



Season 14: Episode 8 | Fr. John Boutros: From Pediatric Surgery to Priesthood

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 will be interviewing Father John Boutros. Father John Boutros is the priest and lead pastor of a young church downtown Toronto, Canada, St. Moses and St. Catherine Coptic Orthodox Church. Father John met the girl of his dreams, Mary, and was married in 2011 and is now a father to Anastasia, Zoe, and Elise.

Ordained in July 2012, he was previously a pediatric surgeon and now Father John serves a wide variety of urban dwellers, students, and young professionals. Father John is equally passionate for the marginalized, the poor, and those who have no one else. Being in a community of disciples of Jesus, steeped in ancient faith and orthodoxy, rooted in Coptic heritage, he lives in the incarnate God's love and the metropolitan setting.

Enjoy this rich conversation.

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Andrew Stirling: John, it's a great privilege for me to have you with us for Scripture Untangled, and I thank you for taking the time and the effort to do this.

I think the last time we were together was at a service of lessons and carols at Yorkminster Park Baptist Church in Advent, which couldn't have been a better time for us to be together. But lovely to have you now as our guest with us at the Canadian Bible Society.

John Boutros: The privilege and honor is all mine.

Thank you so much, Andrew.

Andrew Stirling: John, you have the most unusual background for a priest, and I'm sure many people have commented on this before. But your initial training, and you're the first I've ever interviewed, was prepared to become a pediatric surgeon, which you became.

What led you to the priesthood in the Coptic Church after having been a pediatric surgeon?

John Boutros: Thank you very much for the question, Andrew, because it really speaks to the grace of the Lord and how He qualifies the called rather than calling the qualified. I'm sure He calls the qualified sometimes as well, but this was definitely a case of the former.

In the Coptic Church, it's very normal for the church, probably in most churches, most of the church work is really done by lay ministers who have other jobs or other callings, other vocations, but they love the Lord and they love serving Him.

And He promises that if you serve Me, you will be with Me. And if He who serves me, I will honor and My Father will honor, John 12, I think. And so, it's very common in the Coptic Church that most of the ministry, the hands and the feet of really the body of Christ that do all the heavy lifting is lay people.

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And I was one of those lay people from a young age in the church, maybe 11, 12 years old and older, I was involved in some way as a volunteer here and there and so on. And so probably in my late teens, just after my first mission trip, I realized that there's no such thing for me. I'm not passing judgment on anyone else. As a Christian who is not wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord, there's no such thing as, you know, the call of Christianity, the invitation into the discipleship of the Lord is, you know, "If you want to follow Me, deny yourself, take up your cross, come and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24)

And that's not one day on, one day off, Sunday on, six days off kind of thing. That's to follow Him with, if I want to give my life to the Lord, that's, you know, my life is a series of years and each one of those years is 365 and a quarter or so days. Each one of those days is 24 hours, 60 minutes, 60 seconds, you know what I'm getting with, that every moment has to be given to the Lord, either yes or no, it's quite binary.

And there's nothing else in between. I couldn't marry my wife, Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, sweetheart, you're my favorite. The other days, right, of course, right.

I know I'm preaching to choir, right. But that was a realization for me in my teens. And then, so from then on, getting into med school was really a gift from the Lord.

And He got me into the most unlikely med school for me. I studied at the University of Montreal, a fully French school, and I didn't speak much French. So even at the interview, one of the interviewers stood up and shouted at me and said to me in her broken English, because she was asking me questions all in French, and I was doing my best to answer in French.

She said, you know, in her broken English, shouted at me, why did you apply to a French medical school if you don't even speak French? I mean, I've been trying all this time. It was very insulting. But I kept a smile on my face, and I knew I didn't have a chance of getting into this med school.

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So, this 45 minute two on one interview was simply an opportunity for me to share the Gospel. You know, they're a captive audience for 45 minutes. They can't go anywhere.

Every answer I gave was the Lord led me to this. God gave me that. The lady had had enough.

And she said, God, God, God, why all your answers are about God, they should be about you. And she just ran off on me. And Andrew, all of my friends had much better credentials, all of my friends had much better likelihood of getting in all of them spoke better French, and I got in and they got waitlisted.

And a few of them did get it. It was an act of God that I got into medical school. Sorry for the long-winded answer.

But the short of the long I'm sure you're getting the message is that I did not get myself into med school. I worked really hard. I studied very hard.

I did my very best. But I was not the top of my class. By a long shot.

My interview was horrible. I mean, I got shouted at how it doesn't get much worse than that. And I just got in like a slam dunk like a hot knife through butter, whereas other people got waitlisted and so on and so on.

So, from the very beginning, my education, my later on my training, I got into University of British Columbia extremely competitive program to get into. I did a Master of Public Health and biostatistics and epidemiology while I was there. All of these things are glory to God; I was nearly under qualified for all of these things.

Then I got into pediatric surgery at the hospital for sick children, one of the top five training programs in the world, certainly the top in Canada and one of the top in very much so. One of my friends, who is a pediatric surgeon, and I was really trying to walk in his footsteps, called me after I got in and congratulated me and told me, you know, I'm really embarrassed to tell you, I have no idea how you got that position. Right.

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This is to say, it was all from God. And so, when the Lord gave me my education, my training, my credentials, my career, my sub specialization, and then He asked for it in return. You know, it was, I had no way of saying to the Lord, no, this is mine, I can't give it up.

Andrew Stirling: Yes.

John Boutros: And my wife and I just said... So, the way it works in the Coptic church is you can either study to become a priest, or you could be a lay minister with a previous profession, and the church could nominate you for the priesthood.

That's what happened for me, which is the more common route. Most of my colleague priests now.

Andrew Stirling: That's what I understand, John. Yes. From other Coptic priests that I've spoken with. Yes.

John Boutros: You're still expected to study at some point, which is now, but study and learn on the job. And so that's where we're at.

And so, and you know, funny enough, Andrew, the hospital for sick children offered me a job as I was nearing the end of my training to stay on for a year and possibly longer. And they delayed and delayed and delayed in giving me the contract. My wife was starting to get a little stressed that this contract was not going to materialize, but it finally did after two and a half months of it being in legal and in this and in that.

And finally, they gave me the piece of paper to sign. They gave me four days to read it and sign it back. I came home the same day as I got the contract, the bishop called and said, you know, this new church that you planted with Father Pashoy Salama from St. Maurice and St. Farina's church, how would you feel being the new priest for that church?

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The church has nominated you, and they asked me for my permission, and I have, you know, given my undivided blessing. Father Pashoy thinks you'd be the best candidate for it. What do you think? Same day.

And then he finishes the call by, he told me no pressure. I know it's a very big decision, but I need to give an answer to the archbishop by Monday in four days, the same exact thing. That's what Sick Kids had told me.

So, I had four days to either sign this back or sign this back. So, I know, needless to say, my wife and I prayed for a long time those four days, and we decided that if we are, you know, speaking all over the world as lay people telling people, you must devote your whole life to God. And then we get asked and we turn it down.

What does that say?

Andrew Stirling: What's remarkable about this story is that it shows very much the nature and the power of the call of God. And that's the inspiring thing about it, that at every step of the way, the Lord's hand was in it, whether it was to guide you to medical school and through the difficulties and the challenges to the point that you're in now. Now you are though a priest within the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Our guests often don't know much about the Coptic Orthodox Church. And look, I know there's a great history and I don't want to go back into all the vagaries of the creation of the Coptic Church and so on, and what happened in the third century and the seventh century and so on. But just, can you just give us a brief summary? I know that's difficult, John, but just a brief introduction, a 101 quickly to our listeners about the Coptic Orthodox Church.

John Boutros: Absolutely. In just two sentences, the Coptic Orthodox Church is the church established in Alexandria, Egypt by Mark, the Gospel writer, the second Gospel, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, most of the listeners will be familiar with the four Gospels. And in 40 A.D., he came to Egypt and he preached the Gospel there.

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And the Gospel was well accepted first by one small family, and then it grew and grew and grew. And in the 60s AD, I always forget if it was 62 or 68, but I believe it's 68 because I believe it was after the martyrdom, St. Peter and St. Paul. He was martyred. And that just caused the faith in Alexandria to explode in growth.

Tertullian says or is attributed to have said that "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." And someone else much wiser than me has said that martyrdom was like trying to get rid of dandelions by stomping them out and spreading their pollen all over the world, or something along those lines. And that's exactly what happened.

And then since then, the Coptic church has been persecuted in Egypt, or the word Coptic simply is an ancient Greek term for Egyptian. In ancient Greek, the word for Egypt is Kiptos, Kiptos Coptic. So, it just means that it's the church, which was established in Egypt.

As I'm sure you're aware, but maybe for some of the listeners in early Christendom, sort of the first four centuries, there were five major centres of Christianity, Alexandria, Egypt, where the Coptic church originated and continues to thrive, Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople, and Antioch of Syria.

So, it was one of those major centers from the very, very beginning. And martyrdom for the first few centuries caused the church to grow and grow. And then as the empire became Christian, a holy youth, 18 years old, was standing in the church and heard the call of discipleship, if you want to be My disciple, sell all that you have, come and follow Me.

And he realized that if martyrdom has stopped, the only place he could find his salvation would be in solitude with the Lord. And he went learning from various different holy people how to live that life and became the first monk and the father of modern-day monasticism, Antony the Great. So, all of monasticism, you know, monks and nuns all over the world would attribute St. Antony the Great as to be the first

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monk, although he wasn't the first person to leave society to live in solitude with God, but definitely he's the first person to organize that kind of life.

And then the first person to organize people into monasteries and so on was Pachomius. He was actually an army general and a pagan. And the hospitality of Christians in Egypt, that he was going to martyr, they were going him and his detachment of troops were going to chop their heads off.

And they insisted on washing their feet and on serving them a feast before they chopped their heads off. And their argument was, the villagers were, well, look, seeing as we're not going to, you know, eat these sheep or, you know, we might as well serve them to you. And Pachomius was just astounded by that display of love and hospitality in the face of their really, truly loving their enemies that he converted to Christianity and then went and joined St. Anthony, I believe, or one of his disciples.

And because he was an army general, this idea of a bunch of hermits just living in the desert was too disorganized for him. So, he needed to organize and then, that's how people started to live in community in the desert. So, all monastic communities attribute that communal living to Pachomius.

And then of course, Athanasius, you know, in the Council of Nicaea, you know, defended the whole world from the Aryan heresy, you know, and Contra Mundum, you know, the whole world is against you, Athanasius. And so I will be against the world, is attributed to St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria. So, all of these pillars, all these people came from, from the, the Church of Alexandria, the Coptic Church, and were humbled to be their children in the 21st century and to try to live the lives of these giants in the 21st century.

Andrew Stirling: So, this is so helpful, you know, because I mean, there is such history, such depth, such sacrifices that have been made in the past. I want to though, look at the present at the moment. And what you've said is very helpful, John.

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You know, I understand and appreciate the importance of the place of Scripture in the ritual of, of the Coptic Church, the priest kissing the Gospel and the use of Scripture in rituals and in liturgy and so on. But I also see the power of it in something that you do, and that is in your sermons. And I've been impressed by the way that you weave Scripture into your preaching.

You deal with issues that every Christian wrestles with. And there are some that in the sermons I've heard of yours that really stood out. And I'd like you just for a moment, not to repeat the entire sermon, but to reflect upon just some of these, because I think they're going to resonate with our listeners and they come deep from your heart and deep from Scripture.

So, I'd like to just deal with these one-on-one. There's three of them. And the first is one that I know a lot of Christians struggle with, and that's the issue of unanswered prayer.

Why does God not answer my prayers? Or why are my prayers not heard? And you deal with it with the story of Lazarus, which I confess I'd never put together before. Just tell us something briefly about that, of unanswered prayer. What should our people do when they feel that way, and how does the Scripture help them?

John Boutros: You're so sweet, Andrew.

I am really your student in the Scriptures, and I'm embarrassed to speak in your presence. But just to honor your request, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, is sick, and they send word to Jesus. And so, what does Jesus do when He finds out that one of His closest friends, confidant, supporters, the place where He found refuge is sick? He stays where He is.

He delays. He doesn't..., you know, and then for a few days, and then He travels. And then by the time he gets there, Lazarus is dead and has been dead for four days.

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And I think all of us, I was just telling my wife this morning about some of my plans in the church and so on, and telling her, I have a deep sense in my heart, this is what the Lord wants, but I don't know what the timeline is.

It seems that my timelines are always faster than God's. And I remember reading the story in my personal devotions, and asking the Lord, like, gosh, Lord, why are You so slow? And, you know, I can't say the Lord answered me. I didn't hear a voice or see it, you know, written in the clouds or something. But in my heart, I almost felt like the Lord was returning the question to me and asking me, am I the one who is slow? Or is your expectation too fast? And I said, woe is me, Lord, like to say You're the one who's wrong.

Like He's asking me, who's got, who's wrong? Or am I wrong for being slow? Or are you, you know, wrong is too strong of a word, but inaccurate, maybe, in having an expectation.

I realized it's my expectation that is misled. And oftentimes, I want the Lord to act, because I think that the action of the Lord will be great, will be glorious. So why wouldn't He do it? You know, if the Lord healed Lazarus, the guy would get to live for longer, and we enjoy his company, and we would hate for him to be gone.

But obviously, the Lord had much greater glory plan to raise him from the dead is far more glorious than to heal him from being sick, and to raise him from the dead, a mere week before Jesus will be in the tomb and rise from the dead. And thus, Lazarus becomes prophetic of the resurrection of Christ. And like, you see, like the glory the Lord has envisaged, is so far glorious, what He's cooking up is far greater than what I could possibly imagine.

And so naturally, it takes a little longer for it to come to fruition.

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God's Book: The Series: Before we return to today's conversation, here's a first look at an exciting new small group video series from the Canadian Bible Society, *God's Book: The Series*. What does the Bible really say about science, miracles, violence, and suffering? *God's Book: The Series* is tackling the Bible's toughest questions in a new eight-part video series created for young adults and others who are asking honest questions about the Bible.

Featuring Bible scholar Dr. Andrew Ollerton and three Canadian young adult hosts, *God's Book* explores some of the most challenging questions surrounding the Bible through thoughtful and accessible conversations. The series is launching soon, and you can be among the first to know when it arrives. Preview the trailer and download an episode at godsbooktheseries.com. That's gods book the series . com. And now we can return to today's conversation.

Andrew Stirling: Oh, that's beautiful. Yes, you pray with patience, don't you? And the patience of the Lord. I want it now, Lord, but, you know, in Your time.

And that's a great lesson from Lazarus. And as you said, the waiting for him to die was a portent of things to come at the resurrection and the empty tomb.

Another issue that you dealt with, and look, let's just say this, we live, and our audience, often has come to this country from many different countries. They are citizens of many different lands. I mean, I myself did. There are people who have come from all over the world.

And there's this big question right now, I think, about national identity and what constitutes true national identity. But you deal with things in a somewhat different way. Not that you don't, you know, deal with that issue, but you deal with something else.

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And you have preached on the fact that as believers in Christ, our citizenship is in heaven. Our citizenship is in heaven. What does that mean? And where does that come from? And how does it inspire us, John?

John Boutros: I remember sitting with my mom as a youth and being very frustrated as an Egyptian-Canadian or Canadian-Egyptian.

Being very frustrated that I'm not fully Canadian, nor am I fully Egyptian. And I was telling my mom, I think it would just be so much easier if I was one or the other. But being caught in between is just so difficult.

And I would rather if I was just one or the other. And my mom sort of asked me, what do you mean? And we started talking about culture and what culture is and what it means. And my mom, I asked her, so what culture are you? And she said, well, my parents immigrated to Canada in the late 60s, long before I was born.

And my mom said, well, how do you measure that? I'm like, well, by what food you eat? She said, well, it depends. Are we fasting? The Coptic church has fasting seasons a lot and stuff. Well, it depends if we're fasting or we're not.

What kind of music do you listen to? She said, well, usually, you know, we listen to music that's relatively seasonal to whatever is happening in the church at the time, you know, and well, this and that and so on. And every answer seemed to come back to... And so, the conclusion that my mom and I came to kind of working through these questions together was that we're not really Canadian exclusively or Egyptian exclusively.

We're kind of more so just Christian with the Coptic specific flavor, you know? And so, you know, if I had multiple passports, I guess one of them would be, you know, that I'm a citizen of the Kingdom. Frequently, it's come up in many sermons where I tell people that, you know, that your job, that thing, you know, your nine to five, whatever it is that you do, that's your cover story, you know, but you're really CIA, you know,

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and you got to hold up your cover story real well, because if you don't, they'll get onto you.

And yes, if you work at wherever you may work, IBM, you get a paycheck from IBM, but that's not the paycheck you're waiting for. You're waiting for your paycheck that you get from the CIA. That's who you're going to get rewarded from.

That's where you're going to get the promotion. That's your real career path. And when they offer you career counseling at IBM, that's cute, you know, but you have to be good at your job at IBM.

Otherwise, they'll get onto you, you get fired, and you won't be able to do what, what the CIA puts you there to do. Now, it's not the CIA, but it's the Kingdom of Heaven. And the King of Heaven, King Jesus has commissioned me and put me where I am at this time in this place for His divine purposes, which are oftentimes not obvious to the operative.

The operative is given a mission, go do this. They don't know how that fits into the bigger plan. But they believe in the authority of the person who commissioned them.

And so yes, our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly wait, await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. I don't await anything from my employer, IBM, or, or whoever it may be.

I await from the Lord.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, that's beautifully put. I, whenever I baptized children and or adults, I always told them this, I said, you now have a baptismal certificate.

And this certificate celebrates the fact that you are now part of the Church of Jesus Christ universally, you belong to Christ, this is your ultimate passport. This is the most important sign of your citizenship. This is the one you hold on to.

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And when I heard your sermon on that, that came to my mind. And I just think there are a lot of people who, you know, really do struggle with that. What is their identity? Well, their identity is in Christ, for our citizenship is in heaven.

But an integral part of that, John, is to live the life of Christ. It is to do His bidding. It is to carry out His mission.

And your current parish in Toronto has a significant ministry to the community. Just briefly, because our time is coming to a close, can you tell us something about how you minister to the poor and the needy? And can you tell us something, you know, about the nature of that ministry, as you live out kingdom citizenship in Toronto right now?

John Boutros: Amen, amen, Andrew. That's really the focus of the Christian life, the life of sanctification, maybe is a term that's used, is really to live the life of Christ.

And you know, St. Paul says in Romans 8, maybe 17, that if we indeed we suffer with Him, we will be glorified with Him. So really, these things go hand in hand. And we, our goal, our aim is to live the fullness of the life of Christ.

Hence the Coptic Church's obsession with a calendar. And I know some churches have like a lectionary, and some don't, but we do. And the goal of it is for us to live the fullness of the life of Christ on a daily basis in our daily prayers and a weekly basis through the lectionary on an annual basis through the Sunday lectionary.

But you're absolutely right. It's all talk until the rubber hits the road. And so, at the church, we started off by doing a lot of homeless work on the street.

And it became clear to us that what people need is, in the words of Mother Teresa, people are not starving for a piece of bread as much as they're starving for love, as much as they're starving for their human dignity to be restored. She speaks beautifully about how I was naked and you clothed me. I mean, you don't see many naked people in Toronto.

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You do sometimes. You see people who are not maybe profoundly mentally unwell or substance abusing. May God help us all.

But usually, people are clothed. But really, what does it mean to be naked? It's a loss of that human dignity. And I guess what we learned from another parish, St. John the Compassionate Mission, when we used to serve with them for many years, about a decade, that maybe a practice which is well known to everybody, but somehow has been lost in our 21st century, even in, I guess what you would call like functional families, is family dinner.

You know, everybody's so busy now that for people to sit around a table and share a meal and put their devices away and look at each other in the eye and address each other by name, you know, you can't sit at the table with even with strangers and share a meal and say, hey, you over there pass me the salt. You know, you have to learn their name. And that being called by name is a restoration of identity, is a restoration of human dignity, you know.

And so that's something we learned from St. John the Compassionate. And then through a variety of different circumstances at St. John the Compassionate, it became better for us to, they asked us if we could kind of step away. And that was right before COVID.

And then when COVID hit, Toronto Public Health visited the church and they were so impressed by the strictness with which I was following the regulations for better or for worse. I know a lot of people have a lot of opinions about COVID, but you know, we decided to follow the regulations to the T, that they actually asked us during COVID to start serving the poor of Toronto, because they trusted how much we were following the rules. So initially, we had the tables three meters apart, and they were one person per table.

And of course, as the restrictions lifted, these community meals that we call them really exploded in growth. And then now it's Tuesdays and Thursdays for lunch and

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Saturdays, we serve two dinners, as well as various other opportunities, five, six times a year, God gives us the opportunity to get people groceries and just help live life with people. But the goal is really to restore back that human dignity.

Every person as an image and likeness of Christ, you know, where each person is made in His image and likeness, thus, each person is an icon of Christ and deserves to be treated with the dignity of Christ Himself.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, well, how beautifully put. There was a friend of mine years ago said that he never walks by a homeless person without recognizing them and verbally saying hello to them, even if he knew his pockets were empty, and he had nothing else to offer. He had himself.

And I think that in a sense, that sort of bearing, is it not the gift of Christ, and speaking to people that are there and noticing that they're there and your church has a great reputation in the city, I have to tell you, John, for the work that you do.

Look, you have a busy life. You're a father, you're a husband, you're a priest.

And I asked this of every guest, as I conclude the conversation, and that is, what can we pray for you, our listeners are people who, for the most part, are deeply prayerful people and are concerned and want to support and encourage the guests that we have in whatever they're doing. Just in summary, what would you like us to pray for you, John?

John Boutros: I'd be so honored for you, Andrew, and for all the guests to remember me in your prayers of my own personal holiness. For me, my ministry, I believe, really has to come from an authentic, real encounter with Christ, not once or twice, or me telling you stories about when I was 17 years old.

You know, I'm, where has God been for the last 30 years? Has he been on holiday? If my last sighting of Him was 30 years ago? No, no, no, there needs to be a daily

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encounter with Christ and a renewing of His holiness. You know that Isaiah experience of my lips being touched. I'm a man of unclean lips.

You know, I confess before you and all the listeners, you know that I am in need of that sanctification and that healing of Christ daily and through your prayers. So that's what I would pray for.

First, for my marriage. My wife's name is Mary. She's a wonderful woman. And I would not be here, and I would never been able to accept the call without her.

My children, three daughters, lovely. They're the joy of my life. And then of course, for my ministry, as we're in a, by God's grace, we're in a place of growth and development.

Many different ways that are open for us, both locally and regionally and internationally. And we really, really want to do the will of the Lord. The harvest is great and the labors are few indeed.

And so, I ask for your prayers for wisdom and guidance of how to steer the ship forward. And also, for the hands and feet, literally the humans to come and join forces with us and continue to build the Kingdom of God as beautifully as God has in the past, I'm sure coming glory is even greater.

Andrew Stirling: Well, John, be assured of our prayers for all those things, for holiness, for your family, for your wife, Mary, for your church, for its ministry.

And I know that on behalf of all of those who will be listening to this podcast, a word of gratitude to you personally. Thank you for being part of our Scripture Untangled podcast. And I'm sure that we'll be seeing one another at different events very shortly.

And so, my thoughts, my prayers, and my friendship are with you, John, God bless you. And thank you.

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John Boutros: Thank you for having me.