



Season 10: Episode 13 | Das Sydney | What Is Worth Wanting for Your Own Life?

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

Today, CBS Ambassador, Reverend Dr. Andrew Stirling brings us a conversation with Das Sydney. Today's guest, Das Sydney, is a pastor, theologian, and global church leader whose life has taken him from India to Africa and then eventually to Canada. With nearly 20 years as lead pastor at Highland Baptist Church in Kitchener, Das has led churches with a heart for preaching, justice, and community care.

He's a past president of the Canadian Council of Churches. He's chaired the team behind *This We Believe* for Canadian Baptists and currently serves on boards and leadership teams supporting reconciliation, refugee care, and affordable housing. Das holds graduate degrees from the University of Toronto, McMaster, and Northern Seminary in Chicago.

He's taught at seminaries across Canada and recently is the proud recipient of the King Charles III Coronation Medal. Das is married to Angela, who is a retired nurse. They have three children and six grandchildren.

And his personal motto, *to make God's kind of world real*. Enjoy this conversation.

Andrew Stirling: Das, it's a great privilege to have you with us at the Canadian Bible Society. And I was reflecting on the first time I heard you preach during your tenure at

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Wolfville Baptist Church in Nova Scotia. And at the time, I was fascinated by your background with its origins in India and then in Africa.

How did you first come to faith? And who were the major influences in your life?

Das Sydney: Hello, Andrew. Lovely to be with you and to have this conversation with you. That's a wonderful question, a profound question that gets to the heart of matters.

My spiritual history is more typical in many ways than interesting. I was born in Kerala State in South India into a Christian home, and I'm fourth generation Christian. My earliest impactful recollection is waking up with the crack of dawn to hear my grandfather from his bedroom in our traditional family home in Trivandrum.

In his thundering voice, reading Scripture, a gospel, a psalm, and singing a hymn. And all work in the house was paused. No swish of the stick broom sweeping the floor and veranda.

No rattle of utensils in the kitchen. It was time for respectful reflection and prayer. Here was my grandfather, known as the pepper corn king of the area, with a successful export business, honoring God and pledging integrity in his business and expecting the same of his family and farmhands.

And he would start his day with his face turned toward God. That's a wonderful memory. Both my parents were devout Christians, and I grew up in a home where prayer and Bible reading were important.

My father would often turn to God with thanksgiving and his favorite verse was Psalm 103 verse 1. *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me. Bless his holy name.* And he'd utter that Psalm in good times and in bad.

And indeed, on his tombstone, those are the words that are inscribed. Another vivid recollection was attending a new church plant in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia as a child. It

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was a bright and shiny building, and the memory verse in Sunday school that day was Psalm 23. *The Lord is my shepherd.*

On the wall of our class was a lovely poster of Jesus with a sheep on his shoulders and a flock of bleating sheep around him. It was an Anglo-Saxon Jesus, but I was too young to pick up on that nuance or be offended by it.

I loved the poster and was thrilled when the teacher said I could have it and take it home with me. The image of Jesus as the good shepherd moves me to this day. Let me back up for a moment.

While I was born in India, I grew up in Africa, where my parents are both teachers in high school and post-secondary institutions. We spent six years in the volcanic, more mountainous but stunningly beautiful country of Ethiopia, where we lived on the outskirts of Addis Ababa at 11,000 feet. We could hear lions roar in the distance.

Andrew Stirling: Wow.

Das Sydney: That's amazing.

You know, their sound just carries through the thin air.

Andrew Stirling: It's deep, isn't it? It's deep.

Das Sydney: Oh, it's deep and just echoes and guttural.

For all of its rugged beauty, there was extreme poverty and unrest. I remember the time when the emperor was out of the country. There was an attempted coup d'etat led by the crown prince.

What followed was fierce fighting between opposing forces. We lived on a hillside, and we could hear the thundering noise of big guns and shells and mortars being fired and bombs falling. We shivered with the grinding, frightening din of buildings collapsing and crumbling.

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And these sounds were magnified and would echo, ricochet, as it were, between the hills and the mountains where we lived. I remember huddling under a bed in case our house was hit and the walls caved in. And I repeated the only verse I knew.

I think I must have been about seven years old. The only verse I knew at the time, *Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*. My fear did not disappear, but I knew I was not alone.

My parents were there and so was God. In our fear and pain and suffering, that is the message of Scripture that our loving God is there. We are not alone.

And I wish I could share that with every needy and shipwrecked soul.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, how inspiring that is. And, you know, it is one of the great dilemmas of our time that there is this sense sometimes that God sort of created all of this and then left the scene and left us to our own devices.

And I hear this from philosophers. I hear it from students. You know, I hear it from skeptics, but not in your case, that's for sure.

Das Sydney: No, no, he's not a deist God who created everything and left everything to sit somewhere in his heaven. No, not at all. To another chapter, if I may.

Due to the issues with the high altitude, we moved to Ghana, to Accra at sea level. And I was deeply influenced by missionaries with what was then called the Sudan Interior Mission, S.I.M. They emphasized being born again, having Jesus in your heart. And the challenging question, are you saved? And for a young kid just entering into his teens, those terms were abstract and filled me with terror.

I now know that born again from John 3 calls for a total makeover of mind and spirit, a complete reorientation from self-interest to being a follower of Christ and making him paramount. And having Jesus in your heart means you love Jesus. You seek to live in obedience to His lofty standards of love for the welfare of all people.

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And being saved is a gift of grace, an ongoing, progressive process of being conformed into the image of Christ. It is both a present reality and a future hope. For me, coming to faith has been a slow and at times a torturous process. But in my best moments, Christ is the center and focus of my life. I suppose like Cardinal Newman, I might say, lead kindly light amid the encircling gloom. But in the end, there was Christ, ever-present, loving, and gracious.

I'm so grateful.

Andrew Stirling: Amen. You have a personal motto, which I don't know.

I don't have another colleague or friend who has a personal motto. So, you are in the pantheon all alone of those who I know who have a motto. But your motto is to make God's kind of world real.

I mean, what precisely does this world look like? This world that you love so much and a Christ you love so much? And what are sort of the Biblical themes behind that kind of world that you look for and hope for?

Das Sydney: Just a moment about that personal motto. I think I was at a conference and the speaker encouraged us to create a personal motto. Otherwise, I might never have done that.

But I do like it, to make God's kind of world real. And this means that we are to participate in Christ's unfinished work in the world. One of the vivid memories that comes to my mind is when I was at Blythwood Road Church in Toronto.

And we had the *Out of the Cold* program there. And I was a volunteer that night. It was a Saturday night.

And I'm not always there on a Saturday night because Sunday is always coming. But that evening, people had had their supper. And they were preparing their beds to go to sleep.

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Most of the people were asleep and slumbering. I'd wipe down the kitchen counter, put away the food. And I looked up.

And there, it seemed as if there was a very presence of Christ walking in the midst of the beds that were there. And there he was stopping at each person, blessing each one. And I looked up and I thought, yes, Christ would be here in a very real way.

And I was so grateful for that. Well, perhaps it was a mystical experience. I don't know.

But there was a sense that I was there continuing His kind of work. You know, when we think of unfinished work, Jesus cried from the cross, it is finished. His work of revealing God was done.

But not in every place and in every way. In a sermon in Capernaum, He read from the scroll in Isaiah. And He personalized it, of course.

He took that verse from Isaiah, *the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor and proclaim liberty to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*. And then He put it aside and said, this day, the Scripture is fulfilled in your midst. And of course, the people were thrilled with that.

They said, well, this is Joseph's son. And what do you know, He may be the one who will set us free and so on. But really, it was the mission statement of Jesus, His dream for our stumbling, fumbling world.

And that dream is not fulfilled. His work is unfinished. And so, it calls on us to make it real in every way.

And the dream is also found in the Old Testament phrase, the kingdom of God. And I can go on about the kingdom of God, but maybe I'll just mention a few things about it. It was, after all, the primary theme of His preaching, showing us what it really represents.

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And it opened for us an interpretation of all that Jesus said and did. The kingdom of God, or in Matthew, the kingdom of heaven occurs 53 times in the New Testament, 23 times in Matthew. You know, in Mark, He says the kingdom of God is at hand.

Eighty percent of His parables had to do with the kingdom, the nature of the kingdom, the ethics of the kingdom. And it's a kingdom that doesn't have physical borders, a kingdom that lives in the heart. And some people say the better term is to speak of the reign of God.

It is a little more inclusive, perhaps.

Andrew Stirling: Das, you make a wonderful point.

In my conversations with young people in particular, they want to see the kingdom of God at work, the reign of God at work. Those even that are not entirely devout often want a better world. They want to see the things that Jesus outlined in quoting Isaiah, and they want to affirm that.

You have taught at Acadia, my alma mater. You have taught at McMaster Divinity College. What do you sense? And also, I might add, you have been instrumental in bringing young people into the Canadian Council of Churches, which we'll talk about in a few minutes.

But, you know, you've had a passion for young people, young people who want the kingdom. And what do you think we can do to support them as they serve the kingdom of God? What should the church and the seminaries and preachers and the Bible Society do to support young people?

Das Sydney: Sure. You started mentioning the kingdom of God and the mighty works of Jesus.

And you're right, we cannot repeat the mighty works of Jesus. But we see the direction of His care, and that is very important for here and now. Yes, in speaking to theological students, some of them have the concerns of any other student—debts

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and jobs, the dearth of hope in the face of a declining church, divisions in the church along political lines, the interpretation of the Bible and events.

They sometimes hang their hooks on various terms like liberal or conservative, traditional or progressive. And really, I don't like those terms because they try to put you in a box and limit you. And furthermore, there's a search for truth in our world where there's so much fake news.

We ask the question, well, what is truth? Pilate asks that himself of Jesus. And when it comes to Biblical interpretation, I often suggest to them the Wesleyan quadrilateral. And you may, of course, know what that is, which emphasizes four key sources for our understanding Scripture and tradition and reason and experience.

And, you know, there is a dearth of hope as well in many of the students. And I would say to them, don't lose hope. This is still God's world.

And what we are doing is worthy of the Lamb, and we know the final chapter of history. You know, a few years ago, just a couple of years ago, I was at a conference where Miroslav Wolf was speaking. He's a Croatian background theologian and professor of faith and culture at Yale in the U.S., brilliant and insightful.

And he spoke of some of the volunteer work that he does, which includes teaching people in prison. And he said when he was at Danbury Prison in New York State, he asked two questions of the inmates. What is it you want? And, you know, some of them would say, oh, to be free and to get rid of my history and all that stuff.

And then the second question is, and what is worth wanting? And that's a much more profound question and something I let the students ponder and reflect for their own lives. What is worth wanting and what is it you want for your own life?

Andrew Stirling: Wise advice from Miroslav. And it's, you know, he goes to the heart of things, doesn't he, with those two questions?

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Das Sydney: Yes. And sometimes I might add, just for good measure, a quote often attributed to Martin Luther King Jr., when he said, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. Good thought.

Andrew Stirling: Very good thought.

Look, you have been, Das, and I'm sure a lot of people know this, at the epicenter of a lot of issues facing the broader church, especially in the last few years where you were president of the Canadian Council of Churches. And I've been privileged to sit under your leadership on the governing board on behalf of the Bible Society. Can you tell listeners something more about that body? And what are, for you, some of the outstanding issues that you've had to deal with during your tenure? And what really has stood out for you in your engagement in that important work?

Das Sydney: Sure, Andrew.

It's always lovely to see you sitting around the governing board table at the sessions of our Canadian Council of Churches. You know, it's a council that represents 85% of Christians in Canada, and the widest breadth of Christian representation that is imaginable. It was born at the end of World War II, when there was so much division, politically and religiously as well.

And the council was involved in resettling refugees then as it does now. And today we look at all kinds of new issues, and we bring the best minds to bear on those issues, or ethicists and specialists in the area. And, you know, there are dimensions of the council which are both a matter of being and also of doing.

And the taglines, I think, emphasize and bring before us what unites us as a council. And the tag words are Christ, community, and compassion. You know, so often we emphasize the Great Commission or the Great Commandment, and we forget about Christ's high priestly prayer.

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In John 17, He says, may they be one that the world may know that You have sent me. And one of the remarkable things about the council is the breadth of its diversity. And that is something we nurture very much.

And in the mission statement of the council is the phrase that we seek Christ's truth with affection for diversity. Where would you find that? Where else would you find that?

The Bible Course: Taking a minute here out of the conversation with Das and Andrew to tell you about The Bible Course, because whether you're a seasoned Bible reader or you're just starting on your journey, The Bible Course offers a superb overview of the world's best-selling book. This eight-session course will help you grow in your understanding of the Bible.

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Andrew Stirling: Yes, not very common. I must say, when I attended my first gathering a few years ago, I was astonished at the diversity.

I'll be absolutely honest with you. You know, everything from Orthodox to Baptist to Mennonite to United. I mean, it seemed we were all there.

Representatives of the EFC were there. I mean, it's a tremendous gathering of people. And I often get asked that question, which you're addressing now.

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How do we deal in a world with diversity and yet find commonality and unity? What do you think are the things that need to happen when Christians get together and have diverse views? What helps people, Das, in terms of finding that commonality and that unity?

Das Sydney: Sure. Well, faith and unity are not two words that usually go together, are they? No, they're usually divisive words. Yes, yes, yes.

It seems that faith and religion seem to breed conflict. And you know, there are issues of theology and power and culture and language. And when we look at our history, and this is part of my answer, when we look at our own Christian history and we think of our serious mistakes and crimes as a church in the 16th century, when 40,000 women were tried and killed as witches, or you think of the church creating the doctrine of discovery so that we come into the new world and we say, well, there's nobody here, finders keepers, that we take the land, plunder the new world and its peoples and make the land.

And we can ask ourselves, well, how can we find unity? And that history, I think, helps us. Given the arc of Christian history, I hope we will come to any issue with a healthy dose of humility. We can ask ourselves, could we possibly be on the wrong side of the issue and be fighting against God's purposes to bring all people to His fold? And that's a major thing.

And, you know, I think when you think of diversity, I think of His disciples and how Jesus was able to bring them in. The central center of their attention was Jesus Christ himself. Another dimension, I think, that helps us in terms of unity is the reality of friendship, that we truly do care for each other's welfare personally and corporately.

And I think another important thing, I may have mentioned this in passing, is to remember that unity does not require or demand uniformity.

Andrew Stirling: Yes, exactly.

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Das Sydney: There's a beauty in diversity, like a vase of flowers, you know, spring flowers that are beautiful and varied in the size and color and smell.

And yet in their diversity, there's tremendous beauty.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, it's fascinating. There was one table group that really, I remember and resonated with me.

It had at the table someone who has just recently passed away, Professor Ladouceur, who was Orthodox, a Roman Catholic nun who I had known for many years and had taught in Nova Scotia, a Baptist pastor and a Salvation Army officer, and myself, a United Church minister. And we were debating a particular social issue. Well, I mean, I don't think unanimity was exactly on the table at that very moment, to be absolutely frank.

But unity was. And the unity came from, as you said, friendship and the hospitality that arises out of that friendship. Fellowship, which is the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.

It is a gift of the Holy Spirit and a sense of, as you said, humility and respect. And if we'd each looked at each other's traditions, we could each find an Achilles heel in any of them. And we can each find an error or a mistake or an oppressive teaching, for example.

But the coming together of people to pray and to worship together and to develop that friendship is so important. As you know, one of the things that I love to do is to work with diaspora pastors in Canada and promoting preaching to diverse bodies. I do it along with an Orthodox priest, and we share in the teaching of the Scriptures.

What do you see when I look at the diaspora clergy who come here to Canada from all over the world? What do you see as the global issues facing the church? And what should we be praying for and being sort of focused on as we go into this new part of this millennium?

Das Sydney: Oh, my. How do we possibly answer that?

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Andrew Stirling: Small question. Just a small question.

Das Sydney: Let's solve it here and now. You know, Andrew, when I reflect on the immensity of the problems and how easily we are consumed by them, I'm remembering a limerick that I learned in Ghana growing up in school was in our English textbook. And it was this.

It was a young lady of Niger who smiled as she rode on a tiger. They returned from the ride with the lady inside and a smile on the face of the tiger. We have issues here that can easily consume us.

We think of conflicts around the world, whole people in Palestine on the brink of starvation, the utter stupidity and irresponsibility, unethical immorality of attacking innocent people who are partying in Israel and so on. The list goes on. And in addition to war, you know, I mean, I think sometimes we have to personalize these things because we can think in terms of large numbers and forget there are individual people involved.

I was speaking to a colleague from the Urals of Russia, and she said, with heartrending anguish, I have cousins in Russia and Ukraine, and they are killing each other. And, you know, I'm so grateful for the work of Project Plowshares and what it does in calling out areas of conflict and seeking ways to find peace. Globally, you know, I think of climate change, and it impacts us here in Canada, as you know, very recently with the massive fires in the Midwest and Western Canada.

I think of food insecurity and the millions that are affected by that. Let me give you a couple of examples of how it came home to me very, very vividly. I remember as a child driving with my parents from Addis Ababa to Desi, a town in the middle part of Ethiopia.

And, you know, since it is so mountainous with deep valleys and high mountains, there are communities that are totally separated from each other. And when we were

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going through one small community, we noticed that in the town square, there was a man hanging from a pole. And we whizzed through the town as quickly as possible.

And then we stopped, and we asked a bystander, what was happening, what had happened? And he said, well, that man stole a chicken and ate it all himself, when it could have fed a whole family. That was his crime. And you think of the horror of that, the hunger of the man, and then the bereft nature of the family that was deprived of food.

Or I think of driving along the West Coast of Africa between Nigeria and Ghana and stopping at the Cote d'Ivoire, and in the lineup of cars waiting to cross the border, there was a man who came to the car with his gun carelessly slung over his shoulder. And he said to us in French, *l'argent pour mes enfants*, money for bread for my children.

And you could see the wildness in his eyes. He was not going to use his gun. He was not brandishing his gun as a weapon and pointing it in our direction.

But he was desperate to feed his children. And, you know, we live in a global village and we cannot turn a blind eye to what is happening in other parts of the world. Who is my neighbor? Not just the person next door, but wherever there is need.

And we need to be responsive to that as responsible Christians. You know, I spoke of the comfort of the gospel and the wonderful things that the gospel does for us in my moments of fear in terms of salvation. But there's also another dimension of our faith.

It's not just a personal religion. Wasn't it Karl Marx who said, well, you know, Christianity is the opiate of the people, that it puts us to comfortable sleep. And I remember when I was starting out in ministry, people often refer to Peter Burton and his book, *The Comfortable Pew*.

Too often, we are comfortable being at ease without paying any attention to the sterner demands of the gospel. And the danger of a Christian leader is to only be a

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chaplain, to say a few prayers and bring solace and forget about the other demanding dimensions of the gospel.

Andrew Stirling: Well, I mean, you're so right, Das.

And when you look at Christ's ministry, I mean, He made the comfortable uncomfortable and He made the uncomfortable at peace. And, you know, His whole approach was, in fact, to inspire and to bless and to love in order that people themselves may bless and they may love. And that might take a risk, as He experienced on the cross.

And so, it's the paradox of the cross, isn't it? I mean, on the one hand, the cross is the great comforter. Our sins are forgiven. Christ shows the love of God for us all in dying on that cross.

On the other hand, that is the self-giving. That is the suffering of God. That is God at His most vulnerable.

And the church, in a sense, bears that cross, doesn't it, in both sides. One of the things that I ask every guest, and you've touched maybe on some of the themes already, to be honest, but I ask, what would you like us to pray for you? And I'm talking not just personally, but yes, personally, but also in terms of the broader church and its mission and recognizing that the people who watch this podcast are people who are interested in the Bible, and so they're therefore interested in the welfare of others. Das, what do you want us to pray for, for you?

Das Sydney: When I think of my own context, I'm well into my retirement years now. I'm still on the executive of the Canadian Council of Churches, and now also on the board of an organization called Indwell, which offers supportive housing, and I think it's the most successful approach to helping those who are unhoused. It's demanding work, but very satisfying and rewarding work as well.

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I know at my stage, my strength and time are on a shorter leash, so to speak, than ever before. I also want to model what it means to be a good grandfather, and so I pray for wisdom, to know what God may still want me to do, and I pray for the church as well, that they may ask that question, what does God want us to do? What is appropriate and important for us, as people of love, how we can engage with the world on behalf of Christ?

Andrew Stirling: Yeah. Well, Das, this has been a real privilege to have this conversation, and I know from the breadth of your experience, you have seen everything and heard the sounds of war in Ethiopia, you have seen the poverty of Africa.

You have traveled through Canada's church. You have gone breadth to breadth, and you have brought with it a wealth of experience and passion. But also, clearly, for everyone who's listened to this, a love of Scripture, a love of the Word, from the Psalms right through to the teachings of Christ.

And on behalf of the Canadian Bible Society, I offer you our prayers, but also our gratitude for this time together. Das, this has been a real privilege. Thank you so much.

Das Sydney: Oh, thank you so much, Andrew. Lovely to be with you. And Andrew, this may be something you don't know about me.

I actually have a family connection with the Bible Society. My uncle in India, A.E. Inbanathan, was the general secretary of the Bible Society for India, and he was also one of the translators of the antecedent of the CEV, the Good News Bible. And he gave me a copy of that.

And as you can see, it is well used, and he was one of the translators for it. And I'm so grateful for his impact and his presence in that work. And I'm grateful for the Bible Society, that in their translation work, they use people from all over the world, gaining a very wide perspective.

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Anyway, thank you so much, Andrew, and wonderful to be with you.

Andrew Stirling: A great pleasure. Thank you, Das.