

January: And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen. ^{1Peter 5:10-11}

30th January 2011. Today: Psalm 134 Acts 10. Peter and Cornelius

What value do non-Christian religions have?

Some religions may have some moral or social value but none have true spiritual value as God can only be known through His Son Jesus Christ.

Cornelius was a God-fearing person who was a generous giver who prayed regularly but he did not know God. As Jesus told Nicodemus: *no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again*

Religious up-bringing or a religious lifestyle, including giving to good causes and praying regularly, will not involve us in God's Kingdom. Only re-birth from above will do that.

God's Kingdom is good: SPIRITUALLY — giving us grace & peace; MORALLY — giving us love instead of fear; SOCIALLY — making us happy; PHYSICALLY — providing us with God's health, wealth and wisdom.

Rom.14:17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 1Cor14:20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk

February: I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. ^{Ephesians 3:16-17}

6th February Psalm 135.

Ambassadors for Christ

A British Ambassador is a diplomatic official of the highest rank sent by the United Kingdom as a representative to another Country.

As Christ's Ambassadors we sent by God as His representatives. We need certain qualities to be an Ambassador: Knowledge, Wisdom and Character. First we must know the character, mind, and purposes of God. Secondly, this knowledge must be deployed in a skilful way - wisdom (diplomacy) makes our message persuasive. Thirdly, character, because an ambassador brings himself along in everything he does, his personal maturity will either make or break his message.

If you are learning and growing in these three ways, you'll be able to say with conviction "I am an Ambassador for Christ. I can explain precisely what that means and I can clearly defend the truth of Christianity in an attractive manner that commends the message."

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors... We implore you on Christ's behalf Be reconciled to God.
^{2Corinthians 5:20}

Sunday 13th February Ps.136; Acts 11

Stand firm in the faith

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Gal. 5:1

We are children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, Gal.3:26 born free and children of promise. Gal.4:26-28 Christ has (already) set us free so we can live in freedom. Galatians 5:1

This freedom is from spiritual oppression and legalism including diet. Food is temporal and is for our stomach not our spirit. 1Cor.6:13 Eating (or non-eating) does not affect our spirituality or bring us nearer to God. 1Cor.8:8 Food does not make us unholy or impure – food cannot spiritually contaminate us Rom.14:14 and all food is good for us if we receive it with thanksgiving. 1Tim.4:3; Mk.7:19 Saying “grace” before meals is a good practice as it is a way of appreciation & acknowledges God’s provision.

Our freedom is also from the control of traditions and expectations that have no spiritual value. *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.* Gal.5:6

Wisdom (the application of this information) will determine the quality of life we live.

We must stand firm in our belief (faith) and not become slaves to circumstances, culture or traditions. *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.* Isaiah 7:9 God’s principles for life are: Love God; Love people. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbour as yourself.... Do this and you will live.* Luke 10:27-28

Don’t miss out on all the freedom and abundant life God has planned for us by going back into slavery (being controlled by anything other than God and His values).

Sunday 20th February Ps.138; Acts 12

Prayer

Prayer is how we talk to God. Jesus said we should pray for our own personal needs in private Matt6:6-15 but it is also good to pray corporately for the needs of others Acts.4:23-31; 12:5;

1Tim.2.1-8. Prayer should be earnest (i.e. not a resignation to fate but an aspiration to the will of God). When the Church prayed for Peter Acts 12:14-16, God's answer was not what they expected! Acts 12:14-16 which dispels the theory that God only answer prayers if they are specific! However we should ask for our needs Jas.4:4 without being anxious Phil.4:4-7;

Matt6:25-34. We should address God as Father when we pray Matt-6:9 knowing he will not give us bad or counterfeit things Matt-7:7-11; Luke 11:11-13

"Don't pray hard, pray easy — it's not your prayer that does it, it's God." Oral Roberts "It's not your prayers, it's not your ability, it's your surrender" Kathryn Kuhlman Dave Smethurst encourages us to not to limit God by our prayers. When we pray we should imagine the answer and see it in our minds (it is easier to believe for something if we can picture it) and then expect God to do something greater.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen Ephesians 3.20-21

Here are a few reasons why we should pray: God says we should pray (Co1.4:2) God answers prayer Jas.5:15-17). Prayer is fellowshiping with God — we are partners. Prayer helps us depend on God and focuses our minds on Him and His ability

Sunday 27th February Ps.139:1-12; Acts 13

The Gospel is Good News

Acts 13:32-33 We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers, he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus

The Gospel is a divine message with power to change lives – it is good news (the Greek word is from *messenger* which is the same as *angel*).

The good news is that God has provided forgiveness for our sins and when we receive this free gift we will never be asked to pay for them or even make a contribution towards the cost!

When we understand this, it truly changes our life. We have peace with God (no guilt); peace with ourselves (no shame); peace with others (no embarrassment). God not only cancels out our guilt but adds to us His righteousness – our sin is not just neutralised but He gives us credit as well and call us His child. See how very much our heavenly Father loves us, for he allows us to be called his children, and we really are! ...Yes, dear friends, we are already God's children, and we can't even imagine what we will be like when Christ returns.^{1Jn.3:1-2 NLT} No wonder God says it is GOOD news.

This was not an afterthought for God had planned it and promised it. Under the Old Covenant people had the promise but not the experience. For us today we have the promise AND the experience! And the proof or evidence is the resurrection of Jesus. Because Jesus rose from the dead and is alive WE KNOW our sins are forgiven; WE KNOW the devil has been defeated and disarmed; WE KNOW death is defeated and not the final chapter of our life; WE KNOW we will live with God forever.

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, All fear is gone.

Because I know He holds the future, And life is worth the living just because He lives.

How sweet to hold a newborn baby, And feel the pride and joy he gives.

But greater still the calm assurance, This child can face uncertain days because He lives.

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, All fear is gone.

Because I know He holds the future, And life is worth the living just because He lives.

And then one day I'll cross the river, I'll fight life's final war with pain.

And then as death gives way to victory, I'll see the lights of glory and I'll know He lives.

Story:

Today, millions of Americans and people around the world are coming to love southern gospel music, and a big reason is the popularity of the Bill and Gloria Gaither Homecoming concerts and videos. For more than 40 years, the Gaithers have been writing and performing Christian songs. "He Touched Me," "There's Something About That Name," and some 600 others are featured in many church hymnals. But "Because He Lives" is perhaps the best known.

In the late 1960s, while expecting their third child, the Gaithers were going through a traumatic time. Their firstborn, Suzanne, was 4, and her sister Amy was three months old. The timing for another baby wasn't ideal. On top of that, Bill was recovering from a bout with mononucleosis.

The breakup of the marriage of Bill's sister, Mary Ann, had left his family devastated. What's more, a close friend's accusation that Bill and Gloria were using their ministry just to make a buck blindsided the couple and plunged Bill into a deep depression.

Gloria also remembers it as a time of fear and sadness. The educational system was being infiltrated with the "God is dead" idea, while drug abuse and racial tension were increasing. The thought of bringing another child into the world was taking its toll.

But after a simple prayer by one of Bill's close friends—a prayer that commanded the devil to back off—both Bill and Gloria recall that the strength of the Holy Spirit seemed to come to their aid. Christ's resurrection, in all its power, was reaffirmed in their hearts. They were assured that the future, left in God's hands, would be just fine.

In July 1970 a healthy baby, Benjamin, was born. Inspired by the miracle of their son's birth, "Because He Lives" poured out of the Gaithers' grateful hearts. The song clearly affirms the hope believers have in Christ. We can face tomorrow, with all its uncertainty, as we realize that God holds the future and makes life worth living.

March: Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well ^{3John 1:2}

Sunday 6th March – Ps.139:13-; Family Communion Service followed by shared lunch
Communication with God

Communication can be likened to a game of catch with a ball:

1 **To play the game properly you must catch the ball and throw it back to the other person.** To pray properly you must hear from God (who is Spirit ^{Jn.4:4}) and speak back from your spirit.

2 **The other player can't catch the ball if you throw it in the wrong place.** God won't answer your prayers if they don't agree with His plan and will as revealed in the Scriptures (see Ps.66:13; Deut.1:45; 1Pet.3:7).

3 **Some places have "No Ball Games" signs.** Sometimes God doesn't want us to ask Him to do something for us because He has already done it or he has asked us to do it ourselves! God expects us to obey Him in the strength we already have. He told Gideon: *Go in the strength you have ... I will be with you.* ^{Judges 6:14-16}

However we should always be talking to God – thinking about Him and His promises to us, thanking Him for Jesus Christ and His faithfulness.

Use Scripture verses to help you pray: Read them; Meditate on them (ponder and repeat them); Confess them (speak them out loud and talk about them); Believe them; Live them. *For no word from God shall be void of power* ^{Luke 1:37 ASV} *the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.* ^{1Thes.2:13} As the old BT advert went: **It's good to talk!**

Mme Guyon (1648-1717) taught that we should pray all the time. Whatever we are doing we should also be spending time with God. As she wrote in one of her poems: *'There was a period when I chose, A time and place for prayer ... But now I seek that constant prayer, In inward stillness known ...'*

The Prayer Of The Heart

All are capable of prayer, and it is a dreadful misfortune that almost all the world have conceived the idea that they are not called to prayer. We are all called to prayer, as we are all called to salvation.

Prayer is nothing but the application of the heart to God, and the internal exercise of love. St. Paul has enjoined us to 'pray without ceasing;' ^{1Thes.5:17} and our Lord bids us watch and pray, ^{Mark 13:33;37}: all therefore may, and all ought to practise prayer. Prayer is the key to perfection and the sovereign good; it is the means of delivering us from every vice and obtaining us every virtue; for the one great means of becoming perfect, is to walk in the presence of God. He himself has said, *'Walk before me, and be*

perfect.' ^{Gen.17:1} *It is by prayer alone that we are brought into his presence and maintained in it without interruption.*

You must, then, learn a species of prayer which may be exercised at all times; which does not obstruct outward employments; which may be equally practised by princes, kings, prelates, priests and magistrates, soldiers and children, tradesmen, labourers, women, and sick persons; it is not the prayer of the head, but of the heart.

Meditative Prayer: *read only a small portion of [scripture], endeavouring to taste and digest it, to extract the essence and substance of it, and proceed no farther while any savour or relish remains in the passage: then take up your book again, and proceed as before, seldom reading more than half a page at a time. It is not the quantity that is read, but the manner of reading, that yields us profit. Those who read fast, reap no more advantage, than a bee would by only skimming over the surface of the flower, instead of waiting to penetrate into it, and extract its sweets.*

Those who cannot read books, are not, on that account, excluded from prayer. The great Book which teaches all things, and which is written all over, within and without, is Jesus Christ himself. The method they should practice is this: they should first learn this fundamental truth, that "the kingdom of God is within them," ^{Luke 17:2} and that it must be sought there only. Repeat the Lord's prayer; pondering a little upon the meaning of the words, and the infinite willingness of that God who dwells within them to become, indeed, 'their Father.' In this state let them pour out their wants before him; and when they have pronounced the word, 'Father' remain a few moments in a reverential silence, waiting to have the will of this their heavenly Father made manifest to them...

Sunday 13th March Ps.145; Acts 14

Remain True to the Faith

Strengthen the disciples and encourage them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" ^{Acts 14:22}

The Kingdom of God is the rule of Jesus Christ. This is not a political or geographical domain but a spiritual kingdom in people's hearts see ^{Jer.31:31; Eze.11:19;18:31;36:26}. God obviously has dominion over the whole world but the Kingdom of God as presented by Jesus is different. It is within ^{Lk.17:21; Matt.13:31}; not of this world ^{Jn.18:36}; eternal ^{Daniel 4:3}; it is not about words but power and obedience ^{1Cor.4:20; Matt.7:21}; not food and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ^{Rom.14:17}. It is about turning from useless things to the living God ^{Acts14:15; 1Thes.1:9}. Sadly some people are the same as the Jews in Acts 4 who want to hurt people in the name of religion. True religion is helping, healing and giving people hope ^{James 1:27} and it cannot be imposed by force – it is a religion of peace ^{Matt.6:9} led by the Prince of Peace ^{Isaiah 9:6}.

Although the Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, it is not opposed to the natural life we are now living. *Since God is on our side, who can be against us? God did not spare his own Son. He gave him up for us all. Then won't he also freely give us everything else? ^{Romans 8:31-32}. If you seek first his kingdom and his righteousness ...all these things will be given to you as well ^{Matt 6:33}. You cannot become spiritual by hating this life and denying yourself the good things God has given to us For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer (the word of God and prayer make it holy) ^{1Tim.4:4-5}. In fact you cannot become more spiritual or holy than having God live with you!!!*

The Odes of Solomon are hymns of praise and devotion that we inherit from an early poet. The collection is identified as the Odes of Solomon, not because they were written by King Solomon but because they were considered to be in the tradition of Solomon, who wrote the Song of Songs using the term “the Beloved.” While Solomon lived in the tenth century B.C., the Odist lived sometime near A.D. 100. He composed the Odes in a form of early Aramaic and Syriac which is a language spoken in the early Christian centuries and was a form of the language spoken by Jesus.

Since 1909, when the Odes were found in a Syriac manuscript, scholars have edited the texts, and translated them into many modern languages, included English, German, and French.

The song below is one of the Odes of Solomon and could even have been sung by the Apostle John (obviously not in English)!

**Grace, pouring forth like a fountain flowing,
Our hearts open wide to sing Your praise,
And our sound becomes sweet
with Your Anthems ringing
Praise to the name of the Lord
*Sing Allelu, Sing Allelu,
we rejoice in Your love, most High.
Sing Allelu, sing Allelu,
in Your light, You shine forever
shine in us, O Lord, forever
We're the light to the world, Allelu.***

**Let us who are afraid, find refuge in Christ,
and redemption assured in His name
By day and by night, we delight in Your love
And forever Your Word will remain**

Sunday 20th March Ps.146; Acts 15

Salvation with Prayer, Praise and Prophecy

We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved ^{Acts 15:11}

We are **saved from hell** and eternal torment through faith and we are **saved to serve** God through faith. *Without faith it is impossible to please God* ^{Heb.11:6} and *we live by faith, not by sight* ^{2Cor.5:7}.

The early church re-affirmed that God *will return and rebuild David's fallen tent* ^{Acts 15:16}. David pitched the Tent of worship in Jerusalem where he worshipped God with Prayer, Praise and Prophecy ^{1Chron.15-16; 25:1}. He had wanted to build a magnificent Temple where he could worship God. The Prophet Nathan told David that he should do whatever was in his heart but God re-directed him saying that he was not the one to build a Temple. That is a sound principle to live by: if you want to do something and God doesn't prohibit it, just go ahead with it - unless God tells you otherwise.

But it was David's descendant who was going to build the Temple ^{1Chron.17:11-14}. That descendant is Jesus and the Temple is you and me: *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?* ^{1Cor.6:19} *Now we know that if the*

earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands ^{2Cor.5:1}. This is the house of prayer that Jesus spoke of: *‘My house will be a house of prayer’ but you have made it ‘a den of robbers* ^{Lk.19:46}. We are to *pray continually* ^{1Thes.5:17}. We are to praise continually: *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name* ^{Heb.13:15}. Prophecy is also part of the Church’s role: *Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy* ^{1Cor.14:1} but *Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy* ^{Rev.19:10}

***Look and see the glory of the King
Sense the presence of the Lord amongst His people
Feel Him fill the temple of our lives
As He sits upon the throne of our praise
We are His church, we are all God’s own people
We all proclaim that He is King, He is King***

***At God’s right hand Jesus Christ is exalted
His rule is now, and shall be forever more***

Sunday 27th March Ps.147; Acts 16

How to overcome adversity

Life is full of adversity but it is how we deal with situations that determines whether life is enjoyable, endurable or not even worth living. We can’t return to “go” as in a game and there is not a second chance at life.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ^{Rom.15:4}

The Apostle Paul is a good role model to help us overcome adversity especially when you look at his difficulties: *I have worked much harder. I have been in prison more often. I have suffered terrible beatings. Again and again I almost died. Five times the Jews gave me 39 strokes with a whip. Three times I was beaten with sticks. Once they tried to kill me by throwing stones at me. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea.* ^{2Cor.11:23-25} but he said *What we are suffering now is nothing compared with the glory that will be shown in us.* ^{Rom.8:18}

Because Paul had made the right preparations he was able to overcome his situations and even sing praises to God in prison. **What song would you have sung?** I believe it should be something about God’s goodness. I would have chosen: “*Yes God is good in earth and sky*”; or “*God is good, we sing and shout it*”; or most likely “*You are my God and I will praise You. You are my God, I will exalt You. O give thanks unto the LORD, for He is good and His mercy endures forever*”. Someone has said that satan is allergic to praise! I like to think of the devil coming out in a rash and being in great discomfort every time we praise God!! But whatever happens don’t blame God for your problems: *In spite of everything, Job didn't sin by blaming God for doing anything wrong.* ^{Job.1:22} God is good and what He does is good ^{Ps.119:68}

*I then shall live as one who's been forgiven.
I'll walk with joy to know my debts are paid.
I know my name is clear before my Father;
I am His child and I am not afraid.*

*So, greatly pardoned, I'll forgive my brother;
The law of love I gladly will obey.*

*I then shall live as one who's learned compassion.
I've been so loved, that I'll risk loving too.
I know how fear builds walls instead of bridges;
I'll dare to see another's point of view.
And when relationships demand commitment,
Then I'll be there to care and follow through.*

*Your Kingdom come around and through and in me;
Your power and glory, let them shine through me.
Your Hallowed Name, O may I bear with honour,
And may Your living Kingdom come in me.
The Bread of Life, O may I share with honour,
And may You feed a hungry world through me.*

April: May the God of peace... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen Heb.13:20-21

Sunday 3rd April 2011 Psalm 148

Mothering Sunday.

Mothering Sunday was traditionally the day people, especially servants, would return home to visit their mother other family members. It was a time to show your appreciation to your mother for her love, care and support.

These maternal attributes are attributes we should all aspire to and the Bible lists many of them: astute, confident, capable, dignified, diligent, generous, honoured, respected, strong, trustworthy, wise, but above all, fearing (respecting) God. Proverbs 31:10f

Our spiritual condition affects our whole person and a God-fearing person will have the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is this gentle caring attitude that should be the hall-mark of Christians: *I then shall live as one who's been forgiven. I'll walk with joy to know my debts are paid. I know my name is clear before my Father; I am His child and I am not afraid. So, greatly pardoned, I'll forgive my brother; the law of love I gladly will obey. I then shall live as one who's learned compassion.*

The way to inherit eternal life is not by living a good life but by *loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind; and loving your neighbour as you love yourself.* Luke 10:27 In this story our neighbour is not the person in need

but the Person who helped us when we were in need – Jesus Christ **BUT** Jesus has instructed us to do the same things as he did. Love always initiates a response

As we appreciate our mothers today (or for some of us, their memories) let us honour them by our lifestyle not just our words but more importantly let us honour God by our love expressed in action

*Adam was a handsome man, God made him from dust,
He placed him in a garden fair, away from sin & lust.
Adam was a perfect man but one thing makes me glum,
Although he lived in paradise, he never had a Mum!*

*Adam was a special man, he had a job to do,
He named the birds, he named the beasts, as God had told him to,
He also gave the fruit its name, like apple, pear & plum,
And although he lived in paradise, he never had a Mum!*

*Eve was made from Adam's rib, a woman fair was she,
Her hair was long, her teeth were white, a perfect sight to see;
Adam fell in love with her, he said 'I'm glad you've come
For though I live in paradise, I've never had a Mum!'*

*Eve & Adam lost their home in that sweet garden fair,
Sin had crept into their lives to drive them to despair;
They had to work & toil all day, from dawn to setting sun.
Who could they tell their troubles to? They never had a Mum!*

*People here on earth today, remember that first pair
Who never grew up in a home with other kids to share;
They may have had a paradise but when all's said & done,
You nearly have had everything, when you have had a Mum!*

Sunday 10th April 2011 Psalm 149 Acts 17

Evangelism

Paul was a master at “networking” and relating to people on their level but always with a view to explaining the Truth. When he met with people, he ‘connected’ with them even if he had to look weak or insignificant. He worked tirelessly at helping others know more about the One who said: ‘I am the Truth’ – Jesus Christ, because it is only through the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ that we have eternal life^{John17:3}. Knowing God and Jesus Christ also gives us grace and peace^{Rom.1:7} in abundance^{2Peter 1:2}.

To the Jews, Paul explained that their hope had already come – He was Jesus; and even though they had killed Him, God had raised Him from the dead. Some received Paul’s teaching and some rejected it. The “noble” (more fair-minded^{NKJV}) ones checked out what Paul was saying. We all need to be able to check things out and to learn the difference between quoting and mis-quoting scripture. Although all scripture is inspired and useful, it is also to be interpreted through the New Covenant that Jesus introduced. No more rituals to appease God; no more Priests (or Pastors) to pray on our behalf; no more pilgrimages to make in order to get to heaven. God has made His home in us so we can commune with Him any when and any where.

To the non-Jews, Paul related to them on their own level. He did not protest about their pagan religion but proclaimed the True religion, explaining that their search for truth could end because God had reached down to them in love in Jesus Christ.

Paul only had one message though – *“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”*^{Acts 17:30-31}

Jesus is a Friend of mine – Praise Him!

I've found a Friend, O such a friend! He loved me ere I knew Him;
He drew me with the cords of love, and thus He bound me to Him;
And round my heart still closely twine those ties which naught can sever,
For I am His, and He is mine, forever and forever.

I've found a Friend, O such a friend! He bled, He died to save me;
And not alone the gift of life, but His own Self He gave me!
Naught that I have mine own I call, I'll hold it for the Giver,
My heart, my strength, my life, my all are His, and His forever.

I've found a Friend, O such a friend! All power to Him is given,
To guard me on my onward course, and bring me safe to heaven.
The eternal glories gleam afar, to nerve my faint endeavour;
So now to watch, to work, to war, and then to rest forever.

I've found a Friend, O such a friend! So kind and true and tender,
So wise a Counsellor and Guide, so mighty a Defender!
From Him who loves me now so well what power my soul can sever?
Shall life or death, shall earth or hell? No! I am His forever

But when the Son of Man came, he ate and drank as you do.. He's a friend of tax collectors and “sinners. All who follow wisdom prove that wisdom is right (but wisdom is shown to be right by the lives of those who follow it). ^{Luke 7:34-35}

A friend loves at all times. He is there to help when trouble comes. ^{Prov.17:17}

Some friends may ruin you, but a real friend will be more loyal than a brother. ^{Proverbs 18:24}

Sunday 17th April 2011 Psalm 118: 19-29 Matthew 21 **Palm Sunday**

On Palm Sunday the Easter Story really begins to take shape.

The significance of Palm Sunday is Jesus as the Passover Lamb of God went to the Temple and taught there and no-one found any fault with him ^{Luke 22:53}.

Israel's history of was a 'drama' or a 'pre-recording' of events that would involve the Messiah. Now Jesus was re-enacting many of these events declaring un-equivocally that he was the Messiah: *Birth at Bethlehem (David's city)* ^{Micah 5:2; Matt.2:1-6}. *Going to Egypt* ^{Hosea 11:1; Matt.2:13-15}. *Escape from the massacre of infants* ^{Jer.31:15; Matt.2:16-18}. *Bread of life* ^{Ex.16:4; Jn.6:30-41}. *Water from the rock* ^{Ex.17:37; Jn.7:37-39}. *Snake on a stick* ^{Nu.21:6; Jn.3:14} etc. Jesus stated that he had come from heaven and was now returning to heaven ^{Jn.3:13; 6:42,51,58; 16:27-28} etc. so now came the finale –

the Passover. This is when the Jews celebrate their transition from a large family to a nation and of their deliverance from slavery to freedom – it was their Independence Day, something us English cannot really understand as we have never been slaves. Our

last invaders were the Normans in AD1066 who became English anyway! Perhaps the nearest we have is November 5th Guy Fawkes night where we celebrate what didn't happen! (the blowing-up of Parliament.) For the Jews, Passover was **their celebration of Independence** where they re-enacted the events of the Exodus – the lamb (whose blood had protected them from death), the bitter herbs (which reminded them of the tears of slavery), the bread without yeast (rejection of sin in their lives) and the wine (to drink to the blessings they have). The lamb had to be selected 4 days before they killed it to ensure it had no defect^{Exodus 12}. When Jesus cursed the fig-tree, he was declaring that the old religion of Judaism was ending and would never bear fruit again. At the Last Supper Jesus introduced the New Covenant for forgiveness of sins which would replace that fig-leaf covering of man's attempt to cover himself before God. Jesus began^{Jn.2:12f} and concluded^{Matt.21:12f} his ministry by cleansing the temple, not because the building had any spiritual value (it was going to soon be destroyed) but because of what it stood for: **the Presence of God for God wants us to be a holy house of prayer.**

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Sunday 24th April 2011 Psalm 24 John 20

How do you want people to remember you? What is so important to you that you want others to remember it after you die?

Jesus had continually emphasised that he had come from God and was returning to God ^{Jn.3:13; 6:42,51,58; 16:27-28} etc. He wanted us to remember him as representing God (his heavenly Father) *No one comes to the Father except through me... Don't you believe that I am in the Father? Don't you believe that the Father is in me? ...Believe me when I say I am in the Father. Also believe*

that the Father is in me^{Jn.14:6-11}. Jesus last actions were designed to show in practical ways what God was like *It was time for him to go to the Father. Jesus loved his disciples who were in the world. So he now showed them how much he really loved them*^{Jn.13:1}. Washing the Disciples' feet was one way Jesus showed who God was really like. But even words and actions can seem empty when your loved one is no longer with you. Jesus' revelation of God to us was only a part of what he came to do. He also came as God's solution to sin in mankind. By living a perfect life and accepting mankind's sin, Jesus died in our place *Christ didn't have any sin. But God made him become sin for us. So we can be made right with God because of what Christ has done for us*^{2Cor.5:21}. Happily for us, death could not hold Jesus down but he arose victorious, *He was the first to rise from the dead*^{1Rev.1:5}. The resurrection of Jesus is absolute proof that God has forgiven our sins and we are no longer at enmity with Him.: *We have preached that Christ has been raised from the dead.... And if Christ has not been raised, what we preach doesn't mean anything. Your faith doesn't mean anything either. More than that, we would be lying about God. We have given witness that God raised Christ from the dead. ...And if Christ has not been raised, your faith doesn't mean anything. Your sins have not been forgiven. ...But Christ really has been raised from the dead. He is the first of all those who will rise... Death, where is the battle you thought you were winning? But let us give thanks to God! He wins the battle for us because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done.*^{1Cor.15:11-20,55-56} **Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel**^{2Tim.2:8}

Christ the Lord is risen today: *Hallelujah!*
Sons of men and angels say: *Hallelujah!*
Raise your joys and triumphs high: *Hallelujah!*
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply: *Hallelujah!*

Love's redeeming work is done: *Hallelujah!*
Fought the fight, the battle won: *Hallelujah!*
Vain the stone, the watch, the seal: *Hallelujah!*
Christ hath burst the gates of hell: *Hallelujah!*

Lives again our glorious King: *Hallelujah!*
Where, O death, is now thy sting? *Hallelujah!*
Once He died, our souls to save: *Hallelujah!*
Where thy victory, O grave? *Hallelujah!*

Soar we now where Christ hath led: *Hallelujah!*
Following our exalted Head: *Hallelujah!*
Made like Him, like Him we rise: *Hallelujah!*
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies: *Hallelujah!*

Hail the Lord of earth and heaven: *Hallelujah!*
Praise to Thee by both be given: *Hallelujah!*
Thee we greet, in triumph sing: *Hallelujah!*
Hail our resurrected King: *Hallelujah!*

May: I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ Philemon 1:6

Sunday 1st May 2011 Psalm 150

Royal Weddings

The 1st wedding was in the beautiful setting of the Garden of Eden with God as the officiator and no guest list needed!

Note what the Bible says:

God created us in His image Gen.1:27 We did not create God in our image & we are not equal with God. However we are like Him and should behave like Him. So what is God like? He is like Jesus Jn.14:9

God blessed us Gen.1:28 How many people do you know who really believe they are blessed by God? We should live as blessed people.

God gave us companionship Gen.2:18 God wants us to have a suitable helper. Being single is good - we are born single and die single. Being alone is not good (whether we marry or not). *God sets the lonely in families* Ps.68:6 where God is our Father Matt.6:9 & Jesus is our Brother Heb.2:11

Weddings are to be celebrated *there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom* Jer.33:10

Weddings are a picture of Christ & the Church *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for* Eph.5:25-27 All the beauty and pageantry of our Weddings even Royal Weddings will not match the majesty and glory of the future Wedding of Christ and the Church. This marriage will truly be “made in heaven” and we really will “live happily ever after!”

Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. Revelations 19:6-8 *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, & God himself will be with them and be their God.* Rev.21:2-3

Remember to Whom you belong

I am created by God, I am His.

I am redeemed by God, I am His.

I am twice His, by original right and by purchase.

I belong to Jesus Christ.

God defends me, I am His.

God corrects me, He makes use of me, I am His.

He loves me, He delights in me.

I belong to Jesus Christ.

I am my Beloved’s and He is mine.

No-one else possesses any right or power over me.

All that is mine is His.

I belong to Jesus Christ.

All my sin, weakness and shortcomings, I give to Him.
He has taken all my condemnation, misery and fear.
I belong to Jesus Christ.

His strength is my strength,
His righteousness, my righteousness.
His wisdom, my wisdom and His holiness, my holiness.
I belong to Jesus Christ.

He is my God. He is my Father.
His family is my family and His heaven is my home.
I belong to Jesus Christ.

Sunday 8th May 2011 Psalm 1. John 20:24-21:25

The Blessing of Believing

*“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. **But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*** John 20:29-31

Jesus mission was to save people but His ministry was to help people get saved. Throughout Scripture God has made it clear that we are saved (made righteous) by faith: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast* Eph.2:8-9. *Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”* Gen.15:6; Rom.4:3;22; Gal.3:6; Jas.2:23. *But the righteous person will live by faith* Hab.2:4; Rom.1:17; Gal.3:11; Heb.10:38.

Salvation is being counted righteous by God. This righteousness is not a result of becoming ‘holy’ or ‘spiritual’ or even ‘good’ – it is a gift from God when we are born from above Jn.3:3 with an incorruptible seed. 1Pet.1:23 He writes His laws in our heart Heb.8:10 which He has re-created Ps.51:10.

This righteousness is received by faith. So what is faith? Faith is the calm assurance that God is true to His Word including what He says about us. Faith is linked to hope and love: *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love* 1Cor.13:13. You cannot have faith without hope and love – faith is never dead, despondent, cold or impassionate. Faith is never isolated from God or His Kingdom (Christ’s rule in people) but is saturated with love – pure, unselfish love like God’s love as seen in Jesus. Faith is always expectant but we have to choose to live by faith: *When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he saw he couldn't do but on what God said he would do.* Rom.4:18 When we decide to live by what God has said He would do, our faith grows stronger: *He never doubted that God would keep his promise, and he never stopped believing. He grew stronger in his faith and gave praise to God.* Rom.4:20 It is only when we believe that we really live: **He who is righteous by faith shall live** Heb.10:38YLT

I am a Disciple of Jesus Christ

I identify with the blood of Jesus Christ, the Word of God and the Anointing of the Holy Spirit. I’m a part of the Fellowship of the Unashamed; I have Holy Spirit power.

The die has been cast, I have stepped over the line; the love of God controls me. I won't look back, let up, slow down or back away. The decision has been made, **I am a Disciple of Jesus Christ.**

My past is redeemed, my present makes sense and my future is secure. I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, colourless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking, cheap giving and dwarf goals. I no longer need pre-eminence, position, promotion, plaudits or popularity. I don't have to be recognised, regarded, rewarded or considered right.

I now live by faith and walk with patience. I live by prayer and labour with power. My face is set, my pace is fast and my goal is the Kingdom of God. My road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few, my Guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will not flinch in face of sacrifices, hesitate in the presence of adversaries, negotiate at the pool of popularity or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up or let up until I have stood up, prayed up and spoken up for the cause of Jesus Christ. I must go until He comes, give until I drop, teach until all know and work until He stops me.

I am a Disciple of Jesus Christ!

Sunday 15th May 2011 Psalm 2. Acts 18

The Full Gospel

Apollos ... was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John... Priscilla and Aquila explained to him the way of God more adequately. ^{Acts}
18 24-26

Even today some people only know of the baptism of John. They may have been taught about Jesus accurately but have not really progressed past the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Blood of Jesus is important (that is why we are studying it in our Monday morning Bible Study) but there is more to Christianity than forgiveness of sins and living a good life (which John taught see John 1:29; Luke 3 etc.). There is a *power to be Jesus witnesses* (Acts 1:8) as well! This power is not just an influence or a force but the Person of the Holy Spirit who brings life, spontaneity, emotion, passion, wholeness, wisdom, guidance and counsel to our lives. God never intended us to just get through life, hoping that everything will be alright. God wants us to know that everything will be all right because He is with us and then for us to live like that.

We are in a battle to overcome our own emotions and thoughts (which are influenced by our past, our peer-group, our pastimes and countless other factors). *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2Cor.10:5).* We can (and do) overcome these by our faith: *for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God (1John 5:4-5).*

Yes we are in a fight for faith: *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life (1Tim.6:12). I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness (2Tim.4:7-8).*

We have a Full Gospel and a Full Salvation – so live like it!

I'm full of the Gospel,
full of the Gospel of Jesus Christ my Lord
I'm washed in the blood of the crucified Lord.
I've been redeemed by the Lamb of God.
I've got a brand new walk and a brand new talk.
There's a clapping in my hands and a shouting in my heart
I'm full, full, full of the Gospel of Jesus Christ my Lord.

Well I once was lost in sin & I didn't know how to begin
I had my mind all tangled and twisted
then my Master Jesus came in.
Now I'm born again, cleansed from sin
Walk in the light at my Father's side.
I live in love, joy and peace.
All of the fruits of the Spirit are mine
I'm full, full, full of the Gospel of Jesus Christ my Lord.

Sunday 22nd May 2011 Psalm 3. Acts 19

Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" "...John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. ^{Acts 19:2-6}

There is a receiving of Jesus: *Yet to all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.* ^{Jn.1:12-13} This is what we call "**Conversion**" or being "**born again**" and is a partnership with God, where we believe what He has said (Rom.10:9-10; 1Jn.5:10-12). We combine God's message with faith (Heb.4:2).

There is also a receiving of the Holy Spirit: *Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?* ^{Acts 4:2} This is distinct from (but not necessarily separate from) conversion. In fact the Biblical norm is: *Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will.* ^{Acts 2:38-39} Receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 19:2) is also called *Baptism of the Holy Spirit* (Luke 3:16). The Holy Spirit is a Person not an experience and so the Bible records Believers as being *filled with the Holy Spirit* (Acts 4:31) and instructs us to *keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit* (Eph.5:18) In fact Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would be like living (fresh, running) water: *Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life* ^{Jn.4:14} *"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."* By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. *Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.* ^{Jn.7:37-39}

The description of the Holy Spirit as a river or spring gushing out of us is helpful as Holy Spirit baptised Believers are spontaneous and quick to vocally praise God at any time. **But this empowerment of the Holy Spirit is primarily to help us be Jesus'**

witnesses: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*^{Acts 1:8} **It is a gift:** *And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*^{Acts 2:38} **and doesn't signify maturity** (look at the Corinthian Church who *did not lack any spiritual gift*^{1Cor.1:7} but where Paul had to address *quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder; impurity, sexual sin and debauchery.*^{2Cor.12:20-21})

Maturity is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (*Gal.5:22-23*) **and is the result of making right choices:** *[the] mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*^{Heb.5:14} Maturity can also be called *sanctification* or *renewing our minds* and is a life-long experience.

**Born again, this is the great mystery
That Christ in me, the power to overcome
So I live, yet not I, but Christ in me
triumphant now, is what I can become.
Jesus didn't save me
for me to ever only be a loser in this life.
The power of the Spirit,
the power of the cross
is growing potent in my life.
And now I am winning,
I may be just beginning, but I am a winner,
Yet not I, but Christ in me.**

Sunday 29th May Psalm 4. Acts 20

Sickness is not a sign of sin

I left Trophimus sick in Miletus.^{2Tim.4:20}

Trophimus had been with Paul in Greece sorting out the difficulties in Corinth and continued with him to Jerusalem. He had watched Paul pray for Eutychus after he fell out of the window at Troas and he was there when the Elders of his home church (Ephesus) had prayed with Paul at Miletus (about 40 miles away). Nine years later Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletus. If Church Elders only have to lay hands on the sick (*James 5:14*), why didn't Paul call them over from Ephesus again to pray for Eutychus? **If only healing was always as simple as Believers laying hands on the sick!** (*Mk.16:18*)

As Pentecostals we emphasise that **Jesus is our Saviour, Baptiser, Healer and Coming King** because we are totally committed to those truths. History and our own personal testimonies confirm that **God is our Healer** (*Ex.15:26*) and that **He sent His Word (Jesus) to heal us** (*Psalm 107:20; Acts 10:38*) but we also know many people (including ourselves sometimes) have not been healed. Paul said that it was because of an illness that he first preached the gospel to the Galatians (*Gal.4:14*). Jesus said that sickness was not a result of sin but an opportunity for God to display His glory (*Jn.9:3; Jn.11:4*). *Yes we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.* (*Rom.8:28*)

So what do we do when we are sick?

Asking God to heal (with the right motives) **is always a good start:** *You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives (Jas 4:2-3). God is always willing:* “Lord, you can heal me if you will.” Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man and said, “I will. Be healed!” Matt.8:2-3)

A cheerful attitude is important: *A cheerful heart is good medicine* ^{Prov.17:22}

Parham (the father of Pentecostal doctrine) concluded that not all healings in his meetings were supernatural and estimated half of all diseases were psychosomatic (i.e. did not have a physical cause): “once people threw back their shoulders and faced the world with a smile and cheerful disposition... [many] afflictions would disappear” We can be cheerful because God has established His Son on the Throne (i.e. Jesus is Lord) Ps.2:4-6; Rom.10:9-10

God’s Words (precepts, instructions) keep us healthy: *My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one’s whole body (Prov.4:20-22)*

It is the Prayer of Faith that is effective *And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up (Jas.5:15)* but remember faith is a gift not something we can make up or manipulate into a formula. **Faith is quite simply taking God at His Word:** *Jesus replied, “You may go. Your son will live.” The man took Jesus at his word (The man believed what Jesus said) and departed. (Jn.4:50). Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar (1Jn.5:10) Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker Is:45:9*

If you are sick why don’t you ask God to heal you now?

James writes: *The prayer (singular) of a righteous person (singular) is powerful and effective (Jas.5:16)* You don’t need hundreds of people praying hundreds of prayers but your prayer (if you are righteous i.e. you are a Believer) will be powerful and effective.

Good health, full life and prosperity is my inheritance in Jesus and the reward of the righteous ^{(Ps.1:1-3; Prov.13:21; Jn.10:10; 3Jn.1:2).}

God responds to Faith but He answers Prayer

Something beautiful, something good.

All my confusion He understood.

All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife,

But he made something beautiful of my life

June: But you, belong to God; so run from all these evil things, and follow what is right and good. Pursue a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight for what we believe. Hold tightly to the eternal life that God has given you, which you have confessed so well before many witnesses. ^{1Tim.6:11-12 NLT}

Sunday 5th June 2011 Psalm 5.

Through adversity to the heavens

During WWII the British Government encouraged the public to be personally involved in the war effort with various initiatives for raising money and support including *Tanks for Attack Campaign 1942; Warship Week 1942; Wings For Victory Week 1943; Salute the*

Soldier Week 1944. Communities who reached the recommended targets were given a plaque to commemorate their achievements.

We are in a war but fortunately for us the ultimate Victory has already been won by Jesus on the cross: *He forgave all our sins. He cancelled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross. In this way, God disarmed the evil rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross of Christ.* ^{Col.2:13-15 NLT}

However we are still in a deadly war for our hearts & minds. Actually all sin starts with a thought: *Don't blame God when you are tempted! God cannot be tempted by evil, and he doesn't use evil to tempt others. We are tempted by our own desires that drag us off and trap us. Our desires make us sin, and when sin is finished with us, it leaves us dead.* ^{James 1:14-15 CEV}

Like WWII we can get personally involved in this battle and change the way we live from being defeated to living Victoriously. The weapons we are to use are not battleships, tanks or aircraft (*For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.* ^{2Cor.10:3-5}).

Our weapons are: **Faith** (i.e. believing God and never quarrelling with Him ^{Isaiah 45:9} or accusing Him of doing wrong ^{Job.1:22}): *for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.* ^{1John 5:4-5}); the **Word of God** (**Jesus overcame the devil using 3 scriptures:** *It is written...* ^{Luke 4:1-13}!); *I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.* ^{1Jn.2:14} **the Blood of Jesus** (i.e. His death and resurrection) and **our own confession:** *They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death* ^{Rev.12:11} and **Worship** (praise i.e. telling the truth about God and honouring Him with our conversation and conduct): *Let the saints rejoice in this honour and sing for joy on their beds. May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands* ^{Psalms 149 5-6}.

Let's develop our Faith through the Word of God, Worship and our own confession so we live as overcomers as we turn Warship Week into Worship Week!

To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ^{Rev.21:6-7}

The Motto of the Royal Air Force is *Per Ardua Ad Astra* which means: Through Adversity to the Stars

But you belong to God; so run from all these evil things, and follow what is right and good. Pursue a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight for what we believe. Hold tightly to the eternal life that God has given you. ^{1Tim.6:11-12 NLT}

Sunday 12th Psalm 5. Acts 21:

Prophecy in the Church Today Nu.11:24-30; Acts 21:8-14; 1Cor.14.

Christianity is a living faith based on the New Covenant introduced through Jesus death: *This is my blood of the new covenant. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many* ^{Matt.26:28}. The Old Covenant is obsolete ^{Heb.8:13} and is finished with because the new is better ^{Heb.7:22}. However we can learn a lot from the OT as the examples and rituals were types, patterns and examples ^{Col.2:17; Heb.8:5; 10:1}.

Old Testament Prophets:

1) **Prayed Effectively:** the 1st mention Prophet in the OT was Abram where God said: *he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live*^{Gen.20:7}. Effective prayer is an essential part of the Christian's life: *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him*^{Jn.5:14-15}.

2) **Spoke for God:** God used prophets to speak to people: *Aaron will be your prophet*^{Ex.7:1}. *You shall speak to [Aaron] and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him*^{Ex.4:15-16}. Although the Bible continues to be the world's best-selling book few people actually read it with understanding. We Christians are commissioned by God to TELL others about Him and His Kingdom: *Go into all the world. Preach (tell) the good news to everyone*^{Mark.16:15}.

3) **Knew God intimately:** If we are to speak on God's behalf we must know what we are talking about: *Then the LORD said, "...Suppose one of my prophets is among you. I make myself known to him in visions. I speak to him in dreams*^{Nu.12:6}. God does expect us to know Him personally and He still speaks directly to us: *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Holy Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will have dreams*^{Joel 2:28/Acts 2:14}.

However, God will never tell us to do something he has already told us not to! We need to know God's will, desires, wishes and plan **which He has already given to us in the Scriptures** as revealed in Jesus through the New Covenant. God explains that we must compare what people (especially "Prophets") say with God's revealed will^{Dent.13:1}. Examples of this are 1Kings 13 and Jer.35 where people were tested by God to see if they would obey His known will. The Bereans were commended because they checked out what Paul preached with the Scriptures^{Act17:11}. We certainly do not need a "prophecy" or a "word from God" to live a blessed and victorious life because: *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires*^{2Pet.1:3-4}.

The OT prophets had a national leadership role and often brought a rebuke to the king or country. In the NT God's Kingdom is not political or geographical but the rule of Christ in the Believer's heart. God's nation is the Church and the NT Prophet's ministry is to **Encourage, Edify and Comfort**^{1Cor.14:1-3}. There are examples of rebuke in the NT but any discipline should be implemented by the Church leaders and are certainly not part of the general church life or worship. Jesus came to bring us life not to condemn us: *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned...*^{Jn3:17-18}

I like what the angel told the Apostle John about prophecy:

For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy^{Rev.19:10}.

What Jesus taught is the very heart of prophecy^{NIV}

For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus^{NLT}

For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus^{NIV2011}

Those who tell about Jesus have the spirit of a prophet^{Worldwide English}

For the truth that Jesus revealed is what inspires the prophets^{Good News}

Moses wanted everyone to prophesy: *I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets* ^{Nu.11:29}
So let us all Pursue love and be eager for the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy ^{1Cor.14:1}.

Sunday 19th June 2011 Psalm 7. Acts 22:

Testimony Time: How did you become a Christian?

The Bible describes **conversion** (meaning literally *to turn back, return or change*) in various ways: **received him, believed in his name** ^{Jn.1:12}; **born of God** ^{Jn.1:13}; **born again** (or from above) ^{Jn.3:3}; **born of the Spirit** ^{Jn.3:5}; **born again of imperishable seed** ^{1Pet.1:23}; **accepted the message** ^{Acts 2:41}; **turning from wicked ways** ^{Acts3:26}; **heard the message and believed** ^{Acts 4:4}; **obedient to the faith** ^{Acts 6:7}; **the Lord opened her heart to respond to the gospel** ^{Acts 16:17}; **repent, and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds** ^{Acts 26:20}.

Paul's account of his conversion in Acts 22 is a model testimony. As we look at his method it will help us in our own witness.

Relate: vs.2-4. Identify your listeners. Paul connected with his audience by finding something in common with them. It is important that people understand us and if we use "Christian" language we explain what we mean.

Reliability: vs.5. We must be credible. Exaggerated claims or inaccurate information will discredit the message that we are trying to convey.

Relay: vs.6-14. Share our encounter with Jesus. We may not have had such a dramatic conversion as Paul did but every conversion involves an encounter with Jesus with the resulting "illumination" or "unveiling" (revelation) that Jesus is the Son of God.

Result: vs.15. Belief always leads to action – indeed a truth not practised is a truth not believed! Paul's response was to **be baptised** and then **tell others about Jesus** because this encounter had changed his life. Although Paul had been involved in the killing of Christians because of their faith, he was now at peace with God and himself and his conscience was clean (not seared). Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ has the same spiritual miracle.

Baptism is an important part of our response because it is an act of obedience, acknowledging God's way is right.

All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John. ^{Luke 7:29-30}

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved ^{Mk.16:16}

Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." ^{Matt.28:18-20}

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ^{Acts 2:38}

Telling others about Jesus (witnessing) is also an important part of our response because it is what God wants us to do, it shows our allegiance to God and it affirms our own belief.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. Then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem. You will be my witnesses in all Judea and Samaria. And you will be my witnesses from one end of the earth to the other.” Acts 1:8 NIV

Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven ^{Matt.10:32-33}

But the way to do what God requires must begin by having faith in him. Scripture says ... “The word is near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart.” ^(Dt.30:14) That means the word we are preaching. You must put your faith in it. Say with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord.” Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Then you will be saved. With your heart you believe and are made right with God. With your mouth you say that Jesus is Lord. And so you are saved. Scripture says, “The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” ^(Is.28:16) ...He richly blesses everyone who calls on him. Scripture says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” ^{(Joel 2:32) Romans 10:6-13 NIV}

Sunday 26th June 2011. Psalm 8. Acts 23:

I believe in the Resurrection

Good sound Theology (the study of God) **will enable us to live a blessed, contented and peaceful life**, regardless of our circumstances. In every situation we will be able to defend our mind and soul from attacks of doubt, distress, discouragement, despondency and even depression as we use the shield of faith to extinguish every attack ^{Eph.6:15}. However we must learn to use the Word of God accurately and effectively: *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth ^{2Tim.2:15} (who uses the true teaching in the right way. ^{NCV})* If you haven't started our study on the Fundamental Truths, you are missing out on some of the great aids to victorious living!

God is Good, His Word is True and it Works in my Life! One of the most powerful statements in the Gospels is: *The man took Jesus at his word.*^{Jn.4:50} **That is faith – taking God at His Word.** God's Work really does work – it changes our situations. *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*^{1Thes.2:13} As we look at the subject of the resurrection, let these truths change your thinking, attitude and life.

Jesus resurrection is basic to the Christian faith and part of our elementary teachings: *Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of ...the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.*^{Heb.6:1-2} **Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel**^{2Tim.2:8}

Jesus resurrection is proof that He is the Son of God: *who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God [or “was appointed to be the Son of God with power”] by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.*^{Rom.1:4} *For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.*^{Rom.14:9}

Jesus resurrection is proof that our sins are forgiven:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.^{1Pet 1:3} *And if Christ has not been raised, what we preach doesn't mean anything. Your faith doesn't mean anything either. More than that, we would be lying about God. We have given witness that God raised Christ from the dead. ...And if Christ has not been raised, your faith doesn't mean anything. Your sins have not been*

forgiven. ...**But Christ really has been raised from the dead. He is the first of all those who will rise.**^{1Cor.15:14-20 NIV}

Jesus resurrection is proof death is not the end or even our enemy:

Jesus also became flesh and blood by being born in human form. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he deliver those who have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.^{Heb.2:14-15 NLT} Our natural bodies don't last forever. They must be dressed with what does last forever. ...Then what is written will come true. It says, "Death has been swallowed up. It has lost the battle." "Death, where is the battle you thought you were winning? Death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin. And the power of sin is the law. But let us give thanks to God! He wins the battle for us because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done.^{1Cor.15:53-57 NIV}

Jesus resurrection is proof that we will be raised from the dead:

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.^{Rom.6:5} And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.^{Rom.8:11} we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus.^{2Cor.4:14}

As we reflect on Jesus resurrection, let us remember that at the coming resurrection, we will be given an immortal body, free from pain, suffering and sin: Yes, dear friends, we are already God's children, and we can't even imagine what we will be like when Christ returns. But we do know that when he comes we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is. And all who believe this will keep themselves pure, just as Christ is pure.^{1Jn.3:2-3}

July: Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.^{2Thesalonians 3:16/18}

Sunday 3rd July 2011. Psalm 9:1-10 Family Communion Service.

Clearing out the Wells: Genesis 26:12-33

In Isaac's time, his wells were filled in by other people but when he opened them up they got angry; however Isaac persisted and eventually reaped the benefits.^{Genesis 26} In 1824 work started on the new Church of St Mary in the Castle, Hastings. It was built on the side of the cliff and had a spring flowing through the inside of the building. By the late 1920's a 100 years "stuff" had accumulated and the spring was hidden from view but someone remembered it and the spring was opened up and made into a feature. How symbolic of the Holy Spirit (the River of Life^{Ezekiel 47; John 7:37-39}) flowing through the Church which is built on the Rock of Jesus Christ^{Matt.16:18; 1Cor.10:4} but so often hidden behind centuries of accumulated "stuff" – traditions^{Matt.15:8}, useless rituals^{Heb.6:1;9:14} etc. We should take God's evaluation of our "stuff", rejecting the useless but keeping the valuable and good.

It is time for us to clear the "useless rituals" out of our wells. How many times have people asked you to **pray for them** instead of **praying with them**? God is more interested in us knowing Him than in us having a comfortable life. We cannot have a "proxy" faith where somebody is authorized to act for us, to pray for us or "intercede" for us.

Another “*useless ritual*” is treating prayer and worship as a “*formula*” thinking that if we say the right words God will grant us some spiritual merit, making it a “*sacrament*”. (A “*sacrament*” is a rite in which God is uniquely active and which conveys some spiritual benefit. However, our belief is that no physical act has any reward without the operation of faith. Even salvation is by faith, not by any act, although faith must act to bring salvation. It is not the **ritual** of prayer and worship that counts but the **response of our hearts** in prayer and worship that God accepts.

If we value something we will look after it and protect it. Perhaps the most valuable item we possess is our soul, which is beyond price: *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*^{Mk.8:36-37} *No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them - the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough - so that they should live on forever and not see decay.*^{Ps.49:7-9}

As members of God’s family, we also have valuable “*birthrights*”. These include grace and peace;^{Eph.1:2} being blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ;^{Eph.1:3} our redemption;^{Eph.1:7} being created to praise God^{Eph.1:12}; being marked with a seal of the Holy Spirit.^{Eph.1:13}

In contrast to Esau who despised his birthright,^{Gen.25:34} we should never show contempt for what God has given us but rather care and protect our spiritual “*birthright*” making sure that we value what God values. Then we will be able to enjoy the benefits of being a part of God’s family.

The greatest thing in all my life is knowing You (Lord Jesus)

The greatest thing in all my life is knowing You

I want to know You more, I want to know You more

The greatest thing in all my life is knowing You

I pray to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is the glorious Father. I keep asking Him to give you the wisdom and understanding that come from the Holy Spirit. I want you to know God better. I also pray that your mind might see more clearly. Then you will know the hope God has chosen you to receive. You will know that the things God's people will receive are rich and glorious. And you will know His great power. It can't be compared with anything else. It is at work for us who believe. It is like the mighty strength God showed when He raised Christ from the dead.^{Eph.1:17-20 NIrV}

Sunday 10th July 2011 – Psalm 13 Acts 24

My faith in Christ Jesus

If our faith is not active and affecting every part of our life then it is just a theory, a notion or an idea that becomes an academic exercise.

Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.^{1Jn.2:4} *Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save your souls. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*^{Jas.1:21-22} *I will show you my faith by my deeds.*^{Jas.2:18}

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.^{Jas.2:26} *Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man ...But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man.*^{Matt.7:24/26}

Paul explained what his faith in Christ Jesus meant: *righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.*^{Acts 24:25}

Righteousness

We need to define words according to God's dictionary not ours. Righteousness is what God is – there is nothing wrong, bad, sinful, evil or unjust with God. He is always right, good, and just. And He is enveloped with love because He is love. We must never lose sight of this - whatever we see around us or experience personally. *God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.* ^{1Jn.1:5}

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right? ^{1Gen. 18:25} We need a more balanced view of God, life and death. Mel Montgomery has written an excellent article entitled *Death, Victory, and the End Times*, which is available on line or from me.

The Holy Spirit shows us the true meaning of righteousness and proves that the world's view is wrong:

When he (the Holy Spirit) comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. ^{1Jn.16:8-11}

Not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is what God calls sin. What we normally call "sin" is usually the fruit of this unbelief and the result of not believing.

Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son ^{1Jn.5:10-11}

Too often we take the world's view of life but the Holy Spirit proves this is a wrong view and He shows us what God really thinks.

Self-control

Sometimes when we label a certain behaviour we can excuse it. The Christian cannot hide behind such excuses for God has given us self-control (also translated a sound mind) *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.* ^{2Tim.1:7}

This is literally a saved mind. We are no longer a slave to sin or our past or to the world because we have been set free to live for God.

Now it is up to us to remind ourselves of this and live as Citizens of Heaven

Judgement

Many schools get their students to take the exams early so if they get poor results or fail they can retake them without falling behind. Christians have already taken their life's "exams" and failed! We were judged and found guilty by God who then forgave us everything and gave us "top marks". Now we never have to worry about our "end of life" exams because we know we have "passed".

Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him ^{Rev.20:6}

The non-Christian still have to take their "end of life" exam and they will fail with no chance to re-take it. This is really serious and it certainly is worth asking people to consider the matter before it is too late.

For further reading on Judgement try Mike Petzer's booklet (available from the Church).

Sunday 17th July 2011. Psalm 15 Acts 25:

Jesus is Alive

Acts 25:19 ‘...a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.’

The Resurrection of Jesus is so crucial to our faith that we should all have at least a basic understanding of this amazing fact. It is clear that Jesus is still influencing our daily lives – our calendar and national holidays, our sense of justice and rightness, our concern for the poor etc. but Jesus is more than an influence or motivation. When Jesus was crucified, His spirit and soul separated from His body and He was pronounced dead. He was buried in a grave but 3 days later His spirit and soul were re-united with His body and Jesus stood up and walked out of the grave. Although Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead a few months previously, this was different because Jesus would never be restricted by physical or natural limitations again.

Death is always traumatic and emotional but murder of an innocent person is especially harrowing. No wonder the Jewish leaders were angry when Jesus rose from the dead as He would be living proof of their crimes! But who really killed Jesus? Hitler called the Jews “Christ killers” and the Jewish people did ask to take the blame: *All the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”*^{1Matt.27:25} Howbeit they soon denied it: *Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.”*^{2Acts 5:27-28}

A large group of Jews came to England with William the Conqueror in 1066. Every successive King formally reviewed a royal charter granting Jews the right to remain in England. The church at the time strictly forbade usury, or the lending of money for profit (canon law was not considered to apply to Jews, and Judaism permits loans with interest between Jews and non-Jews). Jews did not enjoy any of the guarantees of Magna Carta of 1215.

Edward I banned Jews in 1290 with Edict of Expulsion after blaming them for the death of his wife Eleanor (cf the 12 Eleanor Crosses between Lincoln and Charring Cross); this was rescinded in 1558 by Cromwell. The Clarendon Code (a series of four legal statutes passed between 1661-1665 by 1st Earl of Clarendon, Charles II's Lord Chancellor) effectively re-established the supremacy of the Anglican Church after Cromwell's Commonwealth, and ended toleration for dissenting religions. It included Corporation Act (1661) which required all municipal officials to take Anglican communion and the Five-Mile Act (1665) which was aimed at Nonconformist ministers who were forbidden from coming within 5 miles of incorporated towns or the place of their former livings. They were also forbidden to teach in schools. This act was not rescinded until 1812

Pilate washed his hands of the blame but allowed the execution to continue and it was the soldiers who actually nailed Jesus to the cross. The Bible states that God Himself was involved: *The LORD says, “It was my plan to crush him and cause him to suffer. I made his life a guilt offering to pay for sin.”*^{Is.53:10 NIV} *The Book of Life belongs to the Lamb whose death was planned before the world was created.*^{Rev.13:8} And Jesus claims that He was in total control of His own life: *I lay down my life for the sheep. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life - only to take it up again.*^{Jn.10:15-17} *Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.*^{1Jn.3:16}

But actually it was our sins that really killed Jesus: *He suffered the things we should have suffered. He took on himself the pain that should have been ours. But we thought God was punishing him. We thought God was wounding him and making him suffer. But the servant was pierced because we had sinned. He was crushed because we had done what was evil. He was punished to make us whole again. His wounds have healed us.*^{Is.53:4-5NIrV}

Yes, we are all guilty of Jesus death! But He forgave us everything – even before we did anything wrong! *My dear children, I'm writing this to you so that you will not sin. But suppose someone does sin. Then we have one who speaks to the Father for us. He stands up for us. He is Jesus Christ, the Blameless One. He gave his life to pay for our sins. But he not only paid for our sins. He also paid for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.2:1-2 NIrV}

Because Jesus is alive, He is living proof that we have peace with God through His death – AND he has given gifts to help us: *There is one God and Father of all. He is over everything. He is through everything. He is in everything. But each one of us has received a gift of grace, just as Christ wanted us to have it. That is why Scripture says, "When he went up to his place on high, he led a line of prisoners. He gave gifts to people."*^{Eph.4:6-8 NIrV}

Yes Jesus has taken prisoner the devil and all his domain of sin, the curse of the law and even death BUT Jesus has given to us the help we need in the Person of the Holy Spirit – and He is always with us. Do you have confidence that God tells the truth? Do you have confidence that God does what He says He will do? – Then you can trust God to take care of you.

Because Jesus is alive and lives with us in the person of the Holy Spirit we will want to honour Jesus not dishonour Him; please Jesus not hurt Him; respect Jesus not embarrass Him; love Jesus, not despise Him; speak well of Jesus not ignore Him.

We belong to the family of Believers, so wherever we are, let us continue to think, act, talk and give as Believers!

Sunday 24th July 2011 Psalm 16 Acts 26:

What is your hope?

Acts 26:6 ‘...my hope in what God has promised.’

Do you see God’s promises for a future time or even a future generation? Or do you see God’s promises for you, here and now? *Hope put off is a weariness to the heart; but when what is desired comes, it is a tree of life.*^{Prov.13:12 BBE}

Martha could believe her brother would rise again at the Resurrection but it was only after Jesus had encouraged her that she realized Jesus promises were for now! (Jn.11:17-27) **So what is your hope or expectation for the future?** We need sufficient sleep, food, finance and friends otherwise we will live a stressed, anxious, fearful, tired life with a tendency to get sick and miserable. Too much or too little of life’s basic needs bring their own problems: *Every word of God proves true. ...O God, I beg two favours from you before I die. First, help me never to tell a lie. Second, give me neither poverty nor riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs. For if I grow rich, I may deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" And if I am too poor, I may steal and thus insult God's holy name.*^{Prov.30:5-8 NLT} **But ...real life is not measured by how much we own ...a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.**^{Lk.12:15-21NLT}

So what is your spiritual hope or expectation?

Our hope is Christ living in us: *Christ is in you. He is your hope of glory.* ^{Col1:27NlrV}

Our hope is glorious: *I also pray that your mind might see more clearly. Then you will know the hope God has chosen you to receive. You will know that the things God's people will receive are rich and glorious.* ^{Eph.1:18NlrV}

Our hope protects our minds and continually reminds us that we are saved:

But we belong to the day. So let us control ourselves. ...Let us put on the hope of salvation like a helmet. ^{1Thes.5:8 NlrV}

Our hope keeps us from drifting into danger: *It is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can take new courage, for we can hold on to his promise with confidence. This confidence is like a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.* ^{Heb.6:18-19 NLT}

Our hope is joyful (not a manufactured “joy” like a forced smile but the blessing of an inner peace and contentment): *Never let the fire in your heart go out. Keep it alive. Serve the Lord. When you hope, be joyful. When you suffer, be patient. When you pray, be faithful. Share with God's people who are in need. Welcome others into your homes. Bless those who hurt you.* ^{Rom.12:11-14 NlrV}

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of highest privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us—they help us learn to endure. And endurance develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation. And this expectation will not disappoint us. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. ^{Rom.5:3-5 NLT}

Yes we need to live as citizens of heaven not enemies of the cross. That doesn't mean we have reached perfection or full maturity but it does mean we are growing in grace and love, confident that God will keep his promise. **It will also make us very very happy**

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven. ...But we must be sure to obey the truth we have learned already. Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example. For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ. Their future is eternal destruction. Their god is their appetite, they brag about shameful things, and all they think about is this life here on earth. But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Saviour. He will take these weak mortal bodies of ours and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same mighty power that he will use to conquer everything, everywhere. ^{Phil.3:12-21NLT}

Sunday 31st July 2011 Psalm 17 Acts 27:

How many people do you influence?

Acts 27:24 God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.

Never think of yourself as unimportant!! You really do influence more people than you think because within 6 people you can connect with anyone in the world! **“Six degrees**

of separation” refers to the idea that everyone is on average approximately six steps away from any other person on Earth. Zechariah 8:23 suggests that we are living in a time when at least 10 people want to be our friends and companions *because they have heard that God is with us*. In Genesis 18, Abraham discussed the influence of godly people with God and concluded that 10 righteous people would have saved Sodom & Gomorrah. God does not bring judgment to nations or cities today but bad decisions of governments will affect their citizens. However the blessings of being a believer will overflow to those around us. Our Christian influence is of great benefit to our family: *For the Christian wife brings holiness to her marriage, and the Christian husband brings holiness to his marriage. Otherwise, your children would not have a godly influence, but now they are set apart for him.*^{1Cor.7:14NLT} and also to our society: *The whole city celebrates when the godly succeed; they shout for joy when the godless die. Upright citizens bless a city and make it prosper, but the talk of the wicked tears it apart.*^{Pron.11:10-11NLT}

Yes we are distinct, different and blessed: *But God chose you to be his people. You are royal priests. You are a holy nation. You are a people who belong to God. All of this is so that you can sing his praises.*^{1Pet.2:9} *Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.*^{Mal.3:18}

But our distinction is due to God’s Grace as found in Jesus Christ. Grace is usually linked with something else: Grace & Peace^{1Pet.1:2}; Grace & Truth^{Jn.1:14-17}; Grace & Power^{Act 4:33;6:8;14:3}; Grace & Strength^{2Tim.2:1; Heb.13:9}; Grace & Salvation^{Eph.1:7; 2:5-8}; Grace & Glory^{Eph.1:6}. So, the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is ours in abundance with Peace, Power, Truth, Strength, Salvation and Glory!

Do you expect those around you to benefit from the blessings of God that you have received? We are expected to pass on to others what we receive from God^{1Cor.11:23; 15:3; 2Cor 1:4}

If God sent Jesus to die for us when we were His enemies, do you think He will love us less now we are His own family?

But here is how God has shown his love for us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The blood of Christ has made us right with God. So we are even more sure that Jesus will save us from God's anger. Once we were God's enemies. But we have been brought back to him because his Son has died for us. Now that God has brought us back, we are even more secure. We know that we will be saved because Christ lives. And that is not all. We are full of joy in God because of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of him, God has brought us back to himself.^{Rom.5:11 NIrV}

In fact God describes us as the apple of His eye: *this is what the LORD Almighty says: “...for whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye”*^{Zech.2:8}

That does not mean we are exempt from difficulties, disease or hardships: *I have told you these things, so that you can have peace because of me. In this world you will have trouble. But cheer up! I have won the battle over the world.*^{Jn.16:33NIrV} **Yes Jesus has overcome the world**

and by our faith we can overcome too: *This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.*^{1Jn.5:4} The NLT puts it this way: *Loving God means keeping his commandments, and really, that isn't difficult. For every child of God defeats this evil world by trusting Christ to give the victory. And the ones who win this battle against the world are the ones who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:3-5}

Sometimes we need to be reminded how much our behaviour affect others and how much God is relying on us to communicate Him and His Kingdom to others. **Never apologise for God’s blessings!**

So you must never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord. ^{2Tim.2:8NLT} *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.* ^{Lk9:26}

I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. ^{2Tim.2:12NKJV}

August: May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ^{1Thesalonians 5:23}

Sunday 7th August Psalm 18:1-19

Is your knife sharp?

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ^{Heb.4:12}

Blunt knives are dangerous because extra force is generally used and then your hand slips and you cut yourself!! To use a blunt knife or axe effectively you can sharpen it, use more force or use more skill: *If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success.* ^{Ecd.10:10NIV} *Since a dull axe requires great strength, sharpen the blade. That's the value of wisdom; it helps you succeed.* ^{Ecd.10:10NLT} (or Remember: *The duller the axe the harder the work; Use your head: The more brains, the less muscle.*) Extra force uses more energy which will wear you out: *A fool's work wearies him.* ^{Ecd.10:15} When Adam sinned, God cursed the ground and said his work would be tiresome: *So I am putting a curse on the ground because of what you did. All the days of your life you will have to work hard to get food from the ground... You will have to work hard and sweat a lot to produce the food you eat.* ^{Gen.3:17-19NirV} Previously Adam's work had been a pleasure: *The LORD God put the man in the Garden of Eden. He put him there to work its ground and to take care of it.* ^{Gen.2:15} and the word WORK is also translated WORSHIP: *Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you... I will give you a full life span.* ^{Ex.23:25} But Jesus has removed the curse for us: *Christ set us free from the curse of the law. He did it by becoming a curse for us... Christ Jesus set us free so that the blessing given to Abraham would come to non-Jews through Christ. He did it so that we might receive the promise of the Holy Spirit by believing in Christ.* ^{Gal.3:13-14NirV} Now our work (worship) is not tiring but energising – in fact Jesus will give us rest when we are tired: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.* ^{Matt.11:28-30} *The LORD ...will not grow tired or weary... He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak... those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.* ^{Is.40:28-31} see also ^{Is.50:4; Gal.6:9; Heb.12:3}

The Word of God is described as a knife or sword: *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart* ^{Heb.4:12NIV}. *For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are. Nothing in all creation can hide from him. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes. This is the God to whom we must explain all that we have done.* ^{Heb.4:12-13NLT} [Jesus] voice was

like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword.^{Rev.1:15-16}

The Word of God really does work in the Believer's life: *the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*^{1Thes.2:13} but we need to keep the Word in us sharp and clean. Fellowship with other Believers will keep us sharp: *As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.*^{Prov.27:17} and God keeps a note of it too: *Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and loved to think about him.*^{Mal.3:16}

Our minds get dull and need sharpening too: *But their minds were made dull... Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*^{2Cor.3:14-16} *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*^{Eph.5:15-17}

Confessing God's Word is not a magic formulæ to get blessed but a means of establishing God's values in our life so we agree with Him. "*Affirmations are not a technique to get what you want in life but rather a means of building the truths of God's Word into the life of and consequences of a Believer in dependence on the Holy Spirit*" E.W.Kenyon

Sunday 14th August 2011. Psalm 18:25-35 Acts 28.

Chapter 28 is not the end!

Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 28:31

The Book of Acts is sometimes called "*The Acts of the Apostles,*" but actually deals mainly with Peter and Paul rather than all of the Apostles. It is sometimes called "*The Acts of the Holy Spirit.*" Luke had already written his Gospel with the purpose of recording what Jesus began to do and teach until His ascension. The Book of Acts continues the account of Jesus working through the Holy Spirit after His ascension, so "*The Acts of the Risen, Glorified, and Ascended Lord as Carried Out by the Holy Spirit*" might be a better title but too long for general usage!

Paul spent 5 years in custody awaiting his trial in Rome: 2 years in Caesarea under Felix (Acts 24); at least 1 year traveling to Rome including 3 months stranded in Malta (Acts 25-28) and 2 years in Rome (Acts 28). However in that time Paul was able to witness face to face with the Emperor, with Kings, Governors, Army Commanders, owners of ships and their Captains as well as many other people that he would never have otherwise had the opportunity to meet. This was not wasted time but God ordained time. We never read that Paul was depressed or even complained but rejoiced that he could *share about kingdom of God and about the Lord Jesus Christ.* In fact he was so convinced that God wanted him to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome that he could not be persuaded to avoid the dangers that he knew lay ahead. "*Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die ...for the name of the Lord Jesus.*"^{Acts 21:13}

How do you see your life? Do you feel as if you are in a "prison"? Or do you feel as if you've been "stranded" for a few months or even years? Try to see your life as an opportunity to *share about kingdom of God and about the Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Acts 28:31}

Remember – Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was about being BLESSED - even when times are hard or painful: *Blessed are those who are spiritually needy. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them.... Blessed are you when people make fun of you and hurt you because of me. You are*

also blessed when they tell all kinds of evil lies about you because of me. Be joyful and glad. Your reward in heaven is great. In the same way, people hurt the prophets who lived long ago.^{Matt.5:3-12NTrV}

The Lord Jesus Christ is central to knowing God and the Kingdom of God – Know Jesus, Know God; No Jesus – No God! *Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*^{Jn.17:3} *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} *We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:20}

Unlike the other books of the NT, the Book of Acts has no proper ending – in fact you could add: *to be continued!* If Luke was to write another chapter¹ of *The Acts of the Risen, Glorified, and Ascended Lord as Carried Out by the Holy Spirit* what would he write about you?
¹NB: *The chapters in our Bible were introduced by Stephen Langton (AD1150 – 1228) who was Archbishop of Canterbury when King John signed the Magna Carta in AD1215. Bible verses were introduced much later by Robert Estienne, who was also known as Robert Stephens (AD1503 – 1559) just in time for the first Bible printed in English to include verses.*

Sunday 28th August 2011 Psalm 20

Maturity

Maturity is taking responsibility for our actions.

Jesus is equipping us so that *we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ.*^{Eph.4:13} Our “World-View” will determine our behaviour because we can see how our life interacts with others. When we see the bigger picture – life beyond our own troubles, responsibilities and joys – we are more likely to show compassion, grace and love to others. When get a “God-View” – seeing life from God’s perspective – we should be humbled and full of gratitude that the Almighty God who created the Universe by His Word would show us such love and care: *O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in the whole earth! ...I think about the heavens. I think about what your fingers have created. I think about the moon and stars that you have set in place. What is a human being that you think about him? What is a son of man that you take care of him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings. You placed on him a crown of glory and honour. You made human beings the rulers over all that your hands have created. You put everything under their control.*^{Ps.8:1-6} Too many people worship a “god” they have created in their own likeness rather than worshiping the God who created us in His likeness!^{Gen.1:26}

Philemon was quite a rich man who lived in Colossæ^{Col.4:7-9} and the Church met in his house^{Phile.1:2}. Paul wrote this letter to him from prison in Rome in about AD61. Apparently Philemon’s slave Onesimus had run away from Colossæ and turned up in Rome; here he met Paul and had become a Christian but now it was time for him to take responsibility for his actions. Onesimus may have been useless to Philemon in the past but he was now useful to Paul who was sending him back to be useful to Philemon, not only as a slave but as his spiritual son and a fellow Believer^{Philemon 1:11} (a clever play on words as “Onesimus” means “useful!”). Paul asks Tychicus and Onesimus to take letters to the Churches at Colossæ and Laodicea^{Col.4:7-16} together with this personal letter to Philemon. In this letter to Philemon, Paul also stresses that as a Believer, Philemon must take responsibility for his own actions. And just to help him do the right thing Paul asks

for a room to be prepared as he will visit very shortly. Now we belong to the Family of God and must live like Believers!

Perhaps the only thing we can give God that He hasn't first given us is appreciation or thanks. Our attitude may determine our altitude (the level of our lifestyle) but our gratitude will certainly determine our quality of our life and it shows a true appreciation of God's grace. When Jesus healed the 10 lepers he said: *"Weren't ten men healed? Where are the other nine? Is this Samaritan the only one who came back to thank God?" Then Jesus said to him, "Stand up and go on your way. You were healed because you believed."* ^{Luke 17:17-19BBE}

Repentance (literally a change of heart or mind) is different from remorse (which is being sorry you have been found out)! When we really know God's forgiveness we will show our appreciation by an attitude of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people. Sometimes that takes a lot of courage and humility but then maturity is taking responsibility for our actions! *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.* ^{2Cor.7:10-11}

True repentance will always include these 5 A's

- 1 **Acknowledgement** of the wrong
- 2 **Apology** for the wrong
- 3 **Action** of determination to change
- 4 **Appreciation** of God's forgiveness
- 5 **Attitude** of grace, gratitude & gentleness towards God & people.

September: And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ^{Philippians 4:7}

Sunday 4th September 2011 Psalm 21. Matt.16:13-20

Keys of the Kingdom

Jesus is the Gate-Keeper of Heaven & Hell; life & death ^{Rev.1:18}.

In the OT King David appointed people to be Gate-Keepers ^{1Chron.9:17-30}. Only the Gate-Keepers could let people into the Tabernacle – the place where God would meet people - and they also kept an accurate inventory of everything that was used for worship. Isaiah prophesied of another Gate-Keeper who would have the Key to the House of David ^{Is.22:22}. Jesus said He was that Key-holder and that *He holds the key of David. No one can shut what he opens. And no one can open what he shuts.* ^{Rev.3:7} We don't use the candles, lamps, incense and elaborate uniforms etc. of the OT worship because they were temporary - an introduction, a representation or a picture of Jesus - until He came ^{Col.2:17}. Now Jesus has come we have the real thing not the substitute ^{Heb.9:10} but God does keep a strict inventory of our worship and fellowship: *Those who had respect for the LORD talked with one another. They cheered each other up. And the LORD heard them. A list of people and what they did was written on a scroll in front of him. It included the names of those who respected the LORD and honoured him.* ^{Mal.3:16} Another version puts it this way: *Then those whose lives honoured GOD got together and talked it over. GOD saw what they were doing and listened in. A book was opened in God's presence and minutes were taken of the meeting, with the names of the GOD-fearers written down, all the names of those who honoured GOD's name.*

Any religion that does not acknowledge Jesus is God is a false religion – even if it is practiced in a Church! Jesus is the only way to God: *And who is the great liar? The one who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Such people are antichrists, for they have denied the Father and the Son. Anyone who denies the Son doesn't have the Father either. But anyone who confesses the Son has the Father also.*^{Jn.2:22-23} Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”^{Jn.14:6}.

That’s why we make so much of Jesus – He is God’s Son: *I give witness that this is the Son of God.*^{Jn.1:34} He was always with God & is God: *In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God.*^{Jn.1:1} God now speaks to us through Jesus: *In the past, God spoke ...at many times. He spoke in different ways. But in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son.*^{Heb.1:1-2}

When Peter acknowledged that Jesus was God’s Son, Jesus gave him the keys to God’s Kingdom: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** ...Jesus replied “*And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A 'yes' on earth is 'yes' in heaven. A 'no' on earth is 'no' in heaven.*”^{Matt.16:16-19}

The statement **“Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God”** is the key that will open the door to God’s Kingdom and Peter was the 1st to use it: *Then Peter stood up with the Eleven. In a loud voice he spoke to the crowd ... God has made this Jesus whom you crucified to be both Lord and Christ! ...All of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then your sins will be forgiven. You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children. It is also for all who are far away. It is for all whom the Lord our God will choose.*^{Act 2:14-39} See how this contrasted with the religious leaders who wanted to keep people away from God: *How terrible it will be for you, teachers of the law and Pharisees! You pretenders! You hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter. And you will not let those enter who are trying to.*^{Matt.23:13}

So what is God’s Kingdom? The Kingdom of God is not a place or a political dogma but the Person of Jesus ruling our lives – it is doing God’s will - not just talking about it: *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*^{Matt:7:21} “*The coming of God's kingdom is not something you can see just by watching for it carefully. People will not say, 'Here it is.' Or, 'There it is.' God's kingdom is within you (or among you).*”^{Lk.17:20-21}

The Kingdom of God now open to us through Jesus Christ Are you living in it?

Sunday 11th September 2011 Psalm 22:19-26; John 1:1-34

God’s Plan of Redemption

Fear is mostly about being afraid of the anticipated future - of what might happen; but faith is having peace in the present, not because we have blanked out the future but because we know God is with us and He will never leave us. After the resurrection, Jesus greeted people with *Peace be with you!*^{Jn.20:19-26} because He wanted them to live in the benefits of God’s kingdom – of enjoying God & coming to Him boldly^{Heb.4:16; 10:19} instead of being afraid.

Art is an attempt to portray something. Some art is life-like and so it is clear what the artist is trying to represent, whilst other art can be a complete mystery! Even before God created the world He had a plan to redeem us because He knew Adam would sin and

mankind would die (be separated from God). God didn't keep this plan in His mind but portrayed it through drama (in people's lives) and text (written down in the Bible). Just as an artist's work is only a copy or representation of an object, so God's illustration of His plan of redemption was only a copy of the plan that would be revealed in Jesus Christ. All through the Bible, especially in the OT, we see "types", "shadows" or "pictures" of Jesus^{Col.2:17} and His redemption plan for us^{Gal.4:24}. We see it in Adam's skins^{Gen.3:21}, Noah's ark^{Gen.7:1}, Abraham's sacrifice^{Gen.22:2} and Moses' exodus^{Ex.12}. When faced with a stunning painting or other art we never absorb all the details at once but need to go back and take a 2nd or 3rd look at it and even then we rarely take in the finer points! These "pictures" in the Bible are there to prepare us for the great and wonderful redemption God has prepared for us so we won't be too overwhelmed and also to assure us that everything is going according to God's plan.

God's plan of redemption is most clearly depicted in the Exodus story^{Ex.12} where the Israelites killed a lamb and painted its blood on the doorpost of their houses. Those inside the house ate the lamb whilst waiting to leave Egypt and their lives of slavery. As they waited, the first-born of every household in Egypt died unless they were in a house that was sprinkled with the lamb's blood.^{Ex.12:12-13; Heb.13:28} However this was only a picture or a real-life drama to help us understand that Jesus would redeem us from a life of slavery to sin and bring us into God's kingdom – a place of blessing and true prosperity. Unfortunately most couldn't understand that the "pictures" were just a copies^{Heb.10:1} and defended the obsolete^{Heb.8:13} with violence – they killed Jesus and many of his followers. So why did it take so long for God to bring in His plan of redemption? Firstly, it was not long in God's agenda: *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.*^{Pet.3:8} God is outside of time – He made time for us! Secondly, God wanted everything in place before Jesus came so the plan of redemption could proceed quickly and effectively: *But when the time had fully come (the right time or the appropriate time), God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law.*^{Gal.4:4} When Jesus did come, the transportation, communication, political and religious time was just right to quickly get God's plan of redemption out across the known world. We know that within a short while the gospel had reached Africa and India (and then on to China). Christianity came to Britain before A.D. 37. Gildas (A.D. 516-570) a British Historian, states, *Meanwhile, these islands ... received the beams of light that is, the Holy precepts of Christ, the true Sun at the latter part, as we know, of the reign of Tiberius Caesar*^{Roman Emperor A.D. 14-37}.

John the Baptist ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus: *Isaiah had spoken of John when he said, "He is a voice shouting in the wilderness: 'Prepare a pathway for the Lord's coming! Make a straight road for him! Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills! Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places! And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.'"*^{Lk.3:4} so when John saw Jesus he said: *Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*^{Jn.1:29} Jesus was not yet another picture of God's redemption plan but the real thing and He introduced God's kingdom – a kingdom of power not of words!^{1Cor.4:20} John recognised this kingdom and Jesus' role in it when he said: *This is the One I was talking about. I said, 'A man who comes after me is more important than I am. That's because he existed before I was born.' I did not know him. But God wants to make it clear ...who this person is. That's the reason I came baptizing with water." ...I give witness that this is the Son of God.*^{Jn.1:30-34}

What is your role in God's kingdom?

Sunday 18th September 2011 Psalm 23; John 1:29-51

Have you heard God's Call?

Everything God includes in Scripture is intentional and for our instruction^{2Tim.3:16}, example^{1Cor.10:11} inspiration^{Heb.11} and encouragement^{Rom.15:4}. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are quite similar in their accounts of Jesus ministry. John, who wrote his Gospel later, includes events that the others missed out and so is understandably distinctive. Some people misguidedly interpret this as being muddled; for instance John records Jesus clearing the Temple at the beginning of His ministry^{Jn.2:12} whereas Mark places it at the end of Jesus ministry^{Mk.11:12}. But by comparing the other associated events (Jesus the turning of the water into wine^{Jn.2:1} and Jesus cursing the fig tree^{Mk.11:20}) it is clear that these are 2 separate occasions – one at the beginning of Jesus ministry and the other at the end of His ministry. Far from being muddled, the Bible provides us with yet another facet of God's wonderful plan of redemption in Jesus. (Next week we will see the significance of this!)

When Jesus called his 1st disciples, He did not expect an immediate emotional response but a carefully, considered, deliberate decision. John records that Andrew, Peter and others from his home town were disciples of John the Baptist. They had travelled down from Galilee to Bethany near Jericho (about 80 miles away) and were baptising in the river Jordan there. Here they heard John the Baptist explain about the coming Christ, saw Jesus baptised, heard God speak from heaven^{Matt.3:13-17} and then heard John explain that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God^{Jn.1:29-34}. The crowd from Galilee left John the Baptist and followed Jesus for a while and then went back home^{Jn.1:43}. When Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness Andrew, Peter and the others went back to their fishing business until Jesus came and found them^{Lk.5:1-11}. It was sometime after they had been introduced to Jesus, had heard Him teaching and seen Him change water into wine, that Jesus asked them for a carefully considered, deliberate decision to follow Him.

Far from excusing themselves as “unworthy” or “not good enough”, those 1st disciples *left everything and followed him*^{Lk.5:11}. When Moses tried to excuse himself from obeying God's call: *Who am I, that I should go*^{Ex.3:11}; *what shall I tell them?*^{Ex.3:13} *What if they do not believe me or listen to me*^{Ex.4:1}; *O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue*^{Ex.4:10}; *O Lord, please send someone else to do it*^{Ex.4:13}; then ***the LORD's anger burned against Moses***^{Ex.4:14}!

When Jesus asked to stay at his house, Zacchaeus responded *at once and welcomed him gladly*^{Lk.19:6}. Jesus said that *“If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”*^{Jn.14:23}.

Yes! Jesus does want a carefully considered and deliberate decision from us, not just to acknowledge that He is good or even God but to actually welcome Him and follow Him. It is not enough to just “believe” we must act on our belief. To follow Jesus means to adhere to His values and principles and publicly acknowledge Him in every part of our life.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man^{Matt.4:24NIrV} *Humbly accept the message God has planted in your hearts, for it is strong enough to save your souls. And remember, it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don't obey, you are only fooling yourself. For if you just listen and don't obey, it is like looking at your face in a mirror but doing nothing to improve your appearance. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.*

But if you keep looking steadily into God's perfect law—the law that sets you free—and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. ^{Jas.1:21-25NLT}

If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life. And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose or forfeit your own soul in the process? If a person is ashamed of me and my message, I, the Son of Man, will be ashamed of that person when I return in my glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels. ^{Lk.9:23-26NLT}

Sunday 25th September 2011 – Psalm 24; John 2

When did you last wash?

Jesus began His Ministry by clearing the Temple of merchants selling animals for sacrifices and also the money changers declaring *Don't turn my Father's house into a marketplace!* ^{Jn.2:16} He also ended His ministry doing the same, saying: *“It is written that the Lord said, ‘My house will be called a house where people can pray.’ But you are making it a ‘den for robbers.”* ^{Matt.21:13} In these events Jesus was painting another picture that depicted God’s plan of redemption. At the beginning of His ministry He turned the water into wine ^{Jn.2:1-11} and at the end, He cursed the fig-tree which then withered supernaturally quickly ^{Matt.21:21}. Jesus used these visual aids to help explain the purpose of clearing the Temple.

For the Jews to approach God or even talk to Him, they had to be ceremoniously clean or pure - “holy” - by undergoing various rituals. The penalty for being “un-holy” (unclean) was severe and the Bible records many who had died because they had tried to by-pass God’s rules. One of the necessary rituals to be “holy” was ceremonial washing ^{Mark 7:1-15}, so many households had large water pots which could hold up to 30 gallons. Jesus asked that 6 of these pots to be filled up with water and then said: *dip some out. Take it to the person in charge of the dinner* ^{Jn.2:8}. When the person in charge tasted the water that had been turned into wine, he said: *Everyone brings out the best wine first... But you have saved the best until now.* ^{Jn.2:9-10}

Ceremonial washing can never make anyone holy (pure or clean). If our spirit (heart) is clean, then our whole person is also clean: *First clean the inside of the cup and dish. Then the outside will also be clean* ^{Matt.23:24} but if our heart is not right, we are not clean however much we wash: *But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart. Those are the things that make you ‘unclean.’* ^{Matt.15:18}

When Jesus changed the water into wine, He was setting the scene for His ministry of the New Covenant: *he took a cup of wine ... and said, “Each of you drink from it, for this is my blood, which seals the new covenant between God and his people. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many* ^{Matt.26:27-28}. There are no more rituals to cover our sin but when we “drink” Jesus blood (i.e. personally accept the facts, and receive benefits of, Jesus death) our sins are forgiven - taken away ^{Jn.1:29} not “atoned for” (which means “covered up”). Jesus said that *repentance and remission (forgiveness) of sins should be preached in His name to all nations* ^{Lk.24:47}.

The word remission literally means **dismissal** and is also translated freedom and release: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed* ^{Lk.4:18}.

Yes! Under the New Covenant our sins are removed, sent away from us and dismissed by the blood of Jesus! People still want the old “wine” – the rituals - the “performance” of religion; the pictures of God’s plan of redemption, the priest to

mediate between them and God – to say their prayers for them! *And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. The new wine would burst the old skins, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine must be put into new wineskins. But no one who drinks the old wine seems to want the fresh and the new. 'The old is better,' they say.* ^{Lk.5:37-39} **It might make people feel better to undergo rituals but they don't work!** *God, who knows people's hearts... also cleansed their hearts through faith. Why are you now questioning God's way by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, through the grace of the Lord Jesus* ^{Acts 15:9-11}. **The old way is finished:** *By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear* ^{Heb.8:13}. *The old rule is done away with. It was weak and useless. The law didn't make anything perfect.* ^{Heb.7:18-19} God had declared that He would meet with people in the Tabernacle (and later in the Temple ^{1Kings 8}) *For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting before the LORD. There I will meet you and speak to you; there also I will meet with the Israelites* ^{Ex.29:41-43}. When Jesus cleared the Temple, He was teaching that the real "House of God" – the place where God met and spoke to people - is us: *For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."* ^{2Cor.6:16} This truth was so important that Jesus cleared the Temple again at the end of His ministry. So I ask the same question that the apostle Paul asked: **Don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price.** ^{1Cor.6:19-20}

October: **May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.** ^{2Corinthians 13:14}

Sunday 2nd October 2011 Psalm 25; Gen 8

God's Faithfulness

As long as the earth remains, there will be springtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night ^{Gen.8:22}

We expect the seasons to continually repeat their rotation because they have done so for thousands of years without fail. We think of the seasons' regularity as part of the "laws of nature" which operate automatically without any human intervention – like gravity. But God states that the seasons will only continue *as long as the earth remains* meaning that there will come a time when the earth will not remain. If we take the Genesis account of Creation literally, God created light on the 1st day ^{Gen.1:3-5} but created the sun on the 4th day ^{Gen.1:14-19} – the 1st 3 days had light without the sun! As we have been seeing, everything God does is intentional and most of what is recorded in the Bible is there to explain His Plan of Redemption. The Book of Revelation states that there will again be a time when the light doesn't come from the sun: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Things are no longer the way they used to be.)"* ^{Rev.21:1-4} *There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give*

them light.^{Rev.22:5} There is coming a new order when we will not have varying seasons and days just the present – it will only be now. (Eternity will not be like millions and millions of years but like the present moment right now, only it will never end.)

God has guaranteed that the seasons will continue as long as the earth remains. He also said He *will never again curse the earth, destroying all living things, even though people's thoughts and actions are bent toward evil from childhood.*^{Gen.8:21} **Natural disasters are not now judgments**

by God for people's sins: *both wise and foolish people end the same way.*^{Ecc.2:14} *Time and chance happen to them all.*^{Ecc.9:11} Jesus said: *what about the 18 people in Siloam? They died when the tower fell on them. Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you turn away from your sins, you will all die too.*^{Lk.13:4-5}

Even before Jesus introduced the Kingdom of God, just a handful of good people would have diverted God's judgement: *"Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"* The LORD said, *"If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake. . . . "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."*^{Gen.18:23-32}

The rainbow is a reminder to God and to us that He will never destroy the earth's population again by flood: *I solemnly promise never to send another flood to kill all living creatures and destroy the earth. I have placed my rainbow in the clouds. It is the sign of my permanent promise to you and to all the earth. . . . When I see the rainbow in the clouds, I will remember the eternal covenant between God and every living creature on earth.*^{Gen.9:9-16} – **BUT** God has promised to bring everyone to account for their actions and end to this world and it's old order by fire!

For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.^{Acts 17:31} *The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and everything in them will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be exposed to judgment. Since everything around us is going to melt away, what holy, godly lives you should be living! You should look forward to that day and hurry it along—the day when God will set the heavens on fire and the elements will melt away in the flames. But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world where everyone is right with God.*^{2Pet.3:9-13}

In the meantime, for those of us who know the peace of God through accepting Jesus punishment,^{Is.53:5} God has promised not be angry with us *"During Noah's time I took an oath and made a promise. I said I would never cover the earth with water again. In the same way, I have promised not to be angry with you. I will never punish you again.*^{Is.54:9}

So next time you see a rainbow remember that God is not angry with you and will not punish you

Sunday 9th October 2011 Psalm 87; John 3

How many Birthdays have you had?

In his Gospel, John introduces Jesus as the eternal Word of God who was with God and who was God.^{Jn.1:1-2} When He became human,^{Jn.1:14} He was called Jesus^{Matt.1:21} because He was the Messiah^{Jn.1:41} who would take away the sins of the world.^{Jn.1:29} Although Jesus was God, He did not use His deity for His own benefit: *Who, being in very nature God, did not*

consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage^{Phil.2:6 NIV2010} Jesus was led by the Spirit^{Matt.4:1} and was determined to only do His Father's will.^{Jn.4:34 5:19; 8:28; Matt.26:39}

Although Jesus was totally human, He was not quite like us because He did not have the sinful nature (a nature that does wrong naturally) that everyone else has inherited. *Jesus came to take away our sins, for there is no sin in him.*^{1Jn.3:5} *Christ didn't have any sin. But God made him become sin for us. So we can be made right with God because of what Christ has done for us.*^{2Cor.5:21}

When Adam disobeyed God, he died spiritually and infected the human heart with the deadly disease called sin: *When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.*^{Rom.5:12} Adam knew God was pure (holy or clean) and that he had become unclean (unholy), so he tried to hide and cover himself with fig-leaves^{Gen.3:7-10} but it didn't work and God made a covering for him.^{Gen.3:20}

That is the real problem with mankind – we are born spiritually dead (separated from God) because our heart is unclean (unholy or impure). *The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is? But I know! I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives.*^{Jer.17:9-10} *What comes out of people makes them 'unclean.' Evil thoughts come from the inside, from people's hearts. So do sexual sins, stealing and murder. Adultery, greed, hate and cheating come from people's hearts too. So do desires that are not pure, and wanting what belongs to others. And so do telling lies about others and being proud and being foolish. All those evil things come from inside a person. They make him 'unclean.'*^{Mk.7:17-23} *For we have already shown that all people ...are under the power of sin. As the Scriptures say, "No one is good - not even one. No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one."*^{Rom.3:9-12}

So when Nicodemus started a conversation, Jesus went straight to the real issue: *I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*^{Jn.3:3} Nicodemus was aware of the "facts of life" – how we reproduce – but knew it was impossible to repeat the event! Jesus explained we need 2 births – a natural birth (by water) that is seen, and a spiritual birth (by spirit) that is unseen but just as real. Just as the wind is invisible but we know it is real because we can hear it & see its effects, so we can know the Spirit (although invisible) it is real because we can hear & see its effects.

What is the result of the Spirit moving? New Birth! When we are born again we are no longer separated from God but joined to Him: *he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*^{1Cor.6:17} There is no sin between us because God has dismissed it: *He has taken our sins away from us as far as the east is from west.*^{Ps.103:12} No more "covering-up"; no more guilt and no more hiding. Now we can come to God with boldness & confidence: *So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it.*^{Heb.4:16 (also Heb.10:19; 1Jn.3:21; 5:14)}

Now God is our Father, we are a new breed of people – we are of the Christ-line not the Adam-line. *What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!*^{2Cor.5:17} *But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan—this rebirth comes from God.*^{Jn.1:12-13} Because we are God's children we will automatically become like our Heavenly Father if we eat, exercise and rest properly. We need to feed our spirits on the Bread of Life – i.e. accept and "digest" (ponder, meditate and think on) Jesus & His Word. We need to exercise our spirits by trusting God i.e. believing (being in agreement with God and living in peace) in every situation we face. We need to rest our spirits by not working any more to impress God

but accept His free love and forgiveness. When we do this we will automatically become like God and we will see the results of the spiritual new birth - and so will others!

For you have been born again. Your new life did not come from your earthly parents because the life they gave you will end in death. But this new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God. ^{1Pet.1:23} **So, have you had your second birthday yet?**

Sunday 16th October 2011 Psalm 26; John 4:

Are you still thirsty?

Of the 4 basic Hellenic elements (Earth ∇ ; Water ∇ ; Air \triangle ; Fire \triangle) 3 are used to illustrate the Holy Spirit (as a Person) and the life of God. In the previous chapters of John we saw the use of water to illustrate the cleansing & saturation of God (baptism),^{Jn.1} the replacement of ceremonial washing of water with the drinking of new wine to make us “clean” or holy^{Jn.2} and the similarity of the water of natural birth with the Spirit of spiritual birth.^{Jn.3} Now we see the parallel between water as essential to natural life and the Spirit as essential to spiritual life.

Jesus was returning to Galilee from Jerusalem (which would take about 3 days) and stopped to refresh himself at Sychar. The well was about 100 foot (30m) deep and so needed a long rope to reach the water. When a woman came by, Jesus asked her for a drink of water to initiate a conversation about spiritual life. In this conversation Jesus contrasted the water in the well with the Kingdom of God - the well was deep and people were thirsty soon after they drank the water but the new life He was offering was accessible by everyone and was totally satisfying to all who accepted it: *People soon become thirsty again after drinking this water. But the water I give them takes away thirst altogether. It becomes a perpetual spring within them, giving them eternal life. (Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.)*
Jn.4:13-14

At first, the woman did not understand what Jesus was talking about but she certainly wanted this water - no more collecting water each day, no more tiring journeys and as much water as she wanted! It sounded like sheer luxury. And that was exactly what Jesus intended it to mean - but in a spiritual sense. The Kingdom of God (that Jesus told Nicodemus he could only see by being born again^{Jn.3:3}) is sheer luxury compared to the old religion of ceremonies and rituals. No more guilt or shame and no more trying to hide. This religion really works and truly satisfies because God is always accessible and freely available. *The LORD GOD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. With joy you will drink deeply from the fountain of salvation!* ^{Is.12:2-3} *You are the spring of water that gives life.*
Jer.17:13

To go back the simile of the living (running) water, the new life in God’s Kingdom is actually within us and flowing out of us; it is not outside of us flowing in!!! No more “drawing” water out of a deep well (pleading with God to bless us) but a constant out-flow of God’s life - a “gushing out” of the new life of Jesus that is within us.

How many times have we said (or sung) “I’m thirsty for more of God?” But Jesus said *whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.*^{Jn.4:14} *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*^{Jn.6:35}

The paradox of the Kingdom of God is that although we will never be thirsty in the sense that we are empty, we never lose our appetite for God and His Kingdom. In fact Jesus said *God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice (righteousness), for they will receive it*

in full. ^{Matt.5:6} Yes we keep our appetite but we are never empty because *God's power has given us everything we need to lead a godly life. All of that has come to us because we know the One who chose us.* ^{2Pet.1:3}

When God created Adam *He breathed the breath of life into him. And the man became a living person.* ^{Gen.2:7} But when Adam disobeyed God, he died (was separated from God). ^{Gen.2:17} Although God visited people after that (*the Spirit rested on them* ^{Nu.11:25} *the Spirit of God came on Azariah* ^{2Chron.15:1}), He did not reside in anyone until Jesus. Because Jesus has opened the way to God and has given us the right to eat of the Tree of Life ^{Rev.2:7; 22:14} (which Adam was prevented from enjoying ^{Gen.3:22}) God can now make His home with us: *Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.* ^{Jn.14:23}

The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus opened up this new and living way ^{Heb.10:20}. When Jesus ascended to heaven from Mt Olives, ^{Lk.24:51; Acts 1:10-11} a river of life (the Holy Spirit) ^{Jn.7:39} flowed out of heaven dividing the earth *On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west... At that time water that gives life will flow out from Jerusalem.* ^{Zech.14:4-8} **Now the Lamb at the centre of the throne [is our] shepherd; he will lead [us] to springs of living water.** ^{Rev.7:17}

Sunday 23rd October 2011 Psalm 27; John 4:43-5:15

Is seeing really believing?

You will not have faith if you do not see signs and wonders. ^{Jn.4:48BBE}

Jesus performed many miraculous signs to provide evidence of His Divinity and people acknowledged that God was with Him. ^{Jn.3:2}

Miracles do not produce faith but they do they promote faith. Not even reading the Bible actually produces faith: *But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.* ^{2Cor.3:14}

Faith is a gift from God: *the measure of faith God has given you* ^{Rom.12:3} which is activated when we turn to Him: *Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.* ^{2Cor.3:15-16}

Faith is not blind and God expects an intelligent response from us - we must understand something about God before we can believe Him. *Consequently faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ.* ^{Rom.10:17 NET} Another version puts it this way: *The point is, Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to.*

What is a Miracle?

My definition of a Miracle is: **God doing something that I can't do.**

When God created the Universe, He set in motion laws or principles that would ensure that the world continued in an orderly and structured way without God continually intervening: planets in their orbits, the way the sun and moon affect our earth, seasons, day & night, gravity etc. God not only created the universe, He sustains it by His Word: *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* ^{Col.1:15-17} *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.* ^{Heb.1:3}

But God can and does intervene in the normal running of the universe. It is a miracle when we recover supernaturally quickly from an illness; when we inexplicably escape serious injury or death; when our money goes further than expected; when someone helps us unexpectedly; when we find something that is irretrievably lost. These miracles are expressions of God's love for us. God is love and he shows His love in practical ways. *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands*^{Ex.34:6} *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*^{Ps.103:8} *And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love.*^{1Jn.4:16}

Every time God answers our prayers - it is evidence that He loves us

Every time God responds to our faith - it is evidence that He loves us

Every time God blesses us - it is evidence that He loves us

Every time God heals us - it is evidence that He loves us

Miracles, signs and wonders are meant to get our attention and point us to God's love as shown in Jesus Christ but our response to God's love is our own responsibility. We can thank God or ignore Him – the choice is ours! *One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."*^{Lk.17:15-19}

Miracles are also a wonderful talking point and it is so easy to tell others what God has done for us - faith talks! *The words of my mouth came from the faith in my heart; in the same way, our words are the outcome of our faith;*^{2Cor.4:13BBE} (or *Just like the psalmist who wrote, "I believed it, so I said it," we say what we believe*)

But remember the greatest Miracle is to be Born Again – to be able to call God "Our Father" – that is certainly worth talking about! *"Stop doubting and believe ... Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen me but still have believed."* *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in front of his disciples. They are not written down in this book. But these are written down so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. If you believe this, you will have life because you belong to him.*^{Jn.20:27-30}

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.^{Gal.5:6}

Sunday 30th October 2011 Psalm 28; John 5:16-47.

Do you believe in God?

I assure you, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.^{Jn.5:24}

How do we believe? Belief in Jesus as the Son of God is the criteria for life after death (eternal life) but what does it actually mean to "believe"?

This kind of "belief" is more than an acceptance of facts. *Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror!*^{Jas.2:19}

The "belief" we are talking about is a **conviction** that challenges us and changes our life. *I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep what I have entrusted to him until that day.*^{2Tim.1:12} *It's the word of faith that welcomes God to go to work and set things right for us. This is the core of our preaching. Say the welcoming word to God—"Jesus is my Master"—embracing, body and soul, God's work of doing in us what he did in raising Jesus from the dead. That's it. You're not "doing" anything; you're simply calling out to God, trusting him to do it for you. That's*

salvation. *With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: "God has set everything right between him and me!"* ^{Rom.10:8-10}

Here are 5 important guidelines from John 5 to help us believe:

1 Come to Jesus: *you refuse to come to me to have life.* ^{Jn.5:40}

There is no life without Jesus. If there was any other way, God would have found it! Jesus was clear that He was the ONLY WAY to God: *What if someone does not enter the sheep pen through the gate but climbs in another way? That person is a thief and a robber.I am like a gate for the sheep. All those who ever came before me were thieves and robbers. But the sheep did not listen to them. I'm like a gate. Anyone who enters through me will be saved.* ^{Jn.10:1-9} *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* ^{Jn.14:6}

2 Hear the voice of Son of God: *[they] will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.* ^{Jn.5:25}

Jesus refers to 2 resurrections – “now”^{Jn.5:25} and “future”^{Jn.5:25} – the “now” is a spiritual resurrection to spiritual life (born again) and the “future” is at the end of this age when those who have died will rise out of their graves to eternal life. If we have been born again (1st resurrection) we will not be harmed by the 2nd death (eternal hell): *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.* ^{Rev.2:1-0-11} *Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him* ^{Rev.20:6} *But to the cowards, unbelievers, detestable persons, murderers, the sexually immoral, and those who practice magic spells, idol worshipers, and all those who lie, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur. That is the second death.* ^{Rev.21:8} It those who are born again that can hear what Jesus says

3 Honour the Son of God: *that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father.* ^{Jn.5:23}

Jesus is God not just a godly person or good prophet and we must honour Jesus as God. That means we respect Him, His values and His wishes just as Jesus respected His Father and His values & wishes. Because we are His family this is not an effort or arduous. We enjoy honouring Him – in fact it is the most natural thing for us to do.

4 Have love for God in our hearts: *I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts.* ^{Jn.5:42}

Love is a choice not just an emotion – it is linked to honour. To love God is the 1st and greatest of all God's instructions: *'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'* ^{Matt.22:37-38} *This is the first and greatest commandment.*

5 Believe the Scriptures: *If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?* ^{Jn.5:46-47}

The Bible is our only reliable information about God and so we make it our priority to study the Scriptures. *You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me.* ^{Jn.5:39-40} *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.* ^{2Tim.2:15}

We must have the Word in our hearts as well as the Bible in our minds: *nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent.* ^{Jn.5:38}

November: But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. ^{2Peter 3:18}

Sunday 6th November 2011. Psalm 29; Family Communion Service followed by shared lunch. International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

Why we do things at Church

Most of what we do at Church is deliberate and motivated by our Core Values:

Love for Jesus: We have a relationship with, and dependence on, Jesus as the Son of God, for which we give thanks in unashamed private and public praise that reflects our appreciation – His worth-ship! *That is why we sing and pray with passion & exuberance.*

Love for God's Word: The Scriptures are always true ^{Jn.10:35} and they point to Jesus. ^{Jn.5:39} They are an insight into God's character and values; a manual for right and blessed living. ^{Ps.119:11} The Word of God really works in us who believe. ^{1Thes.2:13} *That is why we read the Scriptures together, use the Visual Bible, have a monthly memory verse and study the Bible together.*

Love for each other: Our relationship with others (which will be different for each of us) is expressed with affection and concern – we care for one another enough to pray for and help each other. *That is why we greet each other warmly, fellowship around refreshments & meals and share our resources*

Love for the people of the world: We witness to others, through our conversation, behaviour and attitude, about God's glory, goodness and love. This witness is rooted in our indebtedness to God for His love and grace toward us. *That is why we try to honour God at all times. We want to accurately represent God so others can know Him too!*

Love for life – now on earth and later in heaven: We are stewards in this life in preparation for the next, but God calls Believers “blessed” meaning “happy” and “joyful”. We are to enjoy this life but not to the exclusion of the next: *My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.* ^{Jn.10:10NLT} *For me, life finds all of its meaning in Christ. Death also has its benefits. Suppose I go on living in my body. Then I will be able to carry on my work. It will bear a lot of fruit. But what should I choose? I don't know. I can't decide between the two. I long to leave this world and be with Christ. That is better by far.* ^{Phil.1:21-23NlrV} *All those people were still living by faith when they died... They openly said that they were outsiders and strangers on earth... they longed for a better country. They wanted one in heaven. So God is pleased when they call him their God. In fact, he has prepared a city for them.* ^{Heb.11:13-16NlrV}

Please PRAY for the “secret children”. Once a day. Seven days a week. For seven weeks. 6 November – 24 December (the eve of the birth of the Child who changed the world). see www.opendoorsuk.org

International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

Don't forget about those in prison. Suffer with them as though you were there yourself. Share the sorrow of those being mistreated, as though you feel their pain in your own bodies. ^{Heb.13:3}

All over the world children are suffering because they follow Jesus. They grow up in Christian homes, or their parents become Christians, or they make their own choice to follow Jesus – but they have one thing in common: they pay a price for their faith. Today as we are praying for the Persecuted Church we are focusing on the “**Secret Children**”, the hidden victims of the persecuted church. Some are killed. Some are orphans, their parents murdered. Some have their mother or father taken away from

them and put in a prison. Some are excluded from school. Some have to leave their homes and move far away. And some of them just disappear.

You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever! ^{Psalm 30:10-12}

Loving God, our Maker and Healer – You know us and love us all: nothing is hidden from Your sight.

We pray for children around the world who are Christians or part of Christian families.

For children who are bullied in school - strengthen them and make them a light to their friends.

For children whose parents are in prison - help them to cope as they wait to be reunited.

For children whose parents have died – bring comfort and love through church, family and friends.

For children who wander the streets with nowhere to go – lead them to shelter and a caring home.

For children who've witnessed violence – heal the memories of the past and give them a future to look forward to.

Lord, they are part of our family, and we are Your servants. Help us to share the blessings we have with them – so that the secret of Your grace and love is the story of their lives.

Sunday 13th November 2011 Remembrance Sunday. Psalm 30; Jn.6:1-24

Christian Prosperity

Week by week as we give our Offerings at Church, we declare that “good health, full life and prosperity is my inheritance in Jesus and the reward of the righteous”
(Ps.1:1-3; Prov.13:21; Jn.10:10; 3Jn.1:2).

This isn't just a weekly ritual but something I believe with all my heart and with enough conviction to proclaim it passionately in public prayers. But sometimes we are misunderstood so it is helpful to define the words we use.

Good health: We all want to be in good health but few of us (if any) are prepared to live such an extremely disciplined life that deprives us of all pleasure and enjoyment. There is more to life than just living at the peak of physical and mental fitness – we have a soul that was created for, and craves for, comfort and pleasure. There are some basic principles for good health – sound diet, suitable exercise and sufficient rest but we all like some “unhealthy” comfort foods occasionally or found that our clothes have “shrunk” and most of us have had to forgo sleep sometimes (especially when the children were small)! God created our bodies to cope with less than perfect conditions. But true health comes from God's Word (who is Jesus) in our hearts: *Listen closely to my words. Don't let them out of your sight. Keep them in your heart. They are life to those who find them. They are health to your whole body.* ^{Prov.4:20-24} *Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. (Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is much more important, for it promises a reward in both this life and the next.* ^{NLT} ^{1Tim.4:8})

Full life: Jesus came to give us this: *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*^{Jn.10:10} But full life is not measured by stuff but by whether it is eternal. *Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. (Real life is not measured by how much we own or Life is not defined by what you have, even when you have a lot.)*^{Lk.12:15}

At Creation God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so.^{Gen.1:11} It is a Kingdom principle that fruit has seed in it: Seed to sow and bread to eat. *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work... Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*^{2Cor.9:6-11}

Prosperity: *Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.*^{3Jn.1:2} ^{NASB} The literal translation of **prosperity** is “to have a prosperous journey”.

Yes God does want us to prosper but true prosperity is dependent on our soul’s consistent health (rather than feeling good today!) *Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful (you will thrive and be prudent or live wisely).*^{Josh.1:8} Wisdom is skill at living. It is insight into the way the world works. Merely following orders requires no discernment, no deliberation, no knowledge, no reflection, no understanding—in short, no wisdom. **Spiritual maturity is the ability to know, understand, and apply Scripture in every circumstance.**

If the God with whom *nothing is too hard*^{Jer.32:17} was able to make a small picnic into an enormous banquet^{Matt.6:1-13} then we can be sure that he will take care of us: *the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*^{Gal.2:20} *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*^{Rom.8:32} True Christian Prosperity is knowing that God will take care of us **AND** living like that. *Don't worry about everyday life ... Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs, and he will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.*^{Matt.6:25-34} *Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what happens to you.*^{NLT 2Pet.5:7}

We are to *banish anxiety from our heart*^{Ecc.11:10} for worry is “a vote of no-confidence in God”. Remember, God wants us to prosper and enjoy good health, even as our soul prospers. We belong to the family of believers, so wherever we are, let us continue to think, act, talk and give as **Believers!**

It is more blessed to give than to receive.^{Act.20:35}

Sunday 20th November 2011 Psalm 31; Jn.6:25

Christian Work Ethic

Have you ever bought some fruit and found that it was too ripe when you came to eat it? It had been good fruit but you were too late and it had spoilt. How do you think you would feel if you spent your whole life working for something that is useless when you come to need it? Jesus warns about this: *Do not work for food that spoils. Work for food that lasts forever. That is the food the Son of Man will give you.*^{Jn.6:27} When the people asked Jesus:

What does God want from us? What works does he want us to do?^{Jn.6:28} He answered concisely: *God's work is to believe in the One he has sent.*^{Jn.6:29}

“Good health, full life and prosperity” is not only our aspiration - it is our expectation as well. To live a frustrated life is truly debilitating and will eventually affect our mental and physical health. Solomon, writing in Ecclesiastes, says that life can be futile: *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*^{Ecc.1:2-3} Other translations say: *all is to no purpose; futile; meaningless; useless; impotent* (never reaching one’s potential). The Hebrew word literally means *vapour*. We could spend our whole life working hard and even helping others but end up having a spoilt life and no future beyond the grave. A contented godly life is the highest achievement we can ever have: *But godliness with contentment is great gain (You gain a lot when you live a godly life. But you must be happy with what you have^{NIV}). For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*^{1Tim.6:6-8} *O God, I beg two favours from you before I die. First, help me never to tell a lie. Second, give me neither poverty nor riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs. For if I grow rich, I may deny you and say, “Who is the LORD?” And if I am too poor, I may steal and thus insult God's holy name.*^{Prov.30:7-9}

Solomon continues: *All of [life] is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*^{Ecc.2:17} In the Bible’s original language (both Hebrew and Greek) the word for ‘wind’, ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’ is the same - a life chasing after God will always be futile and will prevent us from reaching our potential. God is not playing hide-and-seek with us – He sent His Son to find us: *Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*^{Lk.19:10} *I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.*^{Isa 65:1; Rom.10:20}

Once we *know God—or rather are known by God,*^{Gal.4:9} we are to spend our life in fellowship with God not “seeking” or “chasing after” God. One of the greatest and most life-changing truths of the New Covenant is found in the name of Jesus: **Emmanuel**, which means **God is with us**. We don’t have to go to heaven to talk to God and we don’t have to wait until we die: *“You don't need to go to heaven” (to find Christ and bring him down to help you). And... “You don't need to go to the place of the dead” (to bring Christ back to life again). Salvation that comes from trusting Christ—which is the message we preach—is already within easy reach. In fact, the Scriptures say, “The message is close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart.”*^{Rom.10:6-8}

Yes, God resides in us: *Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love him. We will come to him and make our home with him.”*^{Jn.14:23} *Take a good look at yourselves to see if you are really believers. Test yourselves. Don't you realize that Christ Jesus is in you? Unless, of course, you fail the test! I hope you will discover that I haven't failed the test.*^{2Cor.13:6}

Let’s keep our focus on God seeing Him in Jesus and enjoy a truly contented godly life. *Jesus answered, “You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs—and for free.”*^{Jn.6:26}

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.^{Phil.3:7-11}

Make sure you excel in the greatest work anyone can ever do: Believing in (trusting in, agreeing and not quarrelling with) Jesus Christ the Son of God because the results will last forever.

Sunday 27th November 2011 Psalm 32; Jn.7:1-24.

Christian Discernment

True prosperity, good work ethics and sound discernment are not only Christian aspirations but they are good, wholesome, proper and sensible standards for everyone. However, we Believers understand that there is a dimension beyond the now and sensible (understood with the 5 senses) which is eternal and spiritual and where God's values really count. This affects our view of life because we know that God not only sees our actions and motives but He also cares about us. Now we are God's children we have an obligation to stand up for Him and speak out for His cause – which is **to redeem mankind through Jesus Christ.**

The Bible should never be used to back up our own opinions by quoting a verse out of context. For instance Jesus said: *Do not judge, or you too will be judged.*^{Matt.7:1} But the next verse explains that Jesus means we should be careful how we treat others because we will have the same conditions applied to us – we reap what we sow - *For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*^{Matt.7:2} So we are to judge, but cautiously and without condemning.

The apostle Paul wrote: *The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments.*^{1Cor.2:15} As Christians we cannot “sit on the fence” and we should have an opinion about issues: politics, poverty, pollution, the environment etc. but our opinion only really counts if we agree with God: *Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker*^{Is.45:9} God has sound judgement: *Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have insight, I have power.*^{Prov.8:14} and if we take time get to know Him, we can be His spokesman: *But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people*^{Jer.23:22} *if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman.*^{Jer.15:19}

Our judgement or discernment should be sound, not superficial: *Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.*^{Jn.7:24} *(Rise above the letter of the law to the spirit of the law; use your head—and heart!—to discern what is right, to test what is authentically right.)*

Because Believers have the mind of Christ, we are qualified to make judgements on matters regardless of our academic, financial or social standing: *Don't you know that God's people will judge the world? And if you are going to judge the world, aren't you able to judge small cases? Don't you know that we will judge angels? Then we should be able to judge the things of this life even more! So if you want to press charges in matters like that, appoint as judges members of the church who aren't very important!*^{1Cor.6:2-4}

Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthian church deals mostly with maturity – about living a gracious, godly and stable life. **Spiritual maturity is the ability to know, understand, and apply Scripture in every circumstance.** *And a person who is living on milk isn't very far along in the Christian life and doesn't know much about doing what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right.*^{Heb.5:13-14}

We are no longer mere humans - *God chose you to be his people. You are royal priests. You are a holy nation. You are a people who belong to God. ...But now you are the people of God ...now you*

have received mercy.^{1Pet.2:9-10} We are the church of God, which he bought with the blood of his own Son.^{Acts 20:28}

We should never act as if we are mere humans because we are much more than that – we are God’s Temple or dwelling: *Brothers and sisters, ...are you not **acting** like mere humans? ...Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?*^{1Cor.3:1-16}

We are far more than a sinner saved by grace – we are sons of God with the full rights of heirs: *Think of it this way. If a father dies and leaves great wealth for his young children, those children are not much better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had. They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set. And that’s the way it was with us before Christ came... But when the right time came, God sent his Son... to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children... Now you are no longer a slave but God’s own child. And since you are his child, everything he has belongs to you.... Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to live as I do in freedom from these things... - free from the law.*^{Gal.4:1-12NLT}

December: The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.^{Numbers 6:24-26}

Sunday 4th December 2011 Psalm 33:1-11; Jn.8

Christian Character vs Charisma

Charisma (gifting) is good but it is our character that will sustain us and enable us to continue. *A gift opens the way and ushers the giver into the presence of the great. (A gift opens the way for the one who gives it. It helps him meet important people.*^{NIV} *Diligent hands will rule, but laziness ends in forced labour.*^{Prov.12:24} *Those who have been given a trust must prove that they are faithful.*^{1Cor.4:2} (Read Prov.31 and apply it to the wife of Jesus – the Church i.e. you and me!)

Character or maturity is the result of making right choices: *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (...mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right.*^{NLT} *Heb.5:13-14*

The teaching about righteousness is a big subject but here are the basic facts: at our natural birth we are born un-righteous (i.e. spiritually dead and separated from God) but at our conversion we are spiritually re-born righteous. This change was made possible when Jesus died on the cross: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^{2Cor.5:21} It is accessed by faith: *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.*^{Rom.1:17}

We are to judge (discern) situations without condemning because our righteousness (*right-standing before God*) is given to us and we cannot not earn it or buy it. Even though we are righteous we are not necessarily better than others for *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*^{Rom.3:23} We are not necessarily holier than others: *You were taught to be made new in your thinking. You were taught to start living a new life. It is created to be truly good and holy, just as God is.*^{Eph.4:23-24} We are not necessarily richer than others *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*^{2Cor.8:9} We are not necessarily healthier than others: *Dear friend, I*

pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. ^{3Jn.1:2} (Good health is something we aspire to and expect but is not guaranteed which is why John prayed for it.) We are not necessarily more academic than others: *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.* ^{1Cor.1:26}

Our confidence is in what God has done for us in Jesus: *Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.* ^{2Cor.3:4-6} And so our boast is in the Lord: *God alone made it possible for you to be in Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made Christ to be wisdom itself. He is the one who made us acceptable to God. He made us pure and holy, and he gave himself to purchase our freedom. As the Scriptures say, “The person who wishes to boast should boast only of what the Lord has done.”* ^{1Cor.1:30-31 (NLT)}

However **we are responsible for making the right choices** and that is where character comes in – to be able to choose correctly and not be influenced by people pressure, gifts, bribes, emotions or sentiment. Heroes are people who achieve something great and true greatness results from knowing God: *But the people who know their God will firmly resist him (the contemptible person see verse 21)* ^{Dan.11:22}. Other translations state that the people who know their God shall: *be strong, and carry out great exploits;* ^{NKJV} *display strength and take action;* ^{NASB} *shall stand firm and take action;* ^{ESV} *will act valiantly;* ^{NET} **Let's aspire to true greatness as described by Daniel.**

Here is a saying you can trust. You can accept it completely. We work hard for it. Here is the saying. We have put our hope in the living God. He is the Saviour of all people. Most of all he is the Saviour of those who believe... Set an example for the believers in what you say and in how you live. Also set an example in how you love and in what you believe. Show the believers how to be pure. Until I come, spend your time reading Scripture out loud to one another. Spend your time preaching and teaching. Don't fail to use the gift the Holy Spirit gave you... Keep on doing those things. Give them your complete attention. Then everyone will see how you are coming along. Be careful of how you live and what you believe. Never give up. Then you will save yourself and those who hear you. ^{1Tim.4:9-16 (NIV)}

Sunday 11th December 2011 Psalm 33:10-22; Luke 1 26f **Christian Fellowship**

The Christmas story stretches over about 3 years and we try to condense it into 3 weeks! Although Herod is renowned for infanticide, (also fratricide, filicide and uxoricide!) he was very affluent and influential. He bailed out the cash strapped Olympic Games in 12BC, built Caesarea Maritima, (a brand new city and harbour whose facilities would be a credit to any port today) and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Herod's Temple was started in 19BC and inaugurated in 9BC, so when Zechariah met with the angel Gabriel ^{Lk.1:5f} it had only been “open for business” a couple of years.

The Temple was a very impressive building that could hold around 210,000 people in its environs (a bit like St Peter's Basilica in Rome but that only holds 60,000 people). It was built on the top of a mountain and the main building stood 152 feet high but when you added the pinnacle (160ft) and the drop into the Kidron valley (114ft) it produced a combined height of 426 feet! The building work continued throughout Jesus life time and was finally completed in AD64 just a few years before Titus destroyed it in AD70.

This Temple was maintained by hundreds of priests who were divided up into 24 courses (or shifts); some of them resided in Jerusalem but many lived away and came to the Temple to minister, a week at a time. Zechariah was a non-resident priest and had been chosen to burn the incense at the twice daily sacrifice service. Incense was symbolic of prayers: *May my prayer be set before you like incense;*^{Psa.141:2} *bowls full of incense, which stand for the prayers of God's people.*^{Rev.5:8} and when the people saw the smoke from the incense they knew their prayers had been heard by God. This was the background to Zechariah being told he would have a son they would call John.

A few months later the angel Gabriel went to Mary and told her that she would bear God's Son and gave her an explanation of how it would happen: *The Holy Spirit will come to you. The power of the Most High God will cover you (or: come to rest on you). So the holy one that is born will be called the Son of God (or: the one born holy will be called the Son of God).*^{Lk1:35}

After Mary heard that she would bear God's Son, she travelled from Nazareth to Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, her unborn son John leaped for joy and she said to Mary: *"God has blessed you more than other women. And blessed is the child you will have! But why is God so kind to me? Why has the mother of my Lord come to me? As soon as I heard the sound of your voice, the baby inside me jumped for joy. You are a woman God has blessed. You have believed that what the Lord has said to you will be done!"*^{Lk.1:42-45}

The way Mary conceived Jesus is similar to our new birth:

The Holy Spirit comes to us: He convicts us of sin, (i.e. of being separated from God) challenges us to believe God and then changes us.

The power of the Most High God comes to rest on us: He resides in us. God dwells with us through the Holy Spirit taking up His residence in us. This means we are never far from God; He is actually nearer than our hands and our feet – He is in our mouth and our heart: *The word is near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart.*^(Dt.30:14) *That means the word we are preaching. You must put your faith in it. Say with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord." Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Then you will be saved. With your heart you believe and are made right with God. With your mouth you say that Jesus is Lord. And so you are saved.*^{Rom.10:8-10}

We are born holy and called sons of God: The result is that we are born-again, born holy and born children of God. *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*^{Jn.1:12-13} *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*^{1Pet.1:23} *And it was only right that God—who made everything and for whom everything was made—should bring his many children into glory. Through the suffering of Jesus, God made him a perfect leader, one fit to bring them into their salvation. So now Jesus and the ones he makes holy have the same Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters.*^{Heb.2:10-11}

When we meet other Christians there is an attraction between our spirit and their spirit which causes us "to leap for joy" and to "rejoice in God our Saviour". That is the essence of Christian Fellowship – communion - a common-union!

How do you feel when you meet another Christian?

Sunday 18th December 2011 Psalm 145

Christmas begins with Christ! (and so does Christian!)

The Wise Men followed a star, and the Shepherds followed instructions from an angel to meet with the Christ Child at Bethlehem, but being a Christian is much more than merely following after Christ or even adhering to a set of instructions. Becoming a Christian requires **conversion** not **conforming** to ideals or even morals. Conversion

literally means to “turn right around” which is something we are incapable of doing by ourselves, but we are quite able to do so with God’s help.

The angel told the Shepherds: *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. In the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.* ^{Lk.2:10-11} **Jesus is the Christ** so what does Christ mean? **Christ** literally means **anointed**. The word **Christ**

was transliterated from the Greek (i.e. the translators imported the Greek word **Χριστός** *christos* into our English language) and so we now think of it as an English word! Anointed is an old fashioned word that is rarely used today but our Queen was anointed at her Coronation. The Archbishop poured a spoon of oil on her head which symbolised that she was equipped with authority and ability from God to rule our country. This ritual has its roots in the OT when the High Priest anointed the Kings of Israel with oil. In the Bible, oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit (or the power of God in the Person of the 3rd person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit). The Hebrew word for anoint is *Mesbach* from where we get the word Messiah (thus Christ and Messiah are the same). To anoint literally means to smear, cover or rub with oil: *So Arise, you princes, anoint the shield! (rub your shields with oil!* ^{NIV} *Is.21:5*

When King Saul died, David lamented that his shield would *no longer be rubbed with oil.* ^{2Sam.1:21} (*anointed with oil.* ^{ESV}) Anointing represents consecration or dedicated to God’s service. So when Jesus was born Christ, He was born with the authority and ability to fulfil all that God had planned for Him because He was covered (smeared, saturated) with the Power and Presence of God.

When we become Christians, we are born-again with the authority and ability to fulfil all that God has planned for us because we are covered (smeared, saturated) with the Power and Presence of God. Obviously we cannot make this happen by merely following after a set of rules or morals – we have to be converted (turn right around spiritually). That is why Jesus came from God, was born of virgin Mary, lived a sinless life and died in our stead – to change us from the inside so we can live a different sort of life. If Christianity was merely keeping a set of rules, Jesus would not have come.

As Christians we have been made spiritually alive and we aspire to live changed lives that honour God. But if we make mistakes or do something wrong, we don’t stop being Christians – we will hurt God, we will hurt ourselves and we will hurt others, but we are Christians because of our spiritual new birth not our behaviour. That explains why Christians sometimes do bad things – but there is always hope and a way back to God because Jesus is the Christ (the Anointed One with all authority and ability). He represents us before God and will make things right for us.

The Christmas Story is the story about Christ becoming human and allowing us to become spiritual. This is from God and is entirely free to us (because it was too costly for us to buy)!

Will you begin your Christmas with Christ?

Join with me in saying “**thank you**” to God for Jesus Christ.

May the LORD bless you and protect you.

May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you.

May the LORD show you His favour and give you His peace.

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