

religious communities whose faith is a hollow sham; the general population who do not care about anything other than spending money and looking good; the super-powers threatening the smaller nations; the inevitability of war and food shortages. Isaiah could sit down and weep. *This is a sinful nation, he says, a people whose guilt is great; a brood of evildoers with children who are given over to corruption.*

He does dream of better times. He fantasises about a world where war will come to an end, where people will grow food rather than make swords, where governments will be just and where God will be a real, dynamic force in people's lives, someone they take seriously and spend serious time with rather than using as a mere figurehead for a cosy club or a power-hungry community.

But how can this happen, asks Isaiah, in a country where no-one is really bothered about truth and justice, love and peace? How can this happen amongst people who have become so hopelessly lost and confused? How can this happen amongst people who have turned their backs on God?

Where are the men and women with the X-factor? The men and women with passion for a better world and for a closer walk with God? Where are the people of truth?

Isaiah, at this point in his life was not a happy man, nor a very hopeful one.

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And how much happier or more hopeful are we in 2007?

Where are the people we watch and wait for- the people with the X-factor- the people who can make a difference?

We wonder, how can anything good happen in the world as it is today?

How can anything new happen in the church, as it has become?

Let me leave you with this Prayer, written for Advent Sunday in the new URC Prayer Handbook. It is entitled "Despair."

Are you angry with us, God? Is that why people laugh at us and turn away from your church?

We have remained faithful to your call. Week by week we have gathered for worship, pleaded for help and said our prayers, but still we struggle to understand what it is you ask of us.

We have worked hard just to be here. We can work no harder. Are tears to be our only reward?

Are you angry with us, God? It was you who called us here.

It was you who first opened to us a vision of life in all its fullness and set us in a community of your people.

We are yours, to you we owe our very lives. In you we find our purpose and in you we will discover our tomorrow.

Forgive us if we have come to think that our prayers and our faithfulness are enough.

We, like all the earth, need to be embraced by your grace.

We, your church, wait for you to make us who you need us to be.

Restore us, O God, that we may be saved.

Isaiah did discover some talent- in a surprising person. James and Chris have also made some surprising discoveries this year. After next hymn- hear about them.

PRESENTATION: Isaiah and Others Discover Some Talent...

James: This morning in our presentation we want to talk a little bit about Soul Survivor; a youth event that we went on last year and this year. Soul Survivor is organised by 'Soul Survivor church' and has two weeks running over five days each. While there you spend the week camping, or in a caravan if you're a youth leader who can't brave the outdoors. There are two big worship sessions a day, one in the morning and one in the evening with a wide range of seminars for the rest of the day. And in the evening there are a range of activities including a disco, a wide variety of music and performances, a late night worship session or a number of cafes to pop into. From our talk we hope to get across a few things. The first is just to tell you what we do when we disappear on these events. Second is to give a little bit of a testimony about the things we have experienced, and finally tell you what we have learned about ourselves and our lives. We compare our experience to the vision Isaiah had in the temple, which changed his life and started him on his ministry.

Reader: The prophet Isaiah wrote these words: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were the seraphim and they were calling to one another "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and the thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

Chris: Firstly, Soul Survivor is amazing because being surrounded by 10,000 + Christians, even while not in worship, is a feeling which truly strengthens me personally in the heart. The ability to sit down on some grass somewhere and pray or dance in the street and sing a hymn and often be joined by others and not be asked, "what are you doing?" is a testimony to how freely the Holy Spirit flows at Soul Survivor. Also the utter peace of mind and the safety which is experienced there is beautiful to feel. Another important part of Soul Survivor is that it is just a field before the tents came, and it is transformed by people into a spiritual hive of activity. The main worship is awe inspiring but also there are a wide range of seminars which can be attended to discuss and get your teeth into issues and ideas.

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James: At soul survivor this year 900 people became Christians in just week one. That's quite a lot of people. The worship in the big top is an entirely new experience. 10,000 people all worshipping together in their own way is a truly amazing experience. The music is fantastic: a wide range, from worship bands, to rappers and percussion. The singing was so loud at some points that when the new Christians were taken to a tent next door, they couldn't hear what was being said because we were so loud. It was so cool that we ended up clapping with two fingers and singing in whispers, but there was still so much energy and excitement.

Chris: Many people have different views on what God is like. Soul Survivor helped me personally to portray God a little less as the all powerful God who is to be feared as well as loved. It is true we should fear God and he is all powerful but I often see this and take for granted the all loving part, which is more important as it was the God of love who sent his son to die for us all. I don't fully understand the Old Testament

fire blasting god but Soul Survivor has taught me to engage just as much with the relationship part of God who created me out of his love as the side of God which I don't always understand.

James: The worship especially this year, when I really understood what was going on I felt so close to God, I felt like I was really connecting with him. It very hard to say what that feels like and what it means to you. Personally I felt an overwhelming love. I felt like God was in control, I didn't feel necessarily that everything would become clear but that God was in control and with him on my side, anything was possible.

Reader: When I heard the voices I cried “I am doomed for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. Yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Chris: So you probably all realise by now we had a really really good time at Soul Survivor. When we come back from Soul Survivor many of us feel a sense of godliness. It's the same feeling after a really inspirational service at church. But when we get back into the wider world we see many things which challenge our idea of what an ideal world should be. Its strange coming back from Soul Survivor and the first time you hear the name Jesus it happens to be a blasphemy. Last year I know that over the weeks that followed soul survivor my godliness began to fade slowly from me. This year it has been different, I don't know why. I do know that it has been just as challenging to hold onto the image of God we get used to in our Christian circles. It's hard to engage with the world's social and political problems and do something about them without feeling overwhelmed and lost and without feeling that the special connection to god is failing or not there anymore. But every time we seem to get the feeling of godliness back. This has made me realise that even though we may lose sight of God, he will never lose sight of us.

James: When I came back from soul survivor there were two different things I was worried about. Things on a national or international level and things on a local or personal level. A few weeks ago, some of you may know that I had the privilege of going to Auschwitz on a government sponsored project. With that it was very easy to see a lot of the bad things in the world. After Soul Survivor, I was really aware of some of the bad things in the world. I really wanted to make a change but having any idea where to start was hard. That week I also attended a conference on slavery and Christian citizenship. It was very easy to see so many bad things a wonder why it was like that, but it really began to occur to me, that no matter how small I can make a difference with the power of God. In terms of local and personal, last year when I came back I thought what many people think, that's what worship should always be like, lets go find the most exciting church like that. I want that experience every week, why isn't my church like that? But then the guy in the sky said, hang on James, you do in fact love your church, you've good roots there, you're part of a caring community with people who are always supporting you and caring for you and even Questors with Phil Wall and Suzanne Wallbridge isn't that bad. In fact one issue I've been thinking about for a long time is that although there are many fantastic people who have helped me through many things there are also so many people in this church I don't know. So. Over the next few weeks I intend to find people I don't know as well and get to know them. So all I ask is that if you see a big ugly teenage youth walking towards you, that you don't run away but get to know him! When comes to making

small changes on a local scale I've realised this is the place to be. On a personal level I was desperate to come back a changed person, to be really nice, really holy and be just like Jesus. Unfortunately it doesn't work quite like that. Waking up every morning trying to put on my Jesus face.(grr) since I've been back I've done things I'm not proud of, acted in ways I'd rather that I hadn't. While I was there I had prayer for a particular issue, while I was being prayed for I found my self in tears (its all right to be a man and cry) I thought I'd solved it and it would never happen again. But when I got back it cropped up and I failed, I got angry with god, I thought it was sorted I said, what was all that stuff if it wasn't the solving, God said James it was the beginning, let's work together with this issue and other stuff and start to change the world.

Reader: Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for.”

James: God is **BIG!!!!**. People and laugh and mock me when I make that statement but if you think about it really and fundamentally it's true, God is big. I now know to some degree how big. Soul Survivor , amongst other things this year enabled me to really start believing in the power of God. Here I just want to talk about healing at Soul Survivor. The power of God can be a very scary thing, certainly last year to begin with I was very cynical about healing. I didn't believe all these things could happen. Then I got a bit spooked out by the screaming and some of the things. Slowly over the year my faith built and I really began to believe in the power of prayer. Jesus says in the Bible that we could do greater things than he, well he raised the dead so what does that mean for us? I tell you, it means through the power of God, and by our faith through prayer we can work miracles. I just want to give two quick stories. First this year during a time of prayer one boy was being prayed for as his dad had cancer. He was prayed for. Well about 25 minutes later he got a phone call from his dad, saying that he had been given the all clear. Some say, that he got really lucky, what I say is that God still performs miracles and answers our prayers and that is what that was. Secondly, my friend Benedict has problems with the ligaments in his knees, linked with rugby and as a great sportsman, it seriously effects him at times. Well at Soul Survivor we prayed for him, we gathered round and began to pray, and you know what happened, he started going through immense pain. Some with us experiencing this sort of prayer for the first time got really worried at his pain, I have to admit I was pretty nervous myself, this really wasn't how it was supposed to turn out. I started wandering what I was doing wrong, maybe I wasn't godly enough maybe I needed to shout, or wave my hands or cry in strange languages and pull funny faces, maybe extreme examples, but you see my worry, well Gareth our youth worker came over and said, its not you James, you're not doing anything other than giving God a channel so let him get on with it. Eventually he started to feel better and he realised that he had been healed, it hasn't lasted forever, but it helped him get through the week and it certainly backed up our faith. God was certainly doing work there in all his Bigness, with faith in God, we really could move mountains.

Chris: Through prayer we can engage with that wonderful miracle making part of our faith. A wonderful thing about God is his variety and diversity, just like the variety and diversity which is all around us in God's world. Prayer isn't the only way which God has enabled us to do powerful deeds. We also need to actively help to bring good change about. We are saying to God that we realise in the past humanity has mucked up. God sent Jesus to clear the board of all our past mistakes. But we, in following

Jesus, need to help others in our words and actions. At Soul Survivor, in a seminar called Soul Man we were told that Jesus is an example of the way to live our lives. In helping others we can change the world and show God's love. The marvellous part of this is that it's not a competition of who can move the biggest mountain for people who need God's love shown to them. It's only a test of faith to see if we can pick up the shovel and start digging.

Reader: Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us? And I said "here I am, send me."

James: After all this I'm determined, at the moment I'm not entirely sure there are lots of options open to me and many things I could do. I certainly know, I'm determined to give my all to God, it's not going to be easy and there are going to be bad times but equally very good times. Certainly with everything this year I want to tell people, let them know about situations in the world. I've got lots of presentations left linked with Auschwitz but most of all changes in myself I think are most important. I want to worship God through living out his will. I want people to see a little bit of God in me in my every day life. Because love came down to rescue me, so here I am Lord, send me.

Chris: While at Soul Survivor, some presentations given in the evening services raised an awareness and passion within me. The awareness was of the worst type of poverty happening in Durban in South Africa. The presentations touched me deeply. I had heard of poverty before and I have seen many videos of the last the least and the lost. But for some reason this time was different. I had a rush of love for people whom I had never met before. For people who I suddenly felt God wanted me to help. I have given money to charity before but something in my mind clicked that it wasn't enough for me to just continue giving my money. The overwhelming love for complete strangers is still as powerful now as it was the first worship session I felt it when I was at Soul Survivor and intend to spend my gap year working with the street children in Durban. The determination to do something is still there, and not just in personal spiritual highs, but also in the low points. This wasn't all clear to me in a flash. But I know its something God wants me to do and still does.

James: A time of prayer for us all.....

HYMN 92 Amazing Grace

Thank-you Isaiah, for writing down your story, 2500 years ago.

Thank-you James and Chris for sharing your story with us.

John Newton- a hard-bitten, cynical captain of a slave ship discovered that, through the amazing grace of God, even he had the X-factor, which could change the world for good. His influence on William Wilberforce and others helped to bring about the abolition of slavery. His hymns and writings have renewed faith and hope in countless Christians.

Have you got what it takes? No, it is God who has what it takes and the grace of God that lives in us that gives us what it takes.