



Season 9: Episode 11 | Rob Fennell | How Can Scripture Guide Us Through Difficult Times?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna LaFleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today's episode features a conversation where Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell will be interviewed by CBS Ambassador Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling. Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell is a professor of historical and systematic theology at Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia. An ordained minister of the United Church of Canada and an author, Fennell is committed to encouraging the health and thriving of local churches and their leaders.

His most recent books include: *31 Short Spiritual Practices*, *Camino Close to Home*, *Following Jesus Today*, and with Russ Daye, *Turning Ourselves Inside Out*, *Thriving Christian Communities*. He's always curious about the new thing that the Holy Spirit might be doing. So please enjoy this conversation.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: Rob, I am so delighted that you have taken this opportunity to share your wisdom and your insights and your background with us. And I know that it'll be a blessing for all those who are listening. Rob, you have a very interesting background in the faith.

I mean, you come from a family of believers. So, who were the greatest influences in your life and particularly on the development of your faith?

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Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Great. Well, thanks, Andrew.

Really great to be with you. I'm very happy to have that first question because it does play a big role in how our family and our friends impact us. And I do come from a believing family, a family of churchgoing and believing Christians.

And my parents are certainly the most important impact on the formation of my faith. My dad was also my minister growing up. And my mom was I don't think she was directly my Sunday school teacher, but she was very involved in the Sunday school.

And then, of course, our home in a way was a kind of a Sunday school in the sense that we prayed at home, and we said grace every day and we learned to read the Bible at home. And I remember very, very well my mother teaching me to pray. I have a very clear memory of that, especially bedtime prayers.

And then we had a very free flowing conversation at any moment that I had a question or needed a little bit of correction. Sometimes both of my parents were very active in that. And they in turn learned their faith from their parents.

I remember just a few years ago thanking my parents for their influence on me and my faith. And they said, well, as our parents did for us, that's exactly what they said. So, you know, absolutely.

My parents, certainly my siblings, were a good influence on me as well. I bet they'll be glad to hear that. And then I had some really terrific youth group leaders and Sunday school teachers.

And then a little bit later on, leaders of campus groups and people who just in their own lives had come to faith and believed that their quiet and steady witness to the people around them was important. And then that, you know, there is a way in which faith sometimes is caught. Right.

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So, it's an osmosis process as much as anything. But then one also kind of feels that the Spirit is leading you to continue to learn. So, I feel like it was a very organic process in our home. And then with the people around me over my lifetime, I've been very blessed to be led to faith, I think, through the people around me.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: Was there at any time sort of what some people call an “aha moment” for you? Was there a moment where you personally, deep internally connected with this tradition that was passed on and was sort of, as you would use the Word, I like it, osmosis. But was this sort of an aha moment, a defining moment? Or again, was it a series of events or was it just simply a progress?

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Sure.

I think that it's, I would call it an organic or an incremental kind of process through my life. But there are two moments I remember very clearly that I think were quite significant. One was, you know, in the years in which I was quite young and for many, many years, this was true that the Gideons would come to the schools and give Bibles to children in grade five.

And you could write your name in the front, which was to say, this is my book. And you could also write your name at the back if you were pledging your life to Jesus Christ. And I remember some of my classmates saying, oh, you can write your name in the front and the back and away they went with their pens.

And I thought, oh, wait a minute. I remember thinking very discerningly about that back page and thinking, am I ready to do that? And I was still pretty young. But I do remember so clearly, and I can tell you, I was 11 years of age.

And I read very carefully that statement in the back page about making a personal commitment to follow Jesus Christ. And I didn't sign it right away. It was a few months later.

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And I did, I remember signing that a little bit later. And so, there was a moment there, you know, where I did feel gripped by a sense of conviction. And then a little bit later, I'd say about five or six years later, I was quite involved in youth programming that was put on by the United Church at the regional level.

And I had an experience in a youth retreat, where I had a, I wouldn't say, you know, as grand as Wesley's warming of the heart, but some very kind of emotional response to my faith, that up until then, I had not really experienced. I think that up until then, I probably had a more kind of intellectual ascent or intellectual gathering in of information, almost about the Christian way and my place within it. And I remember in that retreat, feeling a very, a much more profound emotional connection to my faith and to God, and to the leading of Jesus Christ in a way that I had not experienced before.

So again, I was still quite young, but I remember those two moments quite clearly.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: Yeah, no, they are aha moments, aren't they?

In the past, you have been a minister of a congregation, but now you're currently professor of theology at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, my alma mater, just to be clear. And in your engagement with new students, Rob, what are the key issues that they're struggling with, or that they're finding rewarding? I mean, I don't just want it all to be negative, but what are kind of the key things that they're really drilling down into these days?

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Well, I can only, you know, think anecdotally of a few students.

I wouldn't want to generalize about all of them, of course, but you know, when you're in a theological school, one of the things that always arises in conversation is questions of vocation. What is my calling? What is the shape of my calling? And we do a little bit of examining in the college, and the churches are always examining candidates if they're heading towards ministry. So, they need to account for their calling in various ways to these church bodies, and they really

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aren't accountable to us in the same way, but they come up in conversation, these questions of vocation.

And so that's one that's pretty well on the daily round in one way or another. So, it's a pretty consistent issue, or set of questions. It's not an issue.

And then I think the other one is the sense of, you know, how does my..., I mean, it's related, but how does my life fit together with my other relationships, my family, in some senses, my past life, the things that I have been about up until now, and how has God, and how is God leading me to this moment, and how does it all intersect? So that's obviously related to the question of vocation, but not specifically to what is the shape of my ministry, but somewhat more so like how is my whole life kind of bound up with the kinds of things to which I'm committed. And then in terms of celebrations, I think there's often a moment where students kind of realize with great joy that the practice of ministry, where in their field settings, are bringing them just tremendous satisfaction and excitement and delight, and it's just wonderful to see that come alive in them.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: It's interesting, I was just reading in preparation for a paper that I'm sure you'll see at some point, on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He talks about the *vocatio interna*, and that sort of, that notion of a vocation that comes from within and discerning that call, and that was to students in the 1930s in Germany in a time of crisis. It's a powerful thing, and I'm glad, I mean, I'm pleased to hear that, Rob. I'm glad that there really is that discernment about vocation.

It's also, we're going into a different world in terms of that vocation too, aren't we? I mean, we're moving into various forms of vocation. We're bi-vocational in many cases, and there are people who are dealing with the financial constraints of churches, but at the same time having a calling into the service of the Word. Are those issues that are arising as well amongst your students?

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Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Yeah, I mean, I would like to say that our students are not naive about that.

You know, I don't think any of them are really dreaming of some mythical glorious past, that there's a form of ministry that obtained 40 or 50 years ago that they're just going to slide into. I think that they're pretty wide-eyed about what is before them and the challenges in the church and in the world, and for that reason and for other reasons. I'm just so appreciative of them and amazed by their willingness to serve. And I'm just constantly kind of taken aback at their, not taken aback, but just, you know, so pleased and so kind of struck in my heart to know that they're seeing the struggles that are ahead of them and saying yes to that anyway. I admire that. I really do.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: Yeah, I know. I think you're right, and I think to be going into ministry and responding to the call of God today is a challenge and a blessing and courageous for them.

Rob, you're a writer, you've made many literary contributions, and they're diverse in nature, but I've observed from your books and your essays over the years some key themes that have been arising. Now, I know there are many, but there are two that I'd like to focus on. The first is a very big theme of yours is the grace of Jesus Christ, and the other one is the relationship between devotion and social responsibility.

And without sounding too much, again, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who we both admire, how does Scripture, though, Rob, help us understand grace and responsibility?

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Thank you. Yeah, well, I'm enamored of Bonhoeffer, of course, so he's a big influence on me still, and again, that's something I even was exposed to at a very young age because my dad was a big reader of Bonhoeffer as well. But it's only, in a sense, accidental that those themes have come through.

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I didn't sit down and say, well, I really must echo everything Bonhoeffer said. That's certainly never been my objective. But you're right that those themes are echoing down through the decades.

Grace and responsibility arise, I think, through a close reading of Scripture. I think that those of us who are attentive to what Scripture has to say will see that God is constantly showering grace upon God's people throughout the stories, throughout the teaching materials, through the letters, even through the very perplexing apocalyptic literature of the Bible. Again and again, if we are attuned and listening and noticing, and indeed have been shaped in our faith to a certain extent, I think that the Bible will and does so helpfully show us that it is a God of grace with whom we are in relationship.

It is a God of grace who is constantly at our side, guiding us, sometimes restraining us, redirecting us, sometimes offering us alternatives that we had not imagined. And these realities come through again and again throughout the Biblical record. So, this will only strengthen that perspective, I think, if we're engaged with the Bible.

Similarly, God sees that we have a place in this world and gives us a range of gifts and possibilities and opportunities into which God calls us to serve. So that sense of responsibility, as you've named it, is certainly again a thematic in the Bible. If we think about the overarching theme of covenant, which binds together the First and Second Testaments, the covenant also implies not only God's faithfulness to us, but our call to be faithful to God and to exercise our gifts and our opportunities with responsibility, with a desire to love the people around us.

If Jesus says, love one another, well, that's not just sort of a passive thing that I can do on my couch, but indeed to rise up from time to time and take the things that God has placed in my hand and say, yes, I will be about the business of God in this world and do what I can. So this arises not out of a sense of obligation or that God will punish me, but because there is, I think, indeed joy in it and an ability to grow closer to those around us and to serve them and to see them as God sees them.

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Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: A few years ago, you wrote an engaging book review by Miroslav Volf, and it's one of those things, you know, you read it, and you go, that's a great review, I'm tucking that away, so I've saved it.

And the book was captive to the Word of God, so of course, very much in Bible Society language, engaging the Scripture for contemporary theological reflection, and it was insightful, the book and your review. But as you may know, Cardus and Angus Reid and the Canadian Bible Society have examined how Canadians today read Scripture, and across all denominations, Rob, it was found that 56% of Christians hardly read the Bible at all, and only 10% read it monthly. So how can our understanding of the Word of God in our contemporary theological world, in our contemporary world, how can our research into that help us to change those trends in terms of, I guess, renewing a love or an appreciation for Scripture?

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Sure.

Well, I do think it's a long game, right? We don't look at this as something that can be turned around in a matter of a weekend or a year, but to play the long game means to say that we are planting seeds all along the way. When I was very young, the very first Bible I received was, in fact, from the Bible Society, it was called the Good News Bible, in those days, the 1970s translation, today's English.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: All the little figurines.

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: All the little swirly drawings, that's right. On the cover, there was the image of the Sower taken from the parable, and behind the Sower were those little seeds that he was dropping as he walked, or as she walked perhaps. Well, that's a good image for me, of how we plant seeds everywhere we go to rely upon Scripture ourselves, to refer to Scripture, to quote Scripture, to paraphrase Scripture, to make little allusions to Scripture in what we do, and this is for anybody.

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This isn't just for someone who's a minister or a professor, but for anybody who has some familiarity with the Bible to say, here is an anchor, to mix my metaphors completely, here's an anchor for my life, or I'll get some more going, here's a rudder for the ship of my life that I have found very reliable, or maybe it's the sail that catches the breeze of the Holy Spirit. Just to say to persons along the way of our lives, this is how I have found the Bible to be fruitful in my own life, and I think it is that individual witness, that individual offering of a sense of the Bible's trustworthiness, the Bible's value, the Bible's deep wisdom, and to communicate that individually. I think has a tremendous value, to the point where I hope, you know, people will become curious about it, or say, well, now I don't know quite what you mean, and I can always say, well, I bet you could read the Gospel of Mark in one sitting, or why don't you read a chapter of Luke every night for the next few weeks and see what you think. I mean, just giving people little suggestions like this to normalize the reading of Scripture without overlaying it with a great deal of kind of scholarly requirements before you even crack open the book.

We want people to discover Scripture, first of all, to kind of let it wash over them, to sink into them, not necessarily to employ all of the scholarly tools in the first instance. We want those to come along in time, but the first thing is just to read it, just to experience it, and then, of course, ultimately to see how it's deeply valuable as a devotional tool as well.

The Bible Course: Pausing this conversation to tell you a little bit about The Bible Course, because whether you're a seasoned Bible reader or you're just starting on your journey with the Bible, The Bible Course offers a superb overview of the world's best-selling book.

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But as always, the links for everything will be down in the show notes. So now back to the conversation.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: That's beautiful. I mean, the image of the seeds.

I mean, we see the image all around us in the Bible Society, but you forget that. We forget that. I forget that. It's a good reminder. Thank you. It really is.

On another point, and one that is dear to my heart at the moment, is that there was a poll done by the same bodies again that asked another question, are we still Christian? And it was an assessment of really what Christians in Canada believe. And it was found while that the vast majority of evangelicals agree with the phrase, there is one true God in three persons, only 51% of Roman Catholics and 57% of mainline Protestants believed in the Trinity.

Is this a concern of yours? And if so, why is it important? And the fact that this is 1700 years from the Nicene Creed and Nicaea, which has got some phone lines buzzing around me by a very limited number of people, I might add. But, you know, what is the Trinity and why is it important, or is it?

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Well, I'm a Trinitarian. Again, that was part of the shaping of my faith, and at a certain point, a matter of wrestling to some extent to see how I might understand that reality and take it on for myself and what it meant for me.

But I'm quite aware that lots of people of faith are not so sure about the Trinity, are not embracing it, perhaps not understanding God in that way, or not quite sure what it means. And I think, again, it does fall to those of us who have some Trinitarian understanding, whatever it might be, to try to continue to grow in our faith and our understanding and then to share that with those around us. I'm not sure how to account for that kind of decline in Trinitarian understanding and confidence, but it is there, I agree with you.

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And I think there, I've just come from teaching a course on the Holy Spirit, and I'm aware that there's some pretty odd, sometimes, understandings of the Trinity and the persons of the Trinity, or I like to say the identities of the Trinity. And to the extent that some people think this is a matter of three gods or three entities, or there's one real God, and then Jesus is kind of a helper, or the Holy Spirit is a tool or a mystical force, kind of like Star Wars.

I mean, there's lots of other cultural forces around us that offer, in a sense, kind of a bad infection into our understandings. So, we do need good Christian liturgy, we do need good Christian preaching and teaching, and a little bit of writing here and there that I try to do, and others, many, many others are doing, just to kind of reassert and reaffirm the historic faith of the Church. Not because we're traditionalists, not because we think the past is better, or because we're, you know, attached to something from the past in a loopy kind of way, but because there's a deep truth within it.

The deep truth of God's relationality, the deep truth of God's mutuality, the deep truth of God's desire to nurture and enrich in a personal way, within the nature of God, God's self, you see, and then that also overflows into how we understand our own relationships with each other and with God.

God isn't just a force, God isn't just a principle, but God is, in the first instance, a relational reality of love, and that really changes, I think, how we relate to each other and to God.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: That's beautifully put, because I think, as you said, there is a suspicion of it, or are we becoming polytheistic, you know, are there many gods in Christianity, as opposed to one God in three persons? What took me into the Trinity, Bob, was a passage in John's Gospel, you know, as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you, abide in my love.

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Nice, yeah.

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Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: And I'm thinking, that is relational, that is the relationship between the Father and the Son, in very concrete language, but one that has a desire for the people themselves to abide in that love also, to participate in the life of the Trinity. And this is where I always think the Holy Spirit comes in, and I think that is sort of the bond, the unity of the Spirit that we talk about. So, you know, I agree, I think relationship is important, but again, for me, it comes out of Scripture. It's not something that's artificially imposed on it, but that it comes from a reading of it.

You are, and have stressed in your own life, and something I respect about you, devotion, you have the tradition of walking what is known as the Camino, and tell us something about that experience, and how people can benefit from that discipline, and what does it mean?

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Sure, so just to clarify, the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, which is the very famous pilgrimage route in Spain, which ends at the Santiago, is not a pilgrimage route that I have followed myself. I have never walked it. I've never been to Spain, but I know so many people who have.

In my lifetime, it's been around for over a thousand years, so it's not a new phenomenon, although it's had a huge resurgence in the last 30 or 35 years, where a quarter of a million or more people walk that route every year. But because I knew so many people walking the Camino in Spain, I started to think about, well, what does pilgrimage look like in a more local context. And so, for two or three years, I kind of let that simmer on the back burner, you know. What would pilgrimage look like in a local context? How can we bring the blessings of pilgrimage to a local community, because I've always enjoyed walking. I've always enjoyed the outdoors, and I also enjoy my life of community and prayer and all of those things.

I thought, how can we offer that? So, I did develop a local pilgrimage called *Camino Nova Scotia*. That's the name of it, *Camino Nova Scotia*, and *Camino* just means the way or the path in Spanish. So, a pilgrimage in the Nova Scotia context, which we began first along the south shore and has expanded to three other routes as well over the last 10 years.

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We've been at it for about 10 years, and the core thing here is to offer people an opportunity to go on a long distance walk with a small community of people. We only take 15 at a time, and to leave that kind of experience pretty wide open to whatever the Holy Spirit might do with those persons. We don't tell them how to feel.

We don't tell them what to think about. We don't tell them what to believe. We simply make it possible for them to follow a route safely that's predictable, that has some company along the way to take care of their meals and their accommodation and all those kinds of practical things, and then just ask people to settle into this experience of walking.

And the physical activity, including the fatigue and sometimes a little bit of physical pain that arises depending on, you know, blisters and joints and things like that, does help us to settle into our bodies. But there's something about the rhythm of walking the long-distance trail that allows the mind to be expansive and, I believe, to allow the spirit to be open to whatever might transpire. And so, I have heard some pretty lovely stories from people about their own kind of spiritual nourishment or even spiritual breakthroughs that have come through that.

Pilgrimage is a very ancient practice for Christians and many people of other traditions as well, other religions, and there's pilgrimages all over the world. But there is value in being able to do it locally. We don't have to go somewhere exotic to experience that.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: Yeah, yeah, no, that's wonderful, Rob. And actually, I've heard from somebody who was on one of those walks with you, and yes, it had a profound impact. So, you know, it's one of the reasons why I brought it up, because it had a very important influence on their lives.

Rob, I mean, if we get a little existential for a moment, I mean, we're in a time in our world of disruptions and transitions. I mean, we see it politically, we're seeing it economically, there are people being left behind. Many people feel uncertain about the future, particularly right now.

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I mean, just to time this interview yesterday, Justin Trudeau resigned. How can our faith navigate these uncertain waters? Because there are a lot of people who are going to be watching this, and it doesn't matter when they see it, and they're going to realize it's as an era, a time, we're in a time of disruption. How does our faith help us in that, Rob?

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Well, there's a few things I'd want to say about that.

I think the first is, you know, particularly reflecting on the work of the Bible Society, we can remember that, again, the Bible provides us with stories and examples of God's people living through difficult times before us. We are not the first generation to struggle. We are not the first generation to deal with difficult times.

And so we can notice from our spiritual ancestors, as the Bible shows to us, how they responded, how they struggled, how they failed and succeeded in their responses, what they did right, what they did very wrong, and how God was with them throughout, how God guided them and led them and cared for them throughout those difficult times. So, I think in the first instance, that, in a sense, can be a comfort to say, all right, we're not the first civilization. We're not the first society to deal with hard times.

And so that historical kind of overlay and faith overlay, I think, is actually quite important. But in a more immediate sense, there's, again, a great anchorage in our prayer lives and in our worship lives, and even in conversations with other faithful people, to say, you know, this is a difficult time. This is a time in which I worry about things or in which perhaps I myself am struggling with something, or someone dear to me is struggling with something, or I'm very worried about our society or worried about our country or whatever it might be.

And to be very frank about that, and to know that God can handle our frankness, God can handle our lament and our worry. God is not afraid of that. God is not put off by our weakness.

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But God can embrace us and hold us and guide us into whatever comes next. And it is indeed those, you know, structures of wisdom, let us say, that again are communicated in Scripture and in the Christian tradition, which can help us to say, all right, I have a sense of the path I ought to be taking here, the path of righteousness, not to be too fancy about it, but a path of love, a path of holiness that says there is before me a way of walking in this world that is faithful to God's call and true to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's a reliable road.

That's a reliable way of walking. And I want to be on that road and to be with others who are seeking that road as well. And I think, you know, in any difficult time, all we can do is seek to be as faithful as possible and to make the right choices and to live out of love.

And in any generation or in any society in which those troubles arise, that's always going to be true. And that might take the form of very concretely feeding someone who is hungry. It might very concretely be making it possible for someone to find shelter when they are unhoused.

It may be very concretely appealing to someone who has power over another to say it is time for mercy. There are a whole range of ways of walking faithfully, but there is that kind of central theme or practice in the Christian way which says my faithfulness to Jesus Christ and to his gospel will guide me in this moment and throughout my life. And I think we can trust the Lord of the ages to do what is right with our time and with our civilization.

God is active in history and God is active in time, not separate from it, not just observing it, but working through persons to transform. And we can trust that even when things look dire.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: Rob, those are great words of wisdom and something I think we all need to be reminded of, myself included.

Robert, we're coming to the conclusion of our discussion, and I ask every guest the same question. Is there anything that you would like us and our listeners to pray for, for you as you continue your important ministry of developing the faith of the next generation in particular, but also in terms of your own sense of vocation in life? What would you like us to pray for you?

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Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Well, thanks, Andrew. That's always very humbling and welcome to hear that kind of question.

I think for me that the prayer request is that God would continue to guide me and to lead me, to help me to see the light of Christ in each day and to see the light of Christ in the persons around me, and that God would give me a good sense of what to be working on next because there are many, many things I'm interested in and many things I could lend my time and energy and scholarship and teaching to, but I know that I can't do everything. So, to be guided and to be led towards that which would be of greatest service to the people around me and which would glorify God in this moment, that's what I'm always looking for.

Rev. Dr. Andrew Stirling: Well, Rob, be assured of our prayers and our gratitude for your service to the church by being a teacher of those that are emerging and coming along in the faith, and on behalf of the Canadian Bible Society, thank you for your own support and devotion and excellence in teaching, Rob.

It's been a real privilege to have this time with you and I thank you personally. May God bless you and we will be keeping you in our prayers.

Rev. Dr. Rob Fennell: Lovely.

Thanks so much, Andrew. A pleasure for me and blessings to all those who are listening and watching that God would be rich and full and present to you in these days.