years but with the help of God's power and I suddenly started to feel maybe I could learn something from the psalm and it did indeed speak to me it had that particular night the good effect of sending me into deep and peaceful sleep but I think I must have read it every single day of the next few months and that's how it became such a favourite and such a special psalm to me.

Occasionally when I am asked to give a talk as I have been tonight I love to use this psalm because after I came out of prison I went to the one place in Britain which had worse food and worse plumbing than a prison this was an Anglican theological college called Wycliffe Hall Oxford where I have served another sentence rather longer two and a half years reading a degree in theology and when I was there first of I did the psalms as my special subject but secondly the various wonderful teachers there and professors drummed into my head one thing which says if you're ever going to give a talk even if you use some personal illustrations it's not about you root your talk in scripture which is what I'm precisely going to do tonight so let's have a look at this psalm together and you will start to see why there are such deep chords for anyone who is in the depths in it the psalm begins out of the depths I cry to you

[22 : 30] O Lord Lord hear my voice that your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy and that simple opening stanza may be about tears in the depths but it is certainly about prayers the word cry here is a synonym for prayer and the message of this opening couple of verses is the absolute reverse of the secular advice you get sometimes when you're in the depths people say when the going gets tough the tough get going people say things like if you're in a hole stop digging but actually this psalm says if you're in a hole start praying Augustine who did indeed love this psalm wrote a opening couplet he said when we cry to the Lord from the depths our very cry soffreth us allows us to move out of the depths in other words it is the act of praying itself which starts the climb out of the depths prayer is the sort of starter motor of the journey out of the depths so message number one of the psalm is very simply when you're in the depths pray and it's a good message the psalm then moves on to two beautiful verses if you

O Lord kept a record of sins O Lord who could stand but with you there is forgiveness therefore you are feared the great 19th century Baptist preacher C.H.

Spurgeon some of these verses contain the essence of all scripture and in a way I think he was right because these verses remind us that God is a forgiving God that is why he is such a wonderful God and that he does not keep us in a black book of our sins theme reiterated in the Gospels and the New Testaments Paul said all have sinned all have fallen short of the glory of God and there is a reminder here that our forgiving God really does wipe away our sins if we turn to him in penitence and prayer but there is a sort of sting in the tail of these verses that with you there is forgiveness therefore you are feared now in the world of soft soap religion preachers nowadays don't like talking about the fear of the Lord and yet there it is so clearly in scripture the book of

Proverbs the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and our fathers and great grandfathers would have known all about the fear of the Lord because they would have heard a lot about it from previous generations of those who preach sermons but now we tend to brush over it too easily but the psalm of course doesn't what does it mean what is he getting at here and I think one wants to be careful about language fear does not mean some sort of abject terror fear here means something much more than respect it means I think the best translation you find it in some versions of the translation of Hebrew means special reverence what do we mean by that well just for a moment think of in our imagination if some great man or woman from the present or from history entered a room we were in if it was the queen or prime minister we'd all stand up

I'm sure and that would be true if there was some great figure from history like Shakespeare or Churchill we would show our enormous respect but I think if Jesus Christ came into the room we would do something different I think we would fall on our knees and one of the reasons we would do that we would know as people during his earthly ministry knew that he could see into our hearts see into our souls know everything that was to be known about us and we would have an extra special reverence for him and someone who inspired me and I know who inspired many of you was John Stott who wrote of these verses very eloquently commenting in his own commentary on the Psalms John Stott has made this comment on these verses fear and love are the insuperable elements of true religion fear preserves love from degenerating into presumptuous familiarity love prevents fear from becoming a servile and cringing dread so no dread no civility but an overwhelming sense of reverence and love when one talks about forgiveness it is not necessarily a one way street and again

[27 : 56] I hope I don't bore you when I refer to things that happen to be in prison but I sometimes used to meet in the chapel and so on people would say things like I can't forgive myself forgive the grass the allegedly tough judge or whatever it might be I can't forgive X or Y but I think it's sometimes forgotten when one longs for God's forgiveness forgiveness that there are sometimes important things we need to do to position ourselves to receive that forgiveness and they're summed up by what occasionally I think might be one of the most important words in the Lord's Prayer it's the 34th word in the Lord's Prayer if you want to be technical about it which goes forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and it's very important if God is going to wipe the slate clean that to position ourselves we too wipe the slate clean there are many stories in the gospels which emphasize the importance of doing just that to position ourselves to receive

God's forgiveness maybe it's an unforgiveness conditional love he doesn't demand it but his teachings suggest that we need to do some forgiving both of those who may have trespassed against us done us wrong done us harm that's very difficult to do sometimes and also I think we have to get rid of the notion that we can't forgive ourselves I used to say to those guys in prison do you believe in forgiving God oh yes well if you believe God forgives you isn't it a little bit impertinent a little bit cheeky to say I can't forgive myself if he can so we have to wipe the slate clean ourselves and this isn't easy to do one last anecdote from my prison times when I got into prison I thought that I had sort of in a self-congratulatory sort of way done rather well in wiping the slate clean of course if you are always rights and wrongs in any great saga my imprisonment was entirely my fault and nevertheless there were episodes along the way when people had done me harm sometimes deliberately and I remember

I thought that I had completely overcome this and some of my principal adversaries at the time were one or two journalists who I got rather obsessed with hostility but I thought I was over all that the whole slate was clean and then there was a silly story appeared in one of the newspapers I've been in prison about a week by this time and it was in a tabloid and why I should have got fussed about this I cannot know it just seems ridiculous but the story in the tabloid was smelly eight kin too scared to come out of his cell huge tabloid headline and the gist of the story was that I was so terrified by my fellow prisoners that I didn't dare come out and I didn't take any showers and I smelt dreadful and this was a fiction I was actually getting along rather well with my fellow prisoners by that time and perfectly happy to go through prison life and to go to the showers but this was an invention and the guy who had written this had been one of the journalists who had given me most grief in the past and for some reason

I got absolutely wild with anger absolutely the opposite of forgiveness and smoke was coming out of my nostrils as I went into the exercise yard that day having had this tabloid headline thrust under my nose and there was a monk whose job it was he was part of the chaplaincy team and he sort of was there and he used to wander around the exercise yard just chatting to people and he sort of came up to me and said how are you and I instead of saying I'm not doing so badly which is really the truth I gave him all my indignation or my anger about this newspaper article so I know I'm supposed to forgive people how can I here's the people sticking pins and needles and daggers into me all over again I can't stand it I'm furious and this wise old monk gave me a piece of advice which has always stuck with me ever since he said well I can see that you might have trouble you know you're angry now and of course we've looked it in the chaplaincy this morning we all know the story's untrue but I can see you angry and perhaps there's a time when you can't forgive somebody the wrong they've done to you but it should be temporary it should get over it and what you should do he said pray to God to have the gift of forgiveness and you will get it and you will be able to use it instead of praying to forgive Mr.

X do it in that way and I took that advice and it worked not overnight not immediately but this hurdle we have to get over of being willing to forgive people well that's an interesting way of doing it praying for the gift of forgiveness the psalm goes on to remind us of something which is perhaps not unconnected with the difficulty sometimes in giving forgiveness the difficulty sometimes in praying the difficulty in wondering why our prayers aren't answered and this brings us to the third couplet which is all about the underrated Christian virtue of patience I wait for the Lord my soul waits and in his word I put my hope my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning more than watchmen wait for the morning it's all about patience and we have to realize at some stage in our spiritual journeys that our timing isn't necessarily the same as

[34 : 14] God's timing sometimes we have to wait for him and wait through the sometimes painful mystery of unanswered prayer and of course prison is a place where you learn to be patient if you're wise but there are many other circumstances in which you do and it's difficult because we live in this 21st century age of impatience we expect things to happen quickly we live in the age of the internet fast communications fast travel we want things to happen according to our timetables our schedules we want to get our results on time collect our bonuses well not many of them around these days but on time ahead of schedule move on and we are sort of impatient generation but God is timeless and the psalmist sort of knew that and that's why he emphasizes the importance of waiting when the

Hebrew poets really wanted to bang something home they used a device which is known as parallelism in Hebrew and it's a sort of form of double repetition or saying things over again sometimes in exactly the same way sometimes in a slightly different way and I know a few more beautiful more haunting refrains in the entire Psalter than my soul waits the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning more than watchmen wait for the morning a real haunting reminder that we sometimes have to wait for God and wait through his mysteries how we wait is very important and the psalmist says we should wait in hope and we should put our hope and our trust in his word which is just an emphasis on a great spiritual truth which is that the ultimate source of authority and wisdom is his word all scripture is God breathed as Timothy tells us

Paul tells us in his epistle to Timothy and I think that my own spiritual journey was so much helped I had all this time to read his word and that is a good way of awaiting and then we move to the final and really celebratory stanza of the psalm O Israel which just means O people of God put your hope in the Lord for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption he himself will redeem Israel from all their sins what the psalmist is getting at here is a wonderful message of hope there are a few more telling phrases than if we wait if we keep our hope that with the Lord is unfailing love and full redemption Coverdale's translation of the psalms has the phrase plenteous redemption which I think is even more eloquent and what greater reward could there be than the reward of God's unfailing love and plenteous or full redemption and this is a rather extraordinary message at the time when it was written it was written of course at least a thousand years before the arrival and the birth of

Christ and the God of the Old Testament wasn't always a God of immediate forgiveness and redemption he was often quite a judgmental God quite a punitive God and I sometimes wonder because the psalms are full of messianic prophecies some psalms like Psalm 22 all about the cross and it's extraordinary that it should look forward and I wonder sometimes what the psalmist when he was writing this saw something which a great spiritual writer a great prophet might see that there was coming a new person of God who would be willing to give us unfailing love willing to give us full redemption it's an advanced thought for its time at the time when it was written this prediction of a God who loves us and will redeem us and that really brings me to the end of what I have to say it's a great note on which to end because what is here is a journey a journey of somebody who's with God's help come out of the depths and it is a perfect week in which to be talking about this because where is the journey going to

I suggest it goes to the foot of the cross because that's where we will be this good Friday and we will realize that we saw Jesus Christ who died for us in order to redeem us from our sins he did it for you for me he went through terrible depths himself in Gethsemane and on the cross that these experiences written about here by the psalmist were undergone by Jesus himself of waiting and being in great depths and yet in the end there was this wonderful fulfilled promise of God's love and redemption and the reason this psalm has been so loved by people down the ages is that so many people know that the journey is true that this is a journey which many people have been on in the worst of the depths through prayer through forgiveness through waiting sometimes painful waiting but in the end to receive the gift from the cross of God's unfailing love and full redemption

[40 : 34] I'm sure there is somebody here tonight to whom the psalm really speaks I know from experience that it not only speaks but it leads and guides and sign posts the way out of the depths shall we end with a prayer our Lord our heavenly father we thank you for your word and for the haunting message of this psalm we pray especially tonight for anyone who themselves personally is in the depths right now we pray that they and all of us may follow the great teachings of this psalm that by prayer by receiving your forgiveness positioning ourselves to receive your forgiveness by hoping by trusting in your word we too may all receive the gift of your unfailing love and full redemption may the psalm speak and act for us as it has done to readers of it through three millennia through

Jesus Christ our Lord amen before we have an opportunity to have questions and answers I thought it would be good to stretch our legs to stand up and fill our lungs and to sing and we have a version of this psalm which is a rather lovely modern version of course it's been a tradition in the Scottish church to sing psalms for many hundreds of years but here's a particular version of psalm 130 that is rather beautiful from the depths of shame and sorrow from my guilt and my despair Lord I cry to you for mercy be attentive to my prayers so after the introductions prayed we'll stand and sing together and then we'll have questions and answers our will my prayer

All my joy is in your presence. All my hope is in your heart.

More than one day, make the glory, make my hope for you, O Lord.

In our kingdom, in the heaven, God to lay in one's love here.

[44 : 10] God to lay in one's kingdom, O Lord, we love you, heaven be here.

All my joy is in your presence. All my hope is in your heart.

Lord, that my grace is in your heart. All my joy is in your heart. All my joy is in your heart.

All my joy is in your heart. With the Lord in love unfailing, let His people forgive me.

With our body to redemption, To our children, for our King.

[45 : 25] All my joy is in your heart. All my joy is in your heart.

Lord, that my grace is in your heart. All my joy is in your heart. All my joy is in your heart.

All my joy is in your heart. All my joy is in your heart. Do have a seat. And Jonathan, why don't you come forward here? Now, there are some microphones, I think, going around the place.

And here's your opportunity. You can ask anything you like to Jonathan Akin, well, within reason. And whether it's to do with what he's spoken about tonight or whether it's to do with anything else, really, his experience in prison or anything that you would like to ask.

So if there's questions for anybody, we're happy to have them. Yes, one over here. Can you keep your hand up just so the the chaps of the mic can see you there?

[46 : 42] I'm sure you're aware that Scotland and England are post-Christian nations and that 13% of people attend the House of God in Scotland.

So I would ask you, Jonathan, and I think, sadly for you, less than England, how do we as Christians, and I would assume the 300 people here are mostly converted, I pray God there are a few here who are not, and so they will receive Christ tonight as their Saviour.

How do we get serious about this when in a secularised Britain the church is totally sidelined in a sense? Well, they get some publicity, but it's usually a little pat on the back, a little condescension.

Is it not time, that was leading up to my question or my rhetorical question, is it not time for Billy Graham type nationwide evangelism to reach the masses of this nation in a big way, and a joy in salvation, really cutting edge evangelism to this loving nation we love, this country of Great Britain?

Thank you very much. Well, it's a rhetorical question, but I'm sure you're allowed to answer it all the same. Well, like you, I would love it if a great Billy Graham figure emerged on the scene and preached, and the whole nation of Scotland, the whole nation of the United Kingdom was brought to Christ as a result of his evangelism.

[48 : 18] And I am actually old enough to remember, as a boy, when Billy Graham did first come to this country and I then lived in a Suffolk village and I remember the extraordinary excitement when what was called the Relay, which were huge, thick pipes, thicker than a pillar, they brought radio broadcasts and we filled the local parish church as Billy Graham spoke live from the Haringey Arena and there was a wonderful response.

Of course, Billy Graham figures are at work. And one of the great hopeful signs, which is, remember we're talking about a God of the world, a God of the universe, not just about our own little parochial islands here.

And I'm lucky enough to, some of the time I am asked to go speaking in other countries of the world. And I, for example, I'm very, very conscious that Christianity is the world's fastest growing religion by a long way.

I've been to China three times in recent years. I'm head of something called Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which is a wonderful charity which fights for those who are being persecuted for their faith.

And the, nobody knows statistic in China is entirely safe, but I don't think most Western embassies would agree with the figure that there are now well over 100 million Christians in China and are growing at the rate of something like 30,000 a day.

[49 : 56] So there is a tremendous growth and all over India, all over Southeast Asia, you know, the word of God is being preached and responded to.

We may be a very secular society, but there are wonderful, what might be called islands in an increasingly secular landscape, which are centers of great growth.

I myself belong to a small church in London which is growing. I can show that the Tron is going to be a growing church. There are plenty of growing churches where the word is preached and where, but you have to make a real effort and one has to, I mean, preaching the word does mean just that, preaching the word in a faithful way and there are often very, very good responses.

I am not at least despondent. The church has never really, or shouldn't ever have been a numbers game. Think what poor numbers the church in Corinth, for example, started with.

Don't get hooked on the numbers game. But of course more Billy Graham's are needed. Of course great preachers are needed. But we can, I think, take a broad vision of where the gospel is being preached.

[51 : 18] And if it's in our own parish or our own country even, things aren't going as well in the numbers field as we hoped. Well, they're certainly worldwide going wonderfully well and there are centers of churches of preaching excellence, gospel teaching.

William was kind enough to refer to my book on John Newton. When John Newton first became, came to London as what was then called a gospel preacher, he noted that there were only two other gospel preachers in the whole of London.

By the time he'd finished St. Mary Wilworth, as an old man, there were over 400. So you never know when changes are going to come. This is a very secular landscape right now but God's timing, as the psalm told us, is not our timing.

His ways are not our ways. Who knows when the next Billy Graham may be going to come and where. But I, for one, have no despair at all and full of hope.

The worldwide picture, I think, confirms that that hope is right. Other questions? Folk, if you have questions, do put your hand up and then the guys with the microphones can come and see you.

[52 : 39] So down here and then over the back row there. Thank you. And then up there. Thank you. I thank you very much for the anecdote about forgiveness.

About asking for the gift of forgiveness. Because so often we find that we, humanly speaking, cannot forgive. We don't have it in us unless God gives it to us.

I'm struggling with a particular problem that I hope I can get some help with tonight. It's this idea of conditional, what I'm seeing is conditional forgiveness where the Lord himself in, I think it was Acts, says that if thy brother offend against thee, rebuke him.

If he repents, forgive him. So there seems to me this idea of a kind of conditional forgiveness and I'm struggling with that one. I don't know whether anybody can steer me right there. Thank you.

I think I was careful to say that God's forgiveness is unconditional and as one approaches Good Friday, perhaps we should just remind ourselves that the only person we actually know is in heaven is a thief who never even asked for forgiveness, never even asked, but Jesus promised him a place in heaven.

[54 : 02] And when I was doing my theological studies at Wycliffe, I was set at one moment an interesting essay question. And the question was, what is heaven and who will get into it?

And I think the answer according to my tutors is that heaven is where God dwells, we can probably all agree there, and heaven will be full of surprises. And there will be people who do not seem to have deserved forgiveness who will be there, but perhaps in their hearts God knew they were longing for it and communicate to it.

But equally there are parts of the Gospel which are a reminder that we should position ourselves to receive forgiveness.

I mean there is the parable or the story of the harsh steward who was forgiven his debts and then he went out and refused to forgive a much smaller debt of somebody who owed him money.

So I think the teachings are clear enough that in an ideal spiritual life we should forgive and that word in the Lord's Prayer I emphasize as we forgive.

[55 : 17] I think that is according to the best of teachings what we should be doing. But can God reach out and do things even though we have not done them ourselves and forgive unconditionally.

Time and again in the Gospels there are good examples of which the penitent thief is only one. So God's forgiveness is unconditional and I think we can do some spiritual work ourselves to position ourselves.

We can never deserve his grace, we can never deserve his mercy, we can never earn it, but we can position ourselves. And I think that is good sound teaching. It's just saying we must recognize that we need forgiveness.

Absolutely. Some people don't do that in denial. In the back row there. Mr. Aiken, it was just to ask, you being such a high profile figure, did you find that a lot of your pals snubbed you?

And if they did, was that because of your imprisonment or was it because of your conversion to Jesus Christ? First of all, I mean, in life's journey, I think I've been rich in friends, not poor in friends.

[56 : 39] And I haven't, on any wide scale, been shunned by friends. The word friend perhaps deserves a moment of examination. We toss it around very easily.

But the reality is that I sometimes think if we can count our real friends, what Shakespeare in his famous line called our hoops of steel friends, they're probably, if we're lucky, countable on the fingers of two hands, more probably one.

And in my hoops of steel club of friends, in my sort of Praetorian guard of friends, I was well honoured, even in the worst of times.

My friends came to see me in prison. My friends stood by me. My friends helped me. But of course there was a wider circle of people who were friendly acquaintances and some became not so friendly.

And so definitely I lost some friendly people, or once friendly people. It's very easy to be friendly with somebody when they're on the way up in politics or any other walk of life.

[57 : 56] People all want to be friends with the rising star or the boss. Friendship at its best is disinterested. But other pluses in my life have been the arrival of new friends.

And there's a completely new dimension of friendship that entered my life in the last years, which is praying friends. And when I sort of, ten years ago, I thought that praying with someone, especially praying out loud, was almost a worse idea than going to the dentist to learn an anaesthetic.

If I belonged to anything at all, before I got into trouble, I belonged to the church reticent wing of Anglicanism, and we certainly didn't do praying out loud. So I didn't know anything about that at all.

I now know that one of the best things anyone can do in their spiritual life, if it's possible, is to get into a small group of praying friends who you can trust confidences and pray together with, and have prayer partners.

And these friends are completely new in my life. I say completely new, some of them are now ten, twelve years old, that they date my sort of beginning of a meaningful spiritual journey.

[59 : 20] And so the word friendship is complicated, as I've indicated by my answer. But the bottom line is, I feel I've been very rich in friends at all stages, even though I lost some.

Perhaps not my closest friends, but I lost some in the worst of times. But that's life. There was somebody up in the gallery there. Very eloquently, how you came out of the debt, how you've been able to go on and gain further education, and use your experiences.

And it would seem that you've resolved that you don't want to go back to prison again, you're going to try and avoid that experience. What I would like to ask you is, because what concerns me very much, is the vast majority of the people in our prisons have been there before, or if they haven't been there before, will go again.

And I just wondered if you could expound your views on how perhaps we can reduce the prison population, how we can stop these people destroying not only their lives, but the lives of their victims, and how we can improve society.

That's a very topical question, because you've just been writing a large report about that very subject, I think. Is that right? The questioner might be slightly disturbed to know, but I have recently answered that question in 273 pages, but I'll give you the short version.

[60 : 51] And first of all, you are absolutely right in your question. It's one of the most distressing statistics in our criminal justice system. the alarming amount of re-offending.

I, the Scottish figures aren't so different from the England and Wales figures, but it's only the latter that I really know, that I think they're pretty similar. In all prisons, two-thirds of all prisoners, will re-offend within two years.

And if you measure beyond two years, you'll probably be higher than that. Younger prisoners, defined as under 25 in England and Wales, the repeat offending rate, and usually the re-jailing rate, goes up to 75% or three-quarters.

And when you get down to young offenders, you find that the re-offending rate is 90%. So, this is a really terrible failure rate in terms of a system which, at best, two-thirds come back.

There's this sort of endless repeat conveyor belt of crime. Could we do better? Definitely, we think we could, but it's not a sort of simple matter doing better. There aren't any quick fix, easy solutions.

[62 : 11] But, very quickly, trying to answer them. First of all, what is the whole purpose of prison? I think purpose number one is protecting the public. I know better than most people that there are a lot of dangerous people who really need to be locked up.

Secondly, there are people, almost everyone in prison probably, except the very rare miscarriages of justice. People do need to be punished, and for some of them, prisoners an appropriate punishment, the deprivation of liberty.

But the third purpose of prison, which is the one which is the weakest leg of the tripod, is prisoners also should be rehabilitated. And how to rehabilitate effectively is the enormous challenge.

There are certain things you could do. First of all, just let's look at what we could do inside prisons in terms of teaching, training, getting into the habits of work and discipline.

One of the things that actually staggered me is the number of illiterate people in prison. In England and Wales, a third of all prisoners cannot read or write at all. And another third have only the reading and writing age of 11-year-olds.

[63 : 32] So you could do something a great deal to improve those basic literacy skills, because who can hope to get a job if they can't even read the letters on labels in a warehouse.

So there are what I call very practical forms of rehabilitation. Secondly, I tell a story in my long prison report, which I went to see myself having been tipped off by a prison governor, this was happening.

And it's true of a great many prisons, but I happen to see it outside Brixton Prison in London. You go to Brixton Prison any morning, you see prisoners being released. And some of them are met by their families or their friends, or maybe from some good charitable organisation, like Caring for Ex-Offenders or something like that.

But the great majority of them are met by nobody. They just sort of drift aimlessly and rather hopelessly out of prison looking rather disorientated. Who do you think greets them most warmly after a few minutes have gone by?

At the other end of Jed Avenue, the street where Brixton Prison stands, are the friendly neighbourhood drug dealers who greet them with great warmth, great enthusiasm, take some of their resettlement grant off them.

[64 : 55] And the message here is, if you're going to have rehabilitation, and these guys have in many cases been rehabilitated off drugs, to this extent they've been detoxed, they've been on some sort of programmes which make them feel that they're off drugs.

But as soon as temptation is put back in their way in a big way, they yield to it. And so one of the things we emphasise in our point is what we call joined-up rehabilitation, that people shouldn't really leave prison without some sort of definite plan for where they're going to go.

Are they going to just go homeless? Is anyone going to meet them? If they're on drug treatments, is that drug treatment going to continue? In some form or another, the rehabilitation programmes, the supervision, the Alcoholics Anonymous programme, whatever it is.

So if you actually really go for a programme of what I call joined-up rehabilitation, and you make it local, and Scotland is pioneering on two very interesting things in terms of community rehabilitation, and one or two communities, so there are things we can down south learn from what's going on here.

But the basic answer is, this isn't a quick and easy solution, and I've immediately managed to condense 273 pages into about three minutes so far.

[66 : 26] But if you actually, there are ways of getting those re-offending figures much, much lower. And one of our recommendations, which we give quite unashamedly, is that the role of faith-based groups in rehabilitating prisoners should be encouraged and developed, and not obstructed, as so often happens, because one of the reasons people change direction is because of spiritual transformation.

And I often say to churches, do you have any sort of form of prison ministry? Do anyone from your church go into prison? Do anyone help people who come out of prison? Some churches are very good at it, but most are not.

So this is a big field which we should all be a part of, but could we do more to rehabilitate prisoners? Could we bring the prison re-offending rate down? The answer is yes, we could, and I think sooner or later we will have a real try at it.

The gentleman there, by the way. Yes, okay. Jonathan, do you see the hand of God in the recent crisis politically and financially in the country, and if so, how do you think God wants us to respond to what has happened?

I'm reluctant to claim knowledge of the hand of God. I rather agree with Job, who at one moment in the book of Job says something like, I only understand the outskirts of his ways.

[68 : 03] But I think, just guessing without any certainty, that God must have been sad in recent years and times by the huge growth of materialism as a God.

And this is back to the golden calf, it's back to worshipping the wrong kind of idol. And maybe sometimes when there are great corrections, people, as the kind that's going on right now, they're painful if you've lost a job or lost money, but maybe people will think again about life's deeper meaning and deeper values.

And God very often calls at times of crisis. We shouldn't be afraid of the fact that adversity is often the gateway to a deeper faith.

And there's an old Christian saying, if you don't listen to God's whispers, one day you'll have to listen to God's shouts. And sometimes, I think in my own case, being at that time at least a sort of proud and arrogant and not listening person, that it could be added sometimes, and those sort of people who have to listen to a huge kick up the backside from the divine powers.

But in the middle of a crisis, when things are going horribly wrong, either as a nation, as an economy, or individuals, that is a time to be listening to where our values have gone wrong, where our, what idols we may have been worshipping.

[69 : 45] So I think it is perfectly possible that the hand of God has been sending out some signs and some whispers during this crisis. Thank you.

As somebody who served the government from the inside, I wonder if you could maybe share with us how, as Christians, we could influence the politics of this country, and of countries abroad, to bring about change.

Well, I think first of all, pray. Because you never underestimate the power of prayer. Then I think sometimes Christians need to be more on the front foot, when it turns to some of the practicalities.

Let me give one example of that. I mentioned recently, a few minutes ago, that I was the honorary president of Christian Solidarity worldwide. And we work very hard to try and lobby for a different kind of treatment, both by foreign governments or of our governments, or of the EU or the UN or the United States or maybe, and the way they treat foreign governments who do persecute people for their faith.

And on the whole, we are anything from quite to very effective. We lobby very strongly and with very detailed chapter and verse.

[71 : 23] It's a very disciplined process, gathering the information as to what is really going on in regimes like Laos or Vietnam. And then we are able sometimes to persuade people like the EU or our own government, say, no aid going to those governments which are running regimes which persecute Christians, or for that matter non-Christians for their faith.

I mean, that nobody should be persecuted for their faith, because freedom of religion is supposed to be guaranteed by UN treaties and charters. So effective lobbying is, I think, a very worthwhile cause, as is effective Christian protests and organised efforts.

So I don't think one wants to be despairing at all. And seeing the inside in government, I tell you what I most remember from those days, is that there's all the difference in the world between sort of amateur, what I call, by the photocopy, by the cyclos, you know, repeatedly, the same text coming out in emails, over and over again, just sort of repetitive.

It's rather unimpressive kind of lobbying. When a constituent takes the trouble to write personally to their member of parliament, dear Mr. Jones or Mr. Akin, I really want you to know how strongly I feel about this, or they take the trouble to come and see you in your constituency's surgery.

That's a very effective form of lobbying. We sort of guarantee under our system, which on the whole works quite well, that members of parliament on the whole are diligent, whatever political party they come from, seeing their constituents, responding to their constituents' letters.

[73 : 22] And that is, in a way, what the system is about, that we, that sort of representative to parliament should be, is good at responding and listening to certainly the personal words, personal letters, the personal appearance of a constituent.

And the constituent who then approaches the issue, whatever it is from a faith-based point of view, is entitled to respect and a fair hearing and an answer. And that's the most effective form of lobbying.

So, on a big scale, pray. On a personal scale, get personal and lobby or write personally to your member of parliament.

I think that's still a very effective form of influencing events. Time for perhaps one or two more questions. Down on the left here. Can you just keep your hand up?

So, that's great. Thank you. Thank you. And then, at the front there. What was your purpose in doing a theology degree?

[74 : 31] And is it being fulfilled? Has it developed? Has it changed? And where do you go from here? Then, and when I started the theology degree, and now, I sometimes, like the story of a preacher who began with a rhetorical question, question, what makes God laugh?

Answer people who have plans. And I have, when I went off to read theology, I didn't quite know why I was doing it, except that I had a great hunger, spiritual hunger in me to sort of know God better.

And I somehow thought, which I think was not necessarily correct, that I would get to know him better by studying theology. I certainly knew some things about him better, but I remember so well when I was doing theology, getting asked to write an essay on the doctrine of the Trinity.

You'll be relieved here, I don't intend to explain it to you now. But when studying it academically, theologically, I sort of hope I got there, what the answer more or less was, but I understood it far better when I was in prison, and nowhere near a theology degree.

The reason I understood it so well in prison, I used to, an Irish burglar and I started a prayer group while in prison. And we, suddenly, all kinds of people got recruited to this prayer group.

[76 : 14] And it was the most original prayer group ever, in terms of sinners. And when I used to listen, I was not the teacher of that prayer group at all, I was thinking in some ways I was this greatest learner.

But I used to listen to the prayers of my fellow prisoners, and they used to begin their prayers, some of them, our Father, O Lord, our Heavenly Father, Father God.

Why? Because what they most wanted in their lives was a father figure, something most of them had never had. It came from broken homes or non-existent knowledge of their fathers, and they longed for that rock of paternal trust, which they had missed so often in their lives.

Others prayed to God the Son, they began their prayers, the prayers, O Lord Jesus, because what they most wanted was the things that Jesus stands for, love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness of sinners.

And others wanted to pray to the third person of God, God the Holy Spirit, because they longed to be empowered, as the Holy Spirit promises to empower us, to do all kinds of things which, with our own weak wills, we wouldn't be able to do.

[77 : 29] Like, it could be giving up drugs, it could be changing direction in our lives. And that's the doctrine of the Trinity, in a way, the three persons of God. I understood it far better in a prison cell than I did by going to all the academic lectures in the world.

But having gone there, I mean, you know, there is a, if you're ever going to talk, I mean, as I said, they taught me to root any talk in scripture. I did learn a lot.

I've learned two and a half of the happiest years of my life, being at Wycliffe. But I think the reason was not so much the theology, it was that Wycliffe was a very prayerful place, Wycliffe was a place which went out and preached the gospel, we were sent on missions, we were sent to be very active.

And if I, I don't think I have anything as grand as a ministry, as they say, but what I do like is supporting other people's ministries in prisons, and if there's any contribution that I can make, whether it's to prison chaplains work, work of preaching the gospel here at St. George's Tron, or anywhere else, that's, for me, a, in my, even through my imperfect lips, if the Lord's perfect message can be understood better through personal example or words or anything that I've got to offer, that is really more important than theological learning.

But at the same time, I probably couldn't have given the talk I gave tonight about Psalm 130 if I hadn't studied the Psalms for two years. So it was a very enriching process, the theology, but the ology bit isn't so important.

[79 : 14] It's the study and love of God which is important. I wanted to ask about... I think there's a microphone somewhere. I've got it.

One of the interesting things about politics in post-evolved Scotland is the rise of some new political parties, one of which is the Scottish Christian Party, and I wanted to ask you, what are your views on that?

Do you think that we need distinctive Christian political parties, or do we need more Christians in the established political parties like the Conservative Party and the Labour Party? Well, I'm not sure I really know the answer to the question, but I think on the whole, when Jesus himself got into this territory, he said, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar, render unto God the things that are God's.

So there's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be a strong Christian believer in any political party, number one. I'm not against people who want to form political parties which have the Christian label attached to them.

After all, there are fine political parties in other parts of Europe, things like the Christian Democrats. But on the whole, there are some issues which really, there is very often, it's not almost possible to have a purely Christian viewpoint.

[80 : 42] I mean, when I used to steer a finance bill through the House of Commons, well, you could certainly say there are some things which there is a Christian view, but there are an awful lot of sort of complicated technicalities which really, there isn't an obvious Christian view on.

Why should there be a Christian view on whether we should have a channel tunnel or not? That's not a, I mean, and I think Jesus, if he was asked, should we build a channel tunnel, might well have said, render unto Caesar the equivalent of the things that are Caesar's.

So I don't feel at all impelled to put my hand up and say, I love the idea of Christian political parties. I, on the whole, think I don't. I much prefer to Christians to get into politics and parliament at all levels, from all different parties, and none are exclusive, exclude a Christian.

Obviously, there was a sort of racist political party, or perhaps there is one, but, or it was a greed political party exclusively, you could start to say, no, no, that's wrong according to the Gospels.

But, on the whole, I think Christians can come from all political parties, and I think I wouldn't be enthusiastic personally about saying there isn't exclusively a Christian political party, but I wouldn't condemn those who are.

[82 : 00] I think we'll take this last question down on the right here, and then we'll wind up. And there'll be opportunity if you want to ask individually afterwards. Last question. Thank you, Jonathan, for your presentation.

What I'd like to know is, what did your wife and children make of you when you became a Christian, and where are they spiritually now? It's not an entirely simple answer for reasons you quickly understand, but I'll answer it.

At the time when I got into trouble, I was married, probably a bad husband, but I had a good wife, and in the middle of the dramas and troubles, she wanted to divorce me, and we were divorced, which is sad, but we have remained on good terms.

She's a fine mother to my children, and she herself is a strong, believing lady. So I thank God for her, but I'm very, very sorry we are divorced.

My children, well, I have four children, and they are in varying stages of their spiritual journeys.

[83 : 24] All go to church occasionally, all pray some of the time. I think if my son was here, he'd say, I'm a believer, but I'm not over the top like my dad is. But they're all very good children.

They're all in their twenties, I shouldn't call them children, and I thank God for them. They're all very loyal to me, all visited me in prison, all never wavered in their love and loyalty, and I thank God for that.

I think, like many a parent, I sometimes wish their spiritual journeys were a bit more advanced, but then as mine didn't advance for about 50 years, perhaps I shouldn't be at all critical, and I thank God for their spiritual journeys so far and they will develop.

Six years ago nearly, I remarried. I remarried a lady who had been previously married to two famous film stars.

One, she was married, both of them who died. One was, she was Mrs. Rex Harrison, and she was Mrs. Richard Harris. This gives me rather a hard act to follow as a husband sometimes. But she is a most, not only a wonderful wife, but also a lady of real faith and prayer.

[84 : 51] And I wrote a little book called Prayers for People Under Pressure, and its dedication is to Elizabeth, my nearest, dearest and closest prayer partner, and that is true.

So that perhaps sends its own message, that if you can have a happy, fulfilled and praying Christian marriage, it is the greatest blessing of all, and I've got it.

Well, I think you've worked very hard indeed, answering questions, having also given us a talk, and we must let you rest. But I think we'd want to express our appreciation to Jonathan Aitken for having come and first spoken to us.

Thank you. Thank you. Once again, I do want to thank all of you for coming, and I hope it's been an interesting and a stimulating evening for you.

Many things to have heard and perhaps to think about. As I said, there are a number of Jonathan's books available in the book room there, if you want to look at those, and he'll be around here for a little while. I'm sure we'll be glad to talk to you individually if you'd like to, if you have other questions, burning things that you'd like to take him up on.

[86 : 09] But once again, on behalf of everybody, Jonathan, I'd like to thank you very much indeed for coming to be with us. We're very, very grateful indeed. Thank you all for coming. Thank you.