

Hidden Hardship

Devotional Study Guide



10 days of Bible study, reflection, and prayer on hardship in local communities in the UK informed by people's real-life experiences

By Dr Stephanie Denning and Jennifer Johnson

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Foreword

The research by Dr Stephanie Denning entitled “Hidden Hardship” makes visible what is often not seen even though it is ever present. It reveals that hardship exists even in areas which are assumed to be affluent, and is exacerbated by things such as isolation, a lack of support, infrastructure, employment and transport.

Amid the many issues which are seemingly beyond people’s individual control, the research highlights the transforming significance of informal support networks and the importance of relationship. I am therefore delighted that this devotional study guide based on the research findings, enables followers of Christ to reflect more deeply on what it means to be the Church, as individuals and members together of the body of Christ, seeking to be good neighbours with and among the people and places of our local contexts.

This devotional study guide uses Scripture and reflection alongside the experience of individuals enduring hardship, to help us all to recognise that hardship is not just an economic issue but also a theological matter and a relational opportunity. This material enables us to notice, reflect on and challenge hidden hardship, whatever our own story, as we join in with God’s Kingdom work of justice, hope and transformation. I strongly commend it to you whether for personal use, or within a group or church context.

Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester

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Introduction

Welcome to the Hidden Hardship Devotional Study Guide. This guide is written for Christians across the UK whether they are living in rural or urban areas: the UK is one of the most unequal societies in the world and there is hidden hardship amongst affluence in every community across the country. Hardship is not simply a problem of 'elsewhere'.

The language of hardship rather than 'poverty' is purposeful: hardship language can be less stigmatising and othering than poverty language.

This resource arises from research completed in 2023 to investigate hardship in the rural North Cotswolds. Under each day of the guide, the section "In local residents' own words" features quotes and illustrations¹ from the research participants' experiences of hardship and/or responding to hardship. See page 47 for more information on how the research was conducted. People's real names are included with permission, or pseudonyms used.

The guide has 10 themed days for you to engage with and is written for individuals rather than groups to do together. Days 9 and 10 conclude with themes on taking action. We have aimed to be both affirming of current responses to hardship, and to challenge individuals, congregations, and groups on how we can work for a future without hardship.

1. The illustrations are representative of the North Cotswolds and therefore are ethnically and racially not diverse. We recognise other communities across the UK experiencing hardship are more diverse.

DAY 1 | WHAT IS HARDSHIP?

Our reflections begin by exploring what people mean by the word ‘hardship’ and how it impacts their daily lives.

What are people experiencing?

Hardship was overwhelmingly defined by the Hidden Hardship research participants as **struggle** and **tough times**. This was experienced in several different ways. Hardship sometimes referred to a struggle following a difficult or unexpected change in circumstances, but often reflected ongoing tough times. For people who lacked financial, emotional or logistical support, weathering challenging times was especially tricky.

A local resident in the research highlighted that hardship is not purely about financial resources, but also relates to practical struggles and isolation. For some people in rural communities, poor access to amenities and services (including a lack of public transport) led to a sense of feeling trapped. This is an example of how rural hardship may subtly differ from challenges in urban environments. The high cost of rural living also contributed to hardship; participants shared how high costs meant they could not always afford all the basic essentials, and some found they had to choose between food or heating.

Finally, a former farmworker reflected on the hardship of working in agriculture, with its long hours and demanding nature. People’s individual stories of hardship were diverse and varied, but the theme of struggle, which took a toll on people’s physical and mental wellbeing, emerged clearly throughout them.

In local residents' own words

"Gosh, just a struggle with life. Hardship is life is tough... Hardship is you've got very few resources, very little infrastructure around you, and practically no safety net that you get in an urban inner-city environment."

(Emma, Foodbank volunteer)



Examine

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶ And Mary said,
 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely,
 from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Reflect

These words are the song (often referred to as 'The Magnificat') sung by Mary, the mother of Jesus, soon after she found out she was pregnant. She speaks powerfully of God's heart for those experiencing hardship, and of his specific care for and closeness to people experiencing struggle. Her words might also feel challenging to people who are more comfortably-off, but they invite us all to sit with the idea of God's holy discontent with the hardship that people are experiencing, often out of sight.

Struggle and tough times are, in many ways, common aspects of the human experience, which all of us walk through in certain seasons of life. Jesus' incarnation as a human being reminds us that he knows our humanity, and is with us as we both experience and respond to hardship. Today, we particularly reflect on the specific nature of the hardship experienced

by participants in the Hidden Hardship research, which was often ongoing and inescapable for those without the cushion of privilege. Amongst the experiences shared by the research participants were certain commonalities - rather like the melody line of a choral piece - but with many diverse aspects (or harmonies) weaving together underneath that, which may be less immediately obvious. Paying attention to people's specific circumstances and stories, rather than being tempted to assume everyone is in exactly the same boat, can help to inform and direct our responses.

- ▶ *In what places have you or people you know encountered people experiencing hardship, or experienced hardship yourself?*
- ▶ *How aware are you of who is experiencing struggle, or tough times, in your community?*



DAY 2 | INEQUALITY AND AWARENESS OF HARDSHIP

Today we reflect on how people's experience of hardship in broadly affluent communities may be 'hidden', and begin to think about the challenges of inequality.

What are people experiencing?

As the research focused on people who were experiencing or responding to hardship, the vast majority of participants were aware of the sorts of struggles people were facing. However, they shared that for many residents and tourists in the North Cotswolds, this reality remained hidden.

To some degree, this arose from a lack of proximity; people with different life circumstances often just did not cross paths. A local vicar reflected on how their role allowed them to ask questions about how people were managing that may not otherwise have been socially appropriate. But for many people experiencing hardship, existing amongst such marked inequality made it hard to seek help in times of struggle. One local resident talked about worrying that she would be 'judged' – even in places where help was available. This is not to put blame on the groups who were offering help – but is instead a prompt to us to reflect on the stigma attached to experiencing poverty that exists in our society.

People's awareness of hardship was therefore dependent on being in the right sort of place at the right time; they predominantly encountered people facing hardship through work or volunteering activities. For others, the reality of hardship was obscured by the visual appearance of idyllic Cotswold villages, with their wealthy residents and visitors, and tourist facilities.

In local residents' own words

"I dislike the inequality, the experience of some people living in this area is a mystery to others. So, the very rich don't see the very poor and the poor don't see what life is like for the very rich."

(Revd Lucy, local vicar)



Examine

Luke 8:43-48

⁴³ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. ⁴⁴ She came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her haemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵ Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' ⁴⁷ When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸ He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'

Reflect

One of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry on earth was his commitment to giving time and loving attention to people who had often been overlooked by society. Here, we see him pause to heal a woman with chronic bleeding who had suffered for over a decade. The way Jesus pays her attention is striking; rather than let her remain hidden in the crowd, he stops, lingers, and looks her and her suffering in the eye.

As demonstrated by the Hidden Hardship research, it can be easy to miss or to overlook the hardship being faced by people around us. Sometimes, that is just because we are not seeing it – perhaps because our paths do not cross, or because we are busy going about our lives. As well as that, though, it can be hard to sit with someone amidst their ongoing struggle – especially if there does not seem to be an easy 'solution'. In this passage, as with many, the woman is transformed by her encounter with Jesus. Elsewhere, though, the Gospels convey a sense of Jesus himself also being transformed by those encounters – for example, when he cries at the death of his friend (John 11: 28-36), or when he seems to change his course of action after a particular conversation (Mark 7:24-29); even he is moved by people's situations.

- ▶ *Can you recall a time where you have been changed by an encounter with someone experiencing hardship?*
- ▶ *How do you think the woman felt, having lived with the shame and stigma of her condition for over a decade, when Jesus first noticed her? How about after his response to her?*



PRAY

Today I pray for the people who are overlooked; for the older man who feels alone, and child experiencing family hardship who feels different from her friends. Loving God, give me eyes to see them. Amen.

DAY 3 | PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF HARDSHIP

Today's reflection invites us to consider the challenges of coping with life amidst hardship and its impact on wellbeing.

What are people experiencing?

Although each person's experience of hardship was unique, there are some common threads that ran through many of the stories shared during the research.

As we touched on last session, people often experienced a sense of embarrassment, damaged pride and fear of stigma when accessing support. Dealing with these feelings comes on top of the practical challenges of surviving on a low budget. One participant's experience typified that of others; she described how difficult it was trying to navigate high living costs, limited shop choices (in areas with more expensive tourist-focused tearooms than everyday shops for local residents), insufficient income, limited employment opportunities locally (as well as limitations due to the high cost of owning and running a car to access work elsewhere) and managing health struggles.

At the same time, participants displayed remarkable resilience in enduring these challenges, to try and build more comfortable futures for themselves and their families. Many took stoical attitudes to making difficult choices; one participant shared, "We don't have disposable income, but it's how it is." Research participants put huge thought into their daily expenditure. However, this ongoing struggle impacted people's wellbeing, with a significant number of research participants sharing that their hardship was both caused and affected by their poor physical and/or mental health.

In local residents' own words

"I often found it cheaper to just buy powdered milk and cereal for myself which made me feel quite low..."

Have struggled to sleep some nights because I've been hungry. Soup and shakes aren't always very filling."

(Kate, local resident)



Examine

Luke 21:1-4

¹He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; ²he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; ⁴for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

Hosea 6:6

⁶For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.

Reflect

We all make choices about how we spend whatever income that we have. However, some people have more choice than others: a larger income gives more choice than a smaller income, for example over what to buy in the supermarket, whether to have a holiday, and how to spend leisure time.

It is a myth that people experiencing hardship or poverty are simply in that situation because of poor choices. In reality we all make poor choices from time to time, but those with larger incomes absorb their poor choices within their bank balances so that it is not noticeable. As we've raised already and will discuss further in Day 8, society is not structured fairly for everyone – for example, it's more expensive to pay for energy on a pre-payment meter than by direct debit, but many people on low incomes do not have a choice over this. A small income imposes supposed choice – in today's quote and illustration from the Cotswolds Kate 'chose' powered milk over fresh milk.

It is easy in Luke 21:1-4 to admire the widow for giving all that she has to offer, and therefore to praise the person who sacrifices the most whether they literally give the largest amount or not. However, it is a problem if we equate 'the treasury' in this passage to mean 'the Church' because Hosea 6:6 also tells us that God asks for our love over sacrifice. Arguably, Jesus does not ask us – particularly if we are

experiencing hardship ourselves – to literally donate everything to the Church or other causes without keeping enough to live on. Love is more important, and throughout the New Testament Jesus ensures that all are fed in both body and spirit.

- ▶ *Can you think of time when you have critically judged someone else's purchasing choices?*
- ▶ *Can you think of a time when you have been critically judged for your own purchasing choices? How did it feel?*



DAY 4 | CAUSES OF RURAL HARDSHIP

This session highlights some of the significant causes of rural hardship – captured here as ‘lacks of’.

What are people experiencing?

In participants’ accounts of hardship, it could be difficult to differentiate between their **experiences** of hardship, and the **causes** of hardship, because the two were so intertwined. For example – the lack of public transport caused hardship by restricting people’s employment opportunities, but it also shaped people’s daily experience of hardship. Universal Credit claimants had to travel a 40-mile round trip for compulsory appointments, at considerable cost (both financially and in time). Being unable to access larger, cheaper shops made budgeting on an already-stretched income even harder.

Participants shared that their incomes (whether through benefits, and/or employment) were often simply inadequate to cover the cost of essential items. Lack of availability of affordable housing was also a challenge. There was a sense of tension between people liking where they lived and wanting to stay there, and navigating the challenges of the high local living costs. Many of the causes of rural hardship (summarised below), which we could view cumulatively as ‘lacks of’, fed into each other in complex ways.

Lack of support from government and benefits

Mental and physical health challenges

Lack of employment opportunities

Lack of/high cost public transport. High cost of car ownership

High cost of rural living

Lack of rural investment

Family breakdown, death of partner, domestic abuse

Expensive and lack of availability of housing

In local residents' own words

"I do get help [from the government] but that's what I'm saying it's not really enough to... it's enough to scrape by on and it isn't always enough to scrape by on. Yes, so it's a worry that you've... when you're not well enough to work. It's just another worry to make everything worse."

(Clara, local resident)



Examine

Matthew 13:3-8

³And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.'

Jesus in John 10:10

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

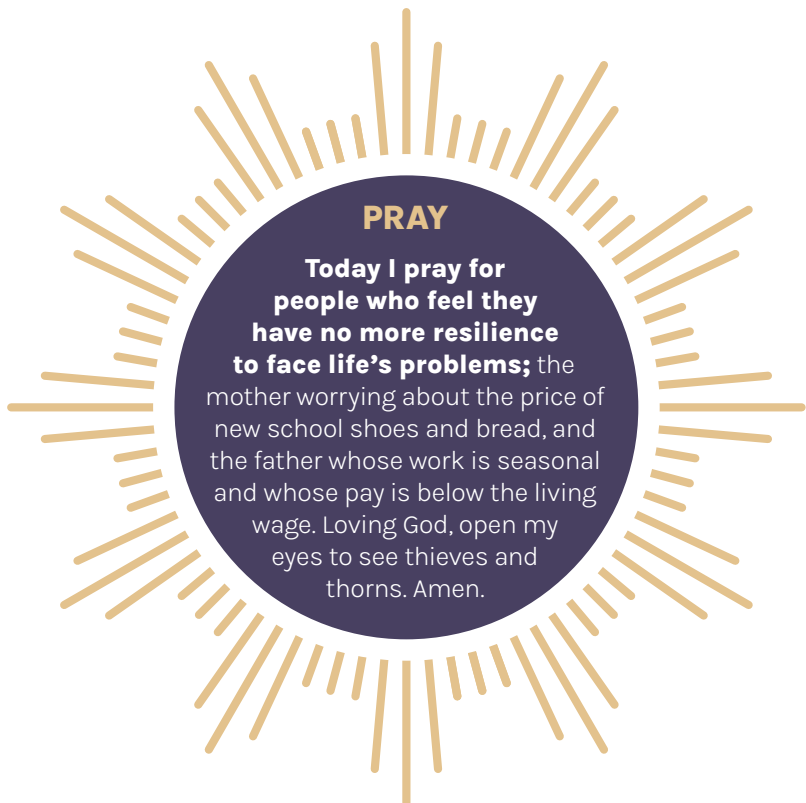
Reflect

When Jesus' disciples asked him to explain this parable, he spoke about it referring to what happens when different groups of people hear about the Kingdom of God. Here, though, we use its imagery to reflect on how the different conditions of people's lives affect their ability to flourish – or to experience the 'abundant life' that Jesus talks about.

The Hidden Hardship research highlighted how, although it was not always easy to separate out the causes of hardship from the experience of it, the conditions that people found themselves in had significant impacts on their daily lived experience. Perhaps the rocky soil might make us think of people surviving on inadequate income (either through work or benefits) – whose supportive root survival systems are shallow and weak, meaning that if unexpected difficult circumstances arrive, they experience further struggle. What if we imagine that the plants growing up amongst thorns that choke them bear similarities to people navigating the chronic challenge of high costs of rural living, poor access to resources like public transport, and lack of employment opportunities? This parable highlights that the conditions of the 'soil' people are 'growing in' affects their ability

to flourish. It invites us to consider what different soil conditions might exist and impact people where we are, and what wider structural factors shape the quality of that soil.

- ▶ *What are the ‘thieves’ that prevent people from experiencing abundant life in your community?*
- ▶ *It’s been said that ‘When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.’ How does this idea, when reflected on alongside the ‘lacks of’ explored in the research, affect how you think about responding to hardship?*



DAY 5 | COPING STRATEGIES: HELP IN TOUGH TIMES

Today's reflection is on how people coped in ongoing daily hardship in the North Cotswolds.

What are people experiencing?

The Hidden Hardship research with people experiencing hardship showed that people approached daily life with **resilience and perseverance** to get through ongoing tough times, particularly when hardship showed little sign of abating. Several people found daily strength to cope with hardship for the sake of their children.

People often took one day at a time in order to manage, and kept a constant eye on their bank balance. Supermarket trips involved careful lists and budgets, with shopping 'choices' focussed on the best value items. Participants made use of second-hand items from charity shops, food surpluses from supermarkets, free items shared on Facebook groups, reward cards shopping/in cafes, and selling second-hand items.

Community spirit was important to people's coping strategies and wellbeing, with this not necessarily being through organised groups but often found informally amongst neighbours and friends. Pets also provided important emotional support for people's mental health during difficult times, as did low cost or free hobbies including walking in the countryside and craft activities.

More formal initiatives for support found across participants' experiences included reduced utility tariffs for people on low incomes. However, people needed to know about these to request them from their utility provider and to have the confidence to do this.

In local residents' own words

"We were in the [Warm Place] and he turned around and said to me, "This is a luxury banana". With me coming from a good background, I found that very... I thought I was bad off. When he said that, it really hit."

(James, local resident)



Examine

Luke 24:13-16, 28-31, the Road to Emmaus

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

Reflect

The Road to Emmaus is generally discussed in terms of Jesus' resurrection but today we are looking at this passage through the theme of hospitality. The two men do not recognise Jesus and instead see him as a stranger, but they still invite him to join them for a meal and to rest.

Hospitality is key for how people cope in tough times during hardship. This could be hospitality at a formally organised group, but just as important is neighbour to neighbour care, and the support of friends and families. Hospitality is not just about what you do, but how you do it.

The local warm place that James spent time in today's quote and illustration was an excellent example of hospitality: guests were warmly welcomed (literally and through the atmosphere) to beautifully laid tables for a cooked lunch with seconds available, anyone was welcome, and the informal conversations ranged from local happenings to emotional and practical hardship support.

Hospitality can result in there being a 'giver' and 'receiver' or an 'us' and 'them'; who is experiencing hardship and who is not. However,

hospitality can be carried out in a way that breaks down these categories. For example, if support is offered alongside people and unconditionally then this helps to address stigma and builds more positive and trusting relationships.

- ▶ *Can you recall a time where you experienced particularly warm hospitality? How did it make you feel?*
- ▶ *How does, or would, it shape your encounters with people in your community if you imagine that by welcoming them, you were welcoming Jesus?*

PRAY

Today I pray for people who do not have enough support; the young man struggling with poor mental health who cannot access therapy, and the mother faced with the choice between mending the car and replacing the fridge. Loving God, walk beside them.
Amen.

DAY 6 | COPING STRATEGIES: FAMILY AND FRIENDS

This reflection shows the vital role of family and friends for coping with hardship, and the contradiction of the opportunity for support from strong rural communities alongside inequality, stigma, and embarrassment.

What are people experiencing?

The support of family and friends was perhaps the most important coping strategy for hardship. However, this is with the caveat that some participants did not want to “burden” their family, and the hidden nature of hardship meant that friends were not necessarily aware, and the wider community even less aware. People did not always want to ask friends for help from embarrassment or fear of stigma: local affluence could be a source of support but also exacerbated inequality.

Friends and family provided significant emotional and practical support, for example with gifts including food, lending money, a listening ear, and a lift to places and amenities including to the GP or the foodbank.

This included support from church leaders and church communities, as well as people’s personal Christian faith to cope with their situations. Local churches are often physically and metaphorically central in rural Cotswold communities. As well as a place of worship, they are often community meeting places, organisers, and offer signposting to other community gatherings, people and connections. For example, one interviewee at a foodbank shared that his faith gave him strength to manage being homeless, and another participant said “that’s how I’ve become part of the community really, through church.”

In local residents' own words

"I have friends who are in a similar boat and we just help each other... In my house, I was given off one of my mates... we call it our help yourself freezer. So, one drawer has all my gluten free stuff, one drawer my friend has, and then the rest of the drawers are help yourself. So, any of my neighbours or my friends who need stuff... One of my friends works at Aldi, so when she does a late shift, any of the meat that is going out she grabs at 75% off and then she just fills the freezer."

(Claire, local resident)



Examine

Ruth 1:15-18

¹⁵ So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ ¹⁶ But Ruth said,

‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!’

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Mark 16:1-3

¹ When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’

Reflect

These stories capture how it is so often bonds of love that sustain people in times of hardship. Ruth displayed sacrificial commitment to her mother-in-law Naomi after they were both widowed, choosing to remain with her rather than returning to her family. Amidst their shock and mourning, the women who had followed Jesus came together to express practical care for his body, in keeping with the customs of their time. There is something powerful about their ‘togetherness’ during tough times. Like Claire and her friends in today’s Hidden Hardship illustration, these women’s care is enacted within relationships – informally, rather than through services or organisations. There is a sense of mutuality and solidarity; of standing together to face hardship, inspired and sustained by friendship and love.

However, Naomi’s initial words to Ruth also carry echoes of the fear of burdening others that was expressed by research participants. Some

research participants shared that they did not always feel able to ask for help when they needed it, out of a sense of embarrassment, stigma, or not wanting to trouble others. Claire talked about people “in the same boat” helping each other; this raises interesting questions about the importance of relationships that are reciprocal, rather than one-directional. The research highlights how important it is for responses to hardship to uphold people’s dignity and respect their agency.

- ▶ *How is Claire’s ‘help yourself freezer’ approach similar and different to that taken by foodbanks?*
- ▶ *What do you think enables, or would enable, you or people in your networks and community to feel safe asking for help in times of struggle?*



DAY 7 | COPING STRATEGIES: LOCAL GROUPS FOR SUPPORT

Today's session focusses on how local community groups also provided support for people experiencing hardship.

What are people experiencing?

Local community groups in the North Cotswolds supported people experiencing hardship in a variety of ways (see below). These were important **responses** to hardship, but often did not address the **causes** of hardship (see Day 4) or the **barriers to wellbeing** (see Day 8).

Therefore, even if a person accessed all of the support available to them, it was likely they would still be experiencing hardship.

Stigma and fear of meeting someone you know in small rural communities was a barrier for some people accessing support at local groups. In addition, it could be difficult for people to access support if groups were not in walking distance (which they often were not). How people accessed groups (both literally and emotionally) was therefore important for both the up-take of support and how it made a person feel.

Examples of local support

- North Cotswold Foodbank
- The local warm place
- Job clubs
- Housing support charity
- Toddler groups
- Cotswold Friends
- Social groups
- Social prescribers
- Home Start befrienders
- Support in schools

In local residents' own words

"Today (Tuesday) I visited the foodbank because I have, so what was it, £5 to last me until Monday. I just used the last £5 to get petrol to go to work, to pick up schoolbooks to mark. So hence I'm at the Warm Place having free soup. And then I have the food from the foodbank to feed the family until Monday."

(Julie, local resident)



Examine

Luke 4:17-21

¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

Reflect

This passage comes from Luke’s account of the start of Jesus’ ministry where he quotes from prophetic words, claiming that he has fulfilled them. It feels like Jesus announcing his vision for his ministry – his purpose on earth – and it is full of bold hope, for a world of good news, freedom and restoration. More than that, it is a vision not just of some far-off Kingdom, but for the here-and-now.

The Hidden Hardship research highlighted how local groups are providing vital services for people experiencing hardship in a whole host of different ways – offering hope for people in the midst of struggle. However, there is a sense that, although these responses are to be commended, they simply are not enough to end people’s hardship. Rather, they seemed to address different jigsaw puzzle pieces of an overall complex picture and provide useful short-term support, but not holistic freedom from struggle. Local residents often had to access multiple sources of support simply to keep their heads above water. While these local groups are undoubtedly providing valuable practical care for people, their focus is often more

concentrated on alleviating the symptoms of a deeper problem, rather than treating it at the root. Even with the cumulative input of these groups, Jesus' bold vision of how the world should be is not being realised because even when accessing support available, people are still experiencing hardship. Action is therefore needed at a more structural level to provide holistic solutions to hardship.

- ▶ *Who is the best listener that you know? What makes a good listener?*
- ▶ *What roles might we play in co-labouring with God to see his Kingdom come closer in our communities?*



DAY 8 | BARRIERS TO WELLBEING

This session considers the barriers that people experience in seeking greater wellbeing than their experience of hardship.

What are people experiencing?

The barriers to improving wellbeing for people experiencing hardship are intertwined with the causes of hardship (see Day 4). Many of the barriers are therefore structural and difficult for local residents to address on their own. These include the lack of government support (including low benefit rates), a lack of secure local employment, a lack of affordable housing, a lack of local amenities, and the withdrawal of local services including transport. These refer to 'lacks of' in rural areas.

Participants shared the challenge of loving the rural environment and community in which they live but being restricted by the location and lack of local services/amenities. Life is more difficult here without a car and a budget sufficient for more expensive local shops/to travel elsewhere.

An additional barrier that people faced was experiencing hardship in an area of predominant affluence, and therefore inequality faced daily. As we've reflected in the previous sections, for some people this results in stigma, fear, and embarrassment. Hardship is hidden by the affluence of others and local tourism, and also by people attempting to be no different to their neighbours and hiding their own hardship.

Together, these barriers to wellbeing mean that people's coping strategies are more often their responses to get by daily, rather than ways to improve their fundamental situation. More needs to be done structurally to address these barriers in order to address the causes of hardship.

In local residents' own words

"The government has left rural areas, a lot of people have felt they have been left alone. I mean the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is proof of that, the DWP only offer support to town areas, people living in towns, if you don't live in town you have to travel all the way, so that in itself is proof that at the government level, people have been made disadvantaged. So political decisions definitely play a big part."

(Bob, research participant)



Examine

Psalm 22:1-2, 7-8, 26

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
- ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
- ⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
- ⁸ Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!
- ²⁶ The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live for ever!

Matthew 27:37, 45-46

- ³⁷ Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'
- ⁴⁵ From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Reflect

Matthew writes that Jesus' last words before his death were 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'. This echoes the lament in Psalm 22 in which the writer asks God 'why are you so far from helping me?'.

Feeling abandoned – another word for forsaken – was a sense described by the Hidden Hardship research participants for how the state has withdrawn services from rural areas, and for the 'lacks of' including public transport and affordable housing. As in Psalm 22:7 – although not quite as vividly – some people experiencing hardship shared how they felt stigma and judgement at their situations, particularly from more affluent residents.

One difference between these Bible accounts and hardship in the UK is that we know in Psalm 22 and Matthew 27 that ultimately God has not forsaken us, whereas for people experiencing hardship there are no such guarantees that the state, society, and its structures have not forsaken them. Action is needed on a variety of levels to address this, which we now turn to in Days 9 and 10.

- ▶ *Are there places or ways in which you might stand with and alongside people who feel abandoned and forsaken in their hardship?*
- ▶ *Before we move to action – are there particular areas of this devotional study guide that have spoken to you so far? What is stirring for you?*



DAY 9 | TAKING ACTION (1)

Days 9 and 10 have a different format to the previous days and focus on taking action to respond to hardship and inequality in the UK. They are therefore the ‘so what’ of this devotional study guide and invite you to use what you have reflected on and learnt from this guide in your daily life as a Christian.

Whilst the Hidden Hardship research focussed on the rural North Cotswolds, Days 9 and 10 are for responding to the hardship that is found in rural and urban communities across the UK.

Taking a step back

Taking action is often associated with practical action such as volunteering at a foodbank. Practical action is important in responding to hardship and inequality, but we want to start by taking a step back. This is because we need to start by addressing our own attitudes, perceptions, and stereotypes about others in order to think about how we are acting. As we saw in Day 5's discussion of hospitality, it's not just about acting, but **how we are acting** and how this makes others feel. It is easy to be blind to the confidence and power that some of us hold in our interactions with others. Reflecting on this can help in building open, trusting relationships with others where all can have their say.

It is also important that as Christians, any action is an acting out of our Christian faith. For example, our actions must reflect God's unconditional love for others, the dignity and worth of each person because we are all created in the image of God, and that as Christians we are called to challenge injustice and hardship.

In local residents' own words

"Numbers increasing at the foodbank, numbers increasing at warm place, just the general wellbeing of people as now I'm around during the day, you notice... I'm noticing people more. ...You notice those people who are going around [the supermarket] just buying the yellow stickers, or walking around with a calculator."

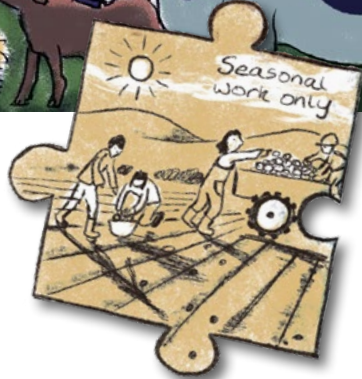
(Claire, local resident)



Examine

Romans 12:2

² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.



The first step – growing understanding

The first step that we invite you to take is to challenge your understanding of hardship in your community.

We need to learn from people who are experiencing hardship to understand what daily life is actually like, what challenges they face, and what are their personal barriers to improved wellbeing. This first step is vital to be able to walk alongside people to work together to reduce hardship.

How to do this? The answer depends on both yourself and your community – for example, have you experienced hardship, and what is already happening in your community?

With others, make a community profile to better understand what happens in your local area, and think about how accessible different places and initiatives are to different people. Invite people who you know less well to contribute to the profile to get their points of view. Questions to consider:

- ▶ ***Who might be experiencing hardship in your local community? Yourself? Do you know them personally?***
- ▶ ***Where could you meet people outside of your own ‘bubble’?***
- ▶ ***What are people’s perceptions of who different local activities and gatherings are for? Are people excluded?***
- ▶ ***This is about real relationships with real people – how can you build these and trust over time?***
- ▶ ***What is the financial cost to participate in local activities and gatherings? Are people excluded?***
- ▶ ***How can you be alongside people and avoid ‘doing to’ people?***

The second step – attitudes

In challenging our understanding of hardship we also need to challenge our attitudes towards people. We all hold stereotypes to varying degrees, and that is not necessarily a problem as long as we are prepared to challenge these in an ongoing process to ensure that our understanding and attitudes match each other, are fair, and live up to the principles of our Christian faith.

- ▶ **What stereotypes do you associate with hardship? Are they fair? Where did these stereotypes come from? Are they actually accurate?**



In local residents' own words

"Poverty among the elderly, really hard to see. People wear big coats and woolly jumpers and so on, so it's difficult to tell when people are getting skinny."

(Revd Lucy, local vicar)

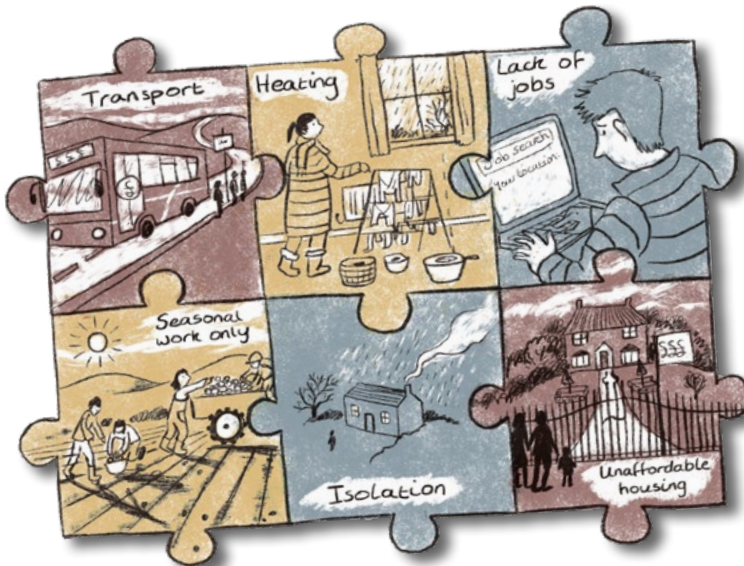


DAY 10 | TAKING ACTION (2)

Moving to practical actions

We are now ready to move onto practical actions. Practical action does not necessarily mean social action such as running a foodbank, it can also mean avoiding inaccurate stereotypes, adapting the words we use or the language of a church service, or writing to your MP. Practical action can respond directly to a person's need, but it can also address the causes of hardship. Both are important if we are going to reduce the high levels of inequality that are found in the UK.

It is important that practical action responds to what people need and hope for, not what we simply think that they need - this is why practical action must start first with checking our understanding and attitudes, and always do this alongside people so that we are 'doing with' and not 'doing to'.



In local residents' own words

"I was opening the cupboards and I've had the same emergency tin of bacon grill in there for about four months and I'm saving that for a really bad time, and then I'm like, okay, it is really bad times."

(Holly, local resident)



Examine

Micah 6:8

⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
 And what does the LORD require of you?
 To act justly and to love mercy
 and to walk humbly with your God.

What practical actions could I/we take?

This devotional study guide was purposely designed for people to use individually rather than in a group setting. This is because discussing hidden hardship amongst affluence could be very difficult in a group setting such as a Bible study group if member(s) there are experiencing hardship, and particularly if they are keeping it largely hidden from others. Now, following Day 9's shift in mindset, discuss with others how to take action in your community, and then put these into practice. Ideas to get you started include:

- ▶ Check and amend where necessary the language used in church services including prayers to ensure that it is not stigmatising. For example, talking about 'the poor' can be very 'othering'. Hold training and then each other to account.
- ▶ Join in with existing activities in your local community. For example, join existing groups and gatherings to meet more local people and share experiences together, or stand for the Parish Council or church leadership structures to work towards justice for everyone. Through these, work together to address the causes of hardship.
- ▶ No matter our political leanings, hardship and poverty are political issues. Hold your elected leaders to account to address the unequal structures in society, for example by attending MPs' surgeries, engaging with campaigns, and writing letters to politicians. Ask why a situation is as it is.

- ▶ Ask your local church leaders and church councils to sign up to the Anti-Poverty Charter <https://breadlineresearch.coventry.ac.uk/churches/anti-poverty-charter/>
- ▶ Where possible, adapt existing and new spaces, amenities and initiatives so that they are open to everyone. For example, make a community lunch free and open to everyone rather than just 'people in need'. This will reduce stigma and emphasise building relationships and trust.
- ▶ Move beyond a crisis response to hardship: many people in the UK are facing ongoing hardship rather than emergency situations, and our responses need to reflect this in responding materially and addressing unjust structures.





Find out more

For more information about the Hidden Hardship research including further resources such as the Report for Policymakers and Community Leaders or to order more copies of this resource, visit the project website at <https://hiddenhardship.coventry.ac.uk/>

In local residents' own words

"My daughter asked if it was payday – picked up a packet of dates because she wanted to try them. It wasn't.
...to say no to a child that thinks it's a treat to try dates for heaven's sake and I had to say wait. Most kids ask for toys!!"

(Julie, local resident)



Appendix: The Hidden Hardship research

This resource is based on participatory research by Dr Stephanie Denning in 2023 with people experiencing and/or responding to hardship in the rural North Cotswolds in south-west England. The research took place in a largely representative rural town and a rural village in the North Cotswolds. At the request of some of the research participants, the town and village are not named.

The research was formed of 2 stages with 24 participants:

1. Time at community groups with 22 interviews with people experiencing and/or responding to hardship.
2. 12 go-along interviews and 3 sets of diaries written by people experiencing hardship.

The research was funded by the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust.

The location of the Cotswolds (in green). © Natural England copyright 2012. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2012, CC BY-SA 3.0



“This material enables us to notice, reflect on and challenge hidden hardship, whatever our own story, as we join in with God’s Kingdom work of justice, hope and transformation. I strongly commend it to you.”

Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester

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