

Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2015

69 Mill Hill, Deal, Kent. CT14 9EW www.dealpentecostal.co.uk

Paul S Fermor

Contents

January: I am in Christ because of God

February: I am Included in Christ

March: I am Forgiven in Christ

April: I am Justified in Christ

May: I am Righteous in Christ

June: I am Reconciled to God in Christ

July: I am Sanctified in Christ

August: I am Standing Firm in Christ

September: I am Victorious in Christ

October: I am Rich in Christ even if I feel poor

November: I am Strong in Christ even if I feel weak

December: I am Blessed with every Spiritual Blessing in Christ

Bible Time Chart

Memory Verses 2015 – I am in Christ

January: I am in Christ because of God

It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our Righteousness, Holiness and Redemption. 1Cor.1:30

Sunday 4th January 2015. Ps.16. Luke 2:21-40

Some will start this New Year with sadness of heart and others with gladness; some with trepidation, others with confidence. Although none of us are sure what the future holds, **all Believers can look forward to God's blessings** because we know that *the blessing of the LORD makes a person rich, without painful toil for it (or, He adds no sorrow with it).*^{Psm.10:22} And we have a “sign” to point us in the right direction – His name is Jesus: *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.*^{Lk.2:34-35} Jesus is a sign that causes some to stumble and others to rise. The Greek word for “rise” is “*anastasis*” which means “*resurrection*”. Jesus is the cause of our resurrection – 1st and 2nd resurrection.^{Jn.5:25-29} *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*^{Jn.5:24} Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. For them the second death holds no power.^{Rev.20:6} People are normally comfortable with the concept of “*God*” as nearly every country in the world has a tradition of the worship of “*deities*” but introduce the Name of Jesus then “*sparks fly*” because the satan is opposed to Jesus (*satan* means *opposer*) - as are all those under satan's influence.^{Gen.3:15} *Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe.*^{2Cor.4:4} *Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.*^{Rev.12:17} Jesus causes people to stumble when they do not obey His message. *In Scripture it says, “Look! I am placing a stone in Zion. It is a chosen and very valuable stone. It is the most important stone in the building. The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” The stone is very valuable to you who believe. But to people who do not believe, “The stone the builders did not accept has become the most important stone of all.” And, “It is a stone that causes people to trip. It is a rock that makes them fall.” They trip and fall because they do not obey the message.*^{1Pet.2:6-8} *Isaiah gives us the metaphor for pulling this together: Careful! I've put a huge stone on the road to Mount Zion, a stone you can't get around. But the stone is me! If you're looking for me, you'll find me on the way, not in the way.*^{Rom.9:33}

Ultimately, whatever excuses we make, our eternal destiny - our “*falling*” or “*rising*” - is determined by our relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the Christian message is loud and clear: **it is possible to be right with God - but only on God's terms.** *They didn't know how God makes people right with himself. They tried to get right with God in their own way. They didn't do it in God's way. Christ has completed the law. So now everyone who believes can be right with God.*^{Rom.10:3-4} In the past people were often ignorant of God's “*rules*” for many reasons: they hadn't heard the Gospel; they were illiterate; the Bible wasn't easily available; the priests or pastors were not true Believers. But today each of these excuses are just that – excuses! We have so much information readily available and yet people are so ill-informed; we have so much education and so little learning; so much knowledge and so little wisdom.

So it is imperative that we continue to proclaim the Gospel loudly and clearly. And remember **the Gospel (good news) is Simple, Settled and Spiritual.** **Simple:** Even a child can believe the Gospel. *Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in.*^{Lk.18:17} **Settled:** The work of Jesus was finished when He died and no one can add to it or take away from it not even the Church: *Jesus said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and died.*^{Jn.19:30} *If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed.*^{Gal.1:9} **Spiritual:** The Gospel cannot be understood with our natural

senses or ability because it is spiritual. *Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help.*^{1Cor.2:14}

So what is the “Gospel”? The “**Gospel**” is about being “**saved**” i.e. **released from the penalty of sin** (and ultimately the effects of sin too). *And that message is the very message about faith that we preach: If you confess with your mouth that **Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by **believing** in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by **confessing** with your mouth that **you are saved.***^{Rom.10:8-10}

Confessing “**Jesus is Lord**” means that we agree with God that **Jesus is “in charge”** - that what Jesus says and does is right. *Can I not do to you as this potter has done to his clay? As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand.*^{Jer.18:6} *What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator. Does a clay pot argue with its maker? Does the clay dispute with the one who shapes it, saying, 'Stop, you're doing it wrong!' Does the pot exclaim, 'How clumsy can you be?'*^{Is.45:9}

Yielding to God may be difficult to start with because we like to be in charge but when we know what God is like it is easy to submit to Him: *You are good, and what you do is good,*^{Ps.119:68} *But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and **faithfulness.***^{Ps.86:15} *Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?*^{Gen.18:25} *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*^{Jas.1:17} *“I the LORD do not change.”*^{Mal.3:6} *Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*^{1Jn.4:8-10}

When we realise that Jesus is Lord (it was God who made Jesus Lord^{Phil.2:9}) we can give our cares and concerns to Him with confidence because we know He has the ability to help us: *Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.*^{1Pet.5:7} *Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens.*^{Ps.68:19} Actually by carrying our own burdens we show our own foolishness, open ourselves up to unnecessary temptation to sin and end up denying that Jesus is Lord! *Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.*^{Ps.37:8} *But remember that you must give an account to God for everything you do. So refuse to worry, and keep your body healthy.*^{Ecc.11:9-10} Fellowship (literally a sharing or participation) with God is about agreeing with Him: *Do two people walk together unless they've agreed to do so?*^{2Ams.3:3} *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.*^{1Jn.1:3-4}

Remember: we are “**in Christ**” and as we learn our Scripture verses this year, let's determine that we will make Jesus Christ our stepping stone not our stumbling stone – that He will cause us to rise not fall as we live in the effects of His resurrection. And let's determine that we will be good guides to point the way to others as we display reliability and accurate knowledge of God and the Scriptures: *Don't imagine us leaders to be something we aren't. We are servants of Christ, not his masters. We are guides into God's most sublime secrets, not security guards posted to protect them. The requirements for a good guide are reliability and accurate knowledge.*^{1Cor.4:1-2}

I want you to know that we pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of His calling and that by His power He may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.

We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sunday 11th January 2015 Ps.17:1-9 Acts 19

You can expect a miracle from God Today! *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul.*^{Acts.19:11}

I believe in Miracles because I believe in God. Christianity is 100% supernatural – it is God possessing man. Nothing in our universe can truly be replicated by humans, intentionally or unintentionally, because it takes a Creator to create, sustain and provide for a Creation. However advanced our inventions and medical skills, we are still frail flesh and totally dependent upon “*life*” to live – and no-one can adequately define or explain “*life*”! Without it we die and with it we live but what actually is “*life*”? The Bible states that the *life of each creature is in its blood... Blood is life.*^{Lev.17:11} And yet “*life*” is much more than the chemicals that constitute blood because “*life*” is not physical and cannot be measured or analysed by science. The Bible also links “*life*” to “*breath*”: *The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.*^{Job.33:4} This “*breath of life*” is the “*soul*” or personality - the mind, emotions and desires - even animals have personality and emotions: *Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died.*^{Gen.7:22} As Solomon pondered over the meaning of life, he reflected on the finality of death, when there is no more breath: *For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?*^{Ecc.3:19-21} However, Solomon eventually concluded that humans are different from animals because although both humans and animals have the “*breath of life*,” humans have an eternal spirit that will return to God who will judge us: *Yes, remember your Creator now while you are young, before the silver cord of life snaps and the golden bowl is broken. Don't wait until the water jar is smashed at the spring and the pulley is broken at the well. For then the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit will return to God who gave it... Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone's duty. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad.*^{Ecc.12:6-14}

Our spiritual life is also a miracle – it is God intervening supernaturally: *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*^{Ez.36:26-27} This spiritual intervention (conversion) is real even though we cannot actually see God working. *Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit."*^{Jn.3:5-8}

A “*miracle*” is God doing something for us that we can't do for ourselves. When God intervened in our spiritual life, He performed the **greatest miracle of all - New Birth**, so it is only to be expected that God would perform “*lesser*” miracles by intervening in our natural life! *If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?*^{Rom.8:32} This is our doctrine, our belief and our experience too!

Many of us have been healed supernaturally by God directly through prayer but all of us have been healed naturally by God through surgery, medicine or our own body's resistance. When we recover from an illness, we acknowledge that we cannot heal our self but it is God who heals us – that God is our Healer. *I am the LORD, who heals you.*^{Ex.15:26} *He sent out his word and healed them.*^{Ps.107:20} And when we acknowledging God, He keeps us on track: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear*

the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.^{Pron.3:5-10} This is why we pray before we give our offerings in the Church Services and say “grace” before meals – **to acknowledge that God is our Provider and Protector:** *He did all this so you would never say to yourself, 'I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy.'* Remember the LORD your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful, in order to fulfil the covenant he confirmed to your ancestors with an oath.^{Deut.8:17-18}

Many of the “ordinary” miracles that God does for us (which the world considers to be just the natural course of events) are even more amazing when we consider the timing of them. God always works **right** on time – never “just” in time because He has planned out our entire life from eternity: *You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed. How precious are your thoughts about me, O God.*^{Ps.139:16-17} However God also does unusual “one-off” interventions that are not every-day occurrences: *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul.*^{Acts.19:11} This word “extraordinary” is also translated “unusual”: *The islanders showed us unusual kindness.*^{Acts.28:2} There are times when God intervenes in an incredible way that is obviously not part of the natural laws that He set in motion at Creation. Some NT Biblical examples are: the feeding of the 5,000^{Matt.16:9}; raising the dead to life^{Acts.20:9}; walking on water^{Matt.14:29}; healed by a shadow^{Acts.5:15}; transported by the Holy Spirit^{Acts.8:39}.

Throughout history there are many documented examples of God intervening “unusually” but that is the key – they are “unusual” and so we should not expect God to bless us with a “copy” of someone else’s experience. God is more creative than that. *But here is something else I remember. And it gives me hope. The LORD loves us very much. So we haven't been completely destroyed. His loving concern never fails. His great love is new every morning. LORD, how faithful you are! I say to myself, “The LORD is everything I will ever need. So I will put my hope in him.” The LORD is good to those who put their hope in him. He is good to those who look to him.*^{Lam.3:21-25} **I call these extraordinary miracles “Tokens of God’s Love”** because they remind us how great God’s love toward us is. Sometimes these “**tokens of love**” are personal rather than spectacular but every intervention should draw a response from us of gratitude and appreciation to God. *Let us give thanks to God for his gift. It is so great that no one can tell how wonderful it really is!*^{2Cor.9:15} Sadly some people remain unthankful: *Jesus asked, “Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?”*^{Lk.17:17-18}

“Expectancy is the atmosphere of miracles”. We want to cultivate an atmosphere of miracles so we can experience all God has for us. Thankfulness and faith go hand-in-hand but so does ungratefulness and lack of faith. *And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honour except in his own town and in his own home.” And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.*^{Matt.13:57-58}

Let’s expect God to do extraordinary things for us and don’t limit Him by our experience or even our imagination – remember He is Almighty God. *With God's power working in us, God can do much, much more than anything we can ask or imagine. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time, forever and ever. Amen.*^{Eph.3:20-21} **But don’t forget: the greatest miracle of all, is our New Birth** - which includes the **Remission** of our sins,^{Lk.24:47} a **Righteousness** from God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe^{Rom.3:22} and a **Relationship** with God that will never end.^{2Jn.1:2} **Emmanuel!**

Sunday 18th January 2015. Ps.18:1-6

(Paul at Walmer Baptist Church)

Christian Unity

Every Christian automatically has at least 5 things in common: same Father, Saviour, Spirit, Scriptures and destination.

Christian Unity is not uniformity of the Churches but a spiritual unity of Christians (a unity of the Spirit) and so there is plenty of scope for us to be distinctive in our styles of worship: *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*^{Eph.4:3-7}

Christian fellowship, primarily, is a sharing and partnership with Christ not with one another. If we look at each other we will always struggle with our differences but if look at Christ we will automatically grow together. *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*^{1Jn.1:3} But if we don't know very much about God – if we are Biblically illiterate – then we will always struggle in our fellowship.

Literacy refers to the ability to read for knowledge, write coherently, think critically about the written word and to communicate that meaning to others - read, write, spell, listen, and speak. Sadly some schools are failing to adequately teach the basic literacy skills of the **3Rs: Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic!** In May 2010 The Daily Mail had this headline: **GCSEs aren't fit for purpose because school-leavers don't master the three Rs, says CBI.** *The importance of GCSEs may need to be downgraded because tens of thousands of school-leavers haven't mastered the three Rs, business leaders have warned.*^{Daily Mail 02/05/2012} (These **3Rs** are actually mentioned in “The Confessions of Saint Augustine” AD401: “For those first lessons, reading, writing and arithmetic, I thought as great a burden and penalty as any Greek.”)

And there are **3Rs** of Bible literacy too: **Repentance, Remission** of sins and **Righteousness. Bible Literacy** is much more than just learning Bible stories – **it is being able to understand and communicate the meaning of the Bible stories.** But without a basic understanding of these spiritual **3Rs** we will be more disadvantaged than not mastering the natural **3Rs**. So we should all aspire to have an accurate knowledge of God and the Scriptures: *Don't imagine us leaders to be something we aren't. We are servants of Christ, not his masters. We are guides into God's most sublime secrets, not security guards posted to protect them. The requirements for a good guide are reliability and accurate knowledge.*^{1Cor.4:1-2}

Repentance. The Greek word is *metanoia* which means a *change of mind*. We should be convinced of our own beliefs: *If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.*^{Jas.1:5-8} But we should also be prepared to look at the Truth and align our views to God's view. Contrast this with a bigot who is intolerant of any ideas other than their own.

Repentance from sin is different from remorse (which is feeling sorry for being found out!) - true repentance changes lives but leaves no scars: *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*^{Matt.3:8} *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*^{2Cor.7:10} **True repentance from sin will always include:**

Acknowledgement of the wrong. **Apology** for the wrong. **Action** of determination to change. **Appreciation** of God's forgiveness. **Attitude** of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people.

Our repentance (change of mind) should also include our view of God: God is love;^{1Jn.4:16} He loves the world,^{Jn.3:16} He loves the Church^{Eph.5:25} and He also loves us individually.^{Gal.2:20} He is not angry with us anymore^{Ls.54:9} because He has forgiven our sins: LORD, *who is a God like you? You forgive sin. You forgive your people when they do what is wrong. You don't stay angry forever. Instead, you take delight in showing your faithful love to them.*^{Micab 7:18} So let's change our minds to believe what God believes and then say what God says: *You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does.*^{Phil.2:5} *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (or let your way of thinking be completely changed). Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*^{Rom.12:2}

Remission of Sins. *Then opened he their mind, that they might understand the scriptures; and he said unto them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*^{Lk.24:25-47} **Remission** means dismissal or release and is also translated forgiveness or freedom: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim **freedom** for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, **to set** the oppressed **free**, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*^{Lk.4:18-19} **God has dismissed our sins from us and we are no longer joined to them.** *For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.*^{Ps.103:111-112} **Yes those of us who believe in Jesus Christ are free from our sins!** *Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.*^{Acts13:38-39}

Righteousness. The English word means “**right-wise-ness**” - we are right with God and wise about it (i.e. we are acting upon the information).

How are we “right with God”? *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} *But now God has shown us how to become right with him. The Law and the Prophets give witness to this. It has nothing to do with obeying the law. We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe. It is no different for the Jews than for anyone else. Everyone has sinned. No one measures up to God's glory. The free gift of God's grace makes all of us right with him. Christ Jesus paid the price to set us free. God gave him as a sacrifice to pay for sins. So he forgives the sins of those who have faith in his blood.*^{Rom.3:21-25}

How are we acting on this information (that we are right with God)?

We will be bold: *but the righteous are as bold as a lion.*^{Prov.28:1}

Bold to come to God - *So let us boldly approach the throne of grace. Then we will receive mercy. We will find grace to help us when we need it.*^{Heb.4:16}

Bold to proclaim Jesus *“You can't be saved by believing in anyone else. God has given us no other name under heaven that will save us.” The leaders saw how bold Peter and John were. They also realized that Peter and John were ordinary men with no training. This surprised the leaders. They realized that these men had been with Jesus.*^{Acts4:12-13} And when we are **Righteous our prayers will be effective too:** *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*^{Jas.5:16} *For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.*^{1Pet.3:12}

How literate are you? Hopefully all of us can now explain to others the basic **3Rs of Christianity literacy: Repentance, Remission of sins and Righteousness** because we have trained [our]selves with a lot of practice and can tell the difference between good and evil.^{Heb.5:14}

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

Sunday 25th January 2015. Ps.18:28-36. Acts 19:23 - 20:6

Encouragement: *“speaking many words of encouragement to the people”*^{Acts.20:2}

The “feel-good factor” is what elevates life from mere existence to enjoyment, and from sadness to gladness. God has never intended that we live in isolation like a “hermit” and we would be foolish to do so: *One who has isolated himself seeks his own desires; he rejects all sound judgment.*^{Prov.18:1} We all need human companionship, someone to make us feel better and to encourage us – in good times and bad times. Right at the beginning of human history, God said: *It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper (or companion) who is just right for him*^{Gen.2:18} and whether we are married or single we should all be part of a “family”: *God sets the lonely in families.*^{Ps.68:6} *Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven. Remember you cannot serve Him alone; you must therefore find companions or make them. The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.*^{Wesley's Journals}

One of the benefits of belonging to a local Church congregation is that we can contribute to the well-being of others as well as receive help and encouragement ourselves – we can be a blessing as well as be blessed. The most basic level of Christianity is to be blessed: *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.*^{Eph.1:3}

The highest level of Christianity is to be a blessing: *You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*^{Acts.20:35} *I will bless you. I will make your name great. You will be a blessing to others.*^{Gen.12:2} Christians primarily draw comfort and strength from God (not just their own personal determination or character) and they also pass that comfort & help on to others:

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.^{2Cor.1:3-4}

God gave us a command to be courageous and not to be afraid: *This is my command – be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*^{Josh.1:9} But most of us learn by example and so we need a pattern – a model to copy.

After David was encouraged by Jonathan, he was able to encourage himself in God: *Jonathan went to find David and encouraged him to stay strong in his faith in God. "Don't be afraid," Jonathan reassured him.*^{1Sam.23:16} *But David found strength in the LORD his God.*^{1Sam.30:6} David had a very motley group of companions so his strength from God was not dependent upon his circumstances or even his companions.

Everyone who was in trouble, or who owed money, or who was unsatisfied gathered around David, and he became their leader.^{1Sam.22:2} In fact David was able to be at rest whilst surrounded by enemies: *The LORD had given him peace and rest from all of his enemies who were around him.*^{2Sam.7:1} *I will fear no evil, for you are with me... You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*^{Ps.23:4-5}

Paul was a great encourager and intentionally inspired others as he met with them: *He gave constant encouragement, lifting their spirits and charging them with fresh hope.*^{Acts.20:2} This word “encouragement” literally means “to call to one's side,” and is sometimes translated *comfort, exhort* or *entreat*.

Here are some practical ways for us to be encouraged in the Lord and also to encourage others:

Attending Church meetings: Companionship is a 2-way relationship and so is Church commitment. We don't try to intimidate people to meet together but we do provide opportunity for fellowship within the security of spiritual oversight. Preaching in particular, should have a spiritual authority that will enable people to reach out to God and receive the help they need from Him: *Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—*

and all the more as you see the Day approaching.^{Heb.10:23-25} Encourage and rebuke with all authority.^{Tit.2:15}

Fellowship: Christian fellowship is more than just attending Church – it is a sharing of our lives because of our partnership in the Gospel. *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*^{Acts.2:42} Our praying for one another will always lead to action. *Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*^{Phil.2:1-4}

Reading Scripture: Our Services are planned to help everyone have an accurate knowledge of God by understanding and communicating the meaning of the Bible - especially the **3Rs: Repentance, Remission** of sins and **Righteousness**. *Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth.*^{Wesley's Journal} *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.15:4-6}

Sharing our Faith: Testimony of what we believe about God is always encouraging: *I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.*^{Rom.1:11-12}

Prophecy: True prophecy is the testimony of Jesus^{Rev.19:10} and He is always the source of encouragement. *But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them. A person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally, but one who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens the entire church.*^{1Cor.14:3-4}

The Return of Jesus: This world is very temporary and one day each of us will have to take our leave – but Believers have a “certain hope”^{Heb.6:19} that we will “never die”^{Jn.11:25-26} (i.e. that we will live on after death in the glorious Presence of Jesus): *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*^{1Thes.4:16-18} *He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*^{1Thes.5:10-11}

The Grace of God: Joy, Gratitude and Generosity are inextricably linked to Grace as they all come from the same word in the Greek language of the NT. *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*^{2Thes.2:16-17} *I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.*^{1Pet.5:12}

Let's endeavour to make this week **Encouragement Week** as we help each other to *stay strong in our faith in God*^{1Sam.23:16} and use the tools that God has given us to encourage one another to find strength in God and to remain strong in our faith.

February: I am Included in Christ

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. Eph.1:13

Sunday 1st February 2015. Ps.18:46-50. Lk.15:8-10.

The Lost Coin: How much do you value God's Promises and Provision?

In Luke 15 there are 3 parables that each has the theme of rejoicing when finding something that was lost. They also show how each Person of the Trinity is involved in our salvation: Jesus searches for sinners like a shepherd for a lost sheep; the Holy Spirit illuminates and cleans us like a woman searching for a lost coin; God the Father welcomes the return of a prodigal son. On each occasion, both in the narrative and in the spiritual application, there is much rejoicing and celebration.

In the parable of the lost coin the "silver coin" (literally "drachma") was worth about a day's wages. It was also probably the bride's dowry and so the missing piece would have had more significance than just its monetary value. In any case Jesus was making the point that God is very happy when someone is repents: *there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*^{Lk.15:7}

The Bible is often misquoted as saying that "money is the root of all evil". What the Bible actually says is: *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*^{1Tim.6:10} It is the love of money that causes problems, not money itself: *Those who love money will never have enough. How meaningless to think that wealth brings true happiness.*^{Ecc.5:10} *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*^{Heb.13:5}

Money is known as "currency" (meaning "in circulation") and is a medium of exchange being used in trade to avoid the barter system. Originally each unit of currency was worth its own intrinsic value i.e. a gold coin was worth "its weight in gold," but later the money came to represent a value which was backed up by the country's banks. This is especially true of paper money which includes the words: "I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of ..."

Although we happily use money, it should never control us. We look to God to meet our needs out of His glorious riches in Christ Jesus^{Phil.4:19} because God is our security, not our own ability or bank balance: *But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant.*^{Deut.8:18} *So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight."*^{Lk.16:11-15}

Everything we receive from God is by grace (remember that "Grace" comes from the same root word in the Greek language of the NT as Joy, Gratitude and Generosity). *So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.*^{Eph.1:6-8} *Some are also faithful today. They have been chosen by God's grace. And if they are chosen by grace, it is no longer a matter of working for it. If it were, grace wouldn't be grace anymore.*^{Rom.11:5-6} *Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope, comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say.*^{2Thes.2:16-17} We were even saved by God's grace through our faith: *God's grace has saved you because of your faith in*

Christ. Your salvation doesn't come from anything you do. It is God's gift. It is not based on anything you have done. No one can brag about earning it.^{Eph.2:8-9}

But now we are saved, we don't have to wait passively for God to help us – we can act on God's promises and activate them by our faith. We don't have to wait for something to “turn up” like the man waiting by the pool called Bethesda.^{Jn.5} We can ask God ourselves: *At that time you won't need to ask me for anything. I tell you the truth, you will ask the Father directly, and he will grant your request because you use my name. You haven't done this before. Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy.*^{Jn.16:23-24}

In the UK, the currency is Pounds Sterling and that is what is used to buy goods; but in God's Kingdom the currency is Faith. Faith is what we use to “buy” goods in God's Kingdom: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*^{Heb.11:6} **Faith is absolute confidence and trust in God based on His Character** (what we know of Him) and **His Word** (what He has said in the Scriptures). *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*^{Heb.4:16} Faith, like love *always protects, always trusts, always hopes, never gives up and never fails.*^{1Cor.13:7-8} We can use our FAITH - the currency of God's kingdom – to obtain God's promises: *Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”*^{Lk.7:50} *Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.”*^{Lk.17:19}

When a country prints more money than its reserves can support, its currency inflates thus reducing its buying power and making it less valuable. In 2008 the Daily Telegraph's headline was: **“Zimbabwe inflation hits 231 million per cent.”** Zimbabwe actually issued a 100 trillion dollar banknote (Z\$ 100,000, 000, 000, 000) and a loaf of bread which cost Z\$500 in August 2008 was priced at Z\$10,000 two months later in October (if you could actually find a loaf to buy). Unlike the countries of this world God's kingdom will never “print” more faith “currency” than it can support and so faith will never get inflated. None of God's promises will ever be beyond our means and so we never have to “go without” because we can't afford them! *God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through?*^{Nu.23:19}

God's kingdom (including His Word) is like a treasure: *I rejoice in your word like one who discovers a great treasure.*^{Ps.119:162} *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a trader who was looking for fine pearls. He found one that was very valuable. So he went away and sold everything he had. And he bought that pearl.*^{Matt.13:45-46} God's promises were given for us to accept and activate by our faith: *Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled.*^{Rom.15:4} *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.*^{Jn.20:31}

So how much value do we place on God's Promises?

The Bible says that *the righteous are as bold as a lion.*^{Prov.28:1} We should never let anyone or anything steal God's provisions from us but, like a lion roaring over its prey, boldly declare what we know and love about God: *Their roar is like that of the lion, they roar like young lions; they growl as they seize their prey and carry it off with no one to rescue. In that day they will roar over it like the roaring of the sea.*^{Is.5:29-30} **God's promises and provisions are too valuable to lose through carelessness.** Let's ensure that we keep our “house” clean (i.e. our mind is kept clean by being *washed with God's Word*^{Eph.5:26} and swept by *renewing our minds*^{Rom.21:2}). And then keep the “birds” from stealing God's Word^{Matt.13:4;19} by using our mouth to praise God: *May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands.*^{Ps.149:6}

Sunday 8th February 2015. Ps.19:1-8. Acts 20

The Purpose of Preaching

Biblical Preaching is the **personal explanation of God's Truth** and like Prophecy^{Rev.19:10} is about **Jesus Christ the Son of God and how to believe in Him**. Scripture says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How can they call on him unless they believe in him? How can they believe in him unless they hear about him? How can they hear about him unless someone preaches to them? And how can anyone preach without being sent? It is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"^{Rom.10:13-15} The Bible likens preaching to "threshing" – separating the wheat from the chaff - because it is breaking open the Scriptures to make them easy to understand: *The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "you shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,"*^{Tim.5:17-18} Even in the OT, preaching helped people understand the Scriptures: *All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law... The Levites...then instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.*^{Neh.8:4-8}

Preaching should be Helpful: *You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you.*^{Acts.20:20} Preaching should primarily be theological but it must also be practical. If we don't understand the principles of God's Kingdom we will always struggle to apply them – and if we don't apply the Kingdom principles, they remain theory - just good ideas: *What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless. Now someone may argue, "Some people have faith; others have good deeds." But I say, "How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds."*^{Jas.2:14-18} Preaching should also include how to apply the principles of God's Kingdom in different situations: *There's an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth: a right time for birth and another for death, a right time to plant and another to reap; a right time to...*^{Ecd.3:1-2} *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*^{Phil.1:9-10}

Preaching should Explain how to turn to God in repentance and faith: *I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*^{Acts.20:21} Turning to God in repentance and faith is not just about conversion but is the main principle of living in God's kingdom. We should turn to God in every situation, changing our minds to agree with Him (that is what repentance means) and then have the confidence to trust Him. It is impossible to be "bogged down" with the cares of this life when we praise God! *I will give them a spirit of praise in place of a spirit of sadness (a praising heart instead of a languid spirit).*^{Is.61:3} *The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity. And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest.*^{Lk.8:14-15} **Praise does not eliminate problems but it does elevate them into God's care!**

Preaching should be about God's Grace: *However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.*^{Acts.20:24} God is a Gracious God: *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*^{Ps.103:8} And it is God's grace that saves us and keeps us: *For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this*

present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.^{Tit.2:11-14} Preaching God’s grace promotes a godly awe because we are reminded that God is in control – it is God’s ability, not our ability that matters! (“Grace” comes from the same root word in the Greek language of the NT as Joy, Gratitude and Generosity).

Preaching should proclaim the Whole Will of God: *For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*^{Acts.20:27} God doesn’t want anyone to perish^{2Pet.3:9} so preaching will always reach out to the “not-yet-Believers” and tell the whole story of **God, Man, Jesus, Cross, Resurrection**. Preaching will also explain how God intervenes in our lives both in general terms by His universal care and provision (*He himself gives life and breath to all people. He also gives them everything else they have.*^{Acts17:25}) and also specifically when we receive answers to our prayers (*for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance*^{Phil.1:19}). Many Christians miss out on so much because they don’t know what God has provided for them or that they can ask for help. *Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.*^{Jas.4:2-3}

Preaching should Warn: *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!*^{Acts.20:29-31} The Church has been beset with distortions and divisions because we still only understand in part! After only a couple of years from the beginning of the Church the Hellenistic Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews^{Acts.8} and a few years later in AD49 the Church was divided over whether Christians should keep the Jewish Law.^{Acts.15} Paul and John warned of deceivers: *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods.*^{1Tim.4:1-3} *Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully.*^{2Jn.7-8} The hymn “The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord” also describes the Church’s divisions: *Though with a scornful wonder this world sees her oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed, yet saints their watch are keeping.* **The Gospel is Simple, Settled and Spiritual** and we must strive to present it as such and not make it complicated or difficult. *It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult.*^{Acts.15:19} *When God speaks of a "new" covenant, it means he has made the first one obsolete. It is now out of date and will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:13} *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*^{2Cor.5:17} *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*^{Gal.5:1} Although God’s Kingdom has different values from the world’s values, there is no need for us to be “weird” and there is a “common-sense” to the Gospel: *I am your servant; therefore give me common sense to apply your rules to everything I do.*^{Ps.119:125}

So let’s preach the Gospel of Grace with a godly passion, (whether publicly or privately) making our explanation helpful as we encourage and warn: *Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*^{Acts20:32}

Sunday 15th February 2015. Ps.19:7-14. Acts 21:1-26

The Purpose of Prophecy

Last week we looked at the purpose of preaching - that we should preach a Gospel of Grace with a godly passion, making our explanation helpful as we encourage and warn. This week we are looking at the **Purpose of Prophecy**. Clearly there is a role for prophesy in the Church as Paul teaches about prophecy in 1Corinthians and there are also several examples of Prophets: *During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)*^{Acts.11:27-28}

Prophecy (like Preaching) **is about Jesus Christ the Son of God**. *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10}

The 1st mention of a Prophet in the Bible is Abraham: *Give Abraham his wife back. He is a prophet. He will pray for you, and you will not die... Then Abraham prayed to God. And God healed Abimelech. He also healed his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again.*^{Gen.20:7;17}

Although there is no record of Abraham actually prophesying, his relationship with God enabled him to open the “closed doors” of infertility when he prayed. **Prophets release the purpose of God!** The next mention of a Prophet is Aaron: *Then the LORD said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country.”*^{Ex.7:1-2} Aaron was to be the “spokesperson” for Moses. **Prophets speak on behalf of God!** Under the OT anyone who spoke presumptuously on behalf of God was judged very severely: *But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death.” You may say to yourselves, “How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?” If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed.*^{Deut.18:20-22} However we should bear in mind that the only true pattern of the Church is drawn from the teachings and examples in the New Testament. George Jeffreys wrote an excellent book called “[Pentecostal Rays](#)” (available in pdf format from our website) where he deals with the function of prophets in the Church.

NT Church prophecy is more about **forth-telling** than **fore-telling** and can be summarised as **Edification, Exhortation and Encouragement**: *But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.*^{1Cor.14:3} **Jesus is the Prophet that Moses spoke of:** *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him... and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name.*^{Deut.18:15-19} *By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see... For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.*^{Acts.3:16;23} Moses saw the day when all would prophesy: *I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them.*^{Nu.11:29} This was fulfilled when the Church began on the Day of Pentecost. *Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*^{Acts.2:18} Now our role as prophets is to **proclaim Jesus through holy living and clear speech**: *But he said to me, ‘Don’t do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!’*^{Rev.22:9} *But when you proclaim his truth in everyday speech, you’re letting others in on the truth so that they can grow and be strong and experience his presence with you.*^{1Cor.14:3}

The **Prophet** in the NT Church is a **Proclaimer** – and we **proclaim Jesus plainly, passionately and persuasively.**

Britannicus, a brother of Nero, visited a church in Rome in about AD50. The description of the service is not only inspiring but also a timely reminder that our worship is in Spirit and in Truth – that we have a prophetic ministry as we are the mouthpiece or spokesperson for God: *Nothing could have been more simple than the order of worship... They had no distinctive dress, but wore the ordinary tunic or cloak of daily life, though evidently the best and neatest that they could procure... They knelt or stood in prayer, as though the mud floor were sacred as the rocks of Sinai, and every look and gesture was happy, as of those who felt that not only angels and archangels were among them, but the invisible presence of their Lord Himself. First they prayed; and Britannicus had never before heard real prayers. But here were men and women, the young and the old, to whom prayer evidently meant direct communion with the Infinite and the Unseen; to whom the solitude of private supplication, and the community of worship, were alike admissions into the audience-chamber of the Divine... But a new and yet more powerful sensation was kindled in his mind, when at the close of the prayers they sang a hymn... Britannicus listened entranced to the mingled voices as they rose and fell in exquisite cadence. He had heard in theatres all the most famous singers of Rome... But he had heard nothing which distantly resembled this melody and harmony of voices wedded to holy thoughts; and, although there were no instruments, the angelical, soft, trembling voices, seemed to him like echoes from some new and purer region of existence... When the hymn was over they sat down, and Linus rose to speak to them a few words of exhortation. He reminded them that they had been called from darkness to light, and from the power of satan unto God. He told them that they had fled to the rock of Christ amid a weltering sea of human wickedness, and though the darkness was around them he bade them to walk in the light, since they were the children of light... Were not their bodies temples of the Holy Ghost which dwelt in them, except they were reprobates? ...The world was passing away and the fashion of it; their own lives were but as the withering grass and the fading flower; and was not the day of the Lord at hand?* Jeffreys: Pentecostal Rays

Because there is a spiritual dimension to Christianity, our proclaiming goes beyond the “forth-telling” and may include “fore-telling” as God occasionally reveals things through the Spirit as in the case with Agabus (N.B. these are unsought and unasked for): *After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’* ^{1Acts.21:10-11} However the “fore-telling” aspect is really a very small part of the New Testament prophetic ministry. There is no teaching or example in the NT Church of “enquiring of a Prophet” or “receiving messages for guidance through the gift of prophesy.” The Bible (which is where the principles of the Kingdom are recorded) and the empowering of the Holy Spirit, is all that we need for victorious Christian living: *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life 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, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.* ^{2Pet.1:3-4} *Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.* ^{Matt.6:33} We don’t need a special “Word from God” to live in victory because we already have everything we need but God does give us “extras” to “make it easier for us. **But when God does speak prophetically, it is to strengthen our faith and to encourage us.** *The gift of prophecy, when rightly guarded and controlled by the infallible written Word, is a means of high and true spiritual elevation for individual and church. But when used according to the dictates of the human mind without regard to the Scriptures, it can be the means of sinking both individual and church to the depths of despair. It is not to be wondered at that an all-wise*

God has stated in unmistakable language and defined in the clearest possible manner the uses and purposes of this extraordinary gift.^{G.Jeffreys}

So let's all aspire to testify about Jesus plainly, passionately and persuasively, recognising that our Faith is spiritual and that we have God's answer to the world within us – **His Name is Jesus!**

Sunday 22nd February 2015. Ps.20. Acts 21:27-22:17

The Basics of Biblical Christianity: *God has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.*^{Acts.22:14-16}

Paul the Apostle was exceptional but not an exception. He was an excellent model and although our experiences may not be as extreme as Paul's, we should all model our expectations on his example. *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*^{1Cor.11:1} *Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.*^{Phil.3:17} Although life may seem haphazard and chaotic at times we are not part of a great game of chance – God has a pre-planned purpose and direction for us. *You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit them together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! It is amazing to think about. Your workmanship is marvellous—and how well I know it. You were there while I was being formed in utter seclusion! You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your book! How precious it is, Lord, to realize that you are thinking about me constantly! I can't even count how many times a day your thoughts turn toward me. And when I waken in the morning, you are still thinking of me.*^{Ps.139:13-18} God even works bad things out for our good and His glory: *And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. God planned that those he had chosen would become like his Son. In that way, Christ will be the first and most honoured among many brothers.*^{Rom.8:28-29} Our response to difficulties have eternal consequences: *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*^{2Cor.4:17} The "blue-print" for Paul's life should also be the "blue-print" for our life too!

God has chosen us to know His Will. God's Will is that we obey Him – and He desires obedience more than anything. But obedience is not automatic – it is a choice. Adam was created sinless but not obedient and when the test came, he made the wrong choice and failed. *For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.*^{Rom.5:19} Jesus was born sinless but when His test came, He made the right choice by obeying God: *Then I said, 'Look, I have come to do your will, O God—as is written about me in the Scriptures.'*^{1Heb.10:7} *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.*^{Jn.6:38} *Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*^{Lk.22:42} However, obedience was something that Jesus had to learn from hard choices: *Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.*^{Heb.5:8} Maturity is about making the right choices: *Solid food is for those who are grown up. They have trained themselves with a lot of practice. They can tell the difference between good and evil.*^{Heb.5:14} We can choose to do God's will as well as praying for it: *Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.*^{Jn.7:17} *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*^{Matt.6:10} Doing God's will shows that we love Him and this has eternal consequences *And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.*^{2Jn.1:6} *The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.*^{1Jn.2:17}

God has chosen us to see the Righteous One. Few of us will see the resurrected Jesus physically as Paul did, but we can all see Jesus spiritually when we meet together (i.e. be aware of His presence with us). *Where two or three people meet together in my name, I am there with them.*^{Matt.18:20} *So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present.*^{1Cor.5:4} However, we don't need feelings to have faith – there is a greater blessing of believing without “seeing”: *Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*^{Jn.20:29} We can also see Jesus in the Scriptures: *The Scriptures you study give witness about me.*^{Jn.5:39} *Then Philip began with that same part of Scripture. He told him the good news about Jesus.*^{Acts.8:35}

God has chosen us to hear Words from His mouth. Today, God speaks to us through Jesus: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.*^{Heb.1:1-2} Although we base our faith on the Scriptures, we must read them in the light of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension **because we are New Covenant Believers.** *But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*^{Matt.13:16-17} The Bible is more than just a picture book about Jesus – it was written about Him **and for our instruction** so that we might know what God is saying to us through Him. *Jesus said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything written about me must happen. Everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must come true.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written. The Christ will suffer. He will rise from the dead on the third day. His followers will preach in his name. They will tell others to turn away from their sins and be forgiven. People from every nation will hear it, beginning at Jerusalem. You have seen these things with your own eyes.*^{Lk.24:44-48} God also speaks today by the Holy Spirit (because Jesus has ascended to the Father). *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{Rev.2:7} We should not only listen to the Holy Spirit but also consult the Scriptures as well: *Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry... they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom.*^{Is.8:20-22} Then we will be able to discern between good and God; morality and spirituality; helpful and holy.

God has chosen us to be a Witness of what we have seen and heard of Him. Jesus' last words to His disciples (and “disciples” includes us if we follow Jesus) was that we must be His Witnesses –to speak about what we have seen and heard. *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} *When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. And you also must testify.*^{Jn.15:26-27} When we realise what Jesus has done for us, we will find it difficult not to talk about Him. *As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*^{Acts.4:20} Testifying about Jesus doesn't mean that we all have to knock on doors or preach on the streets but it does mean talking about Him – sharing what we believe and what is within us: *that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*^{Phile.1:6}

So what are we waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on His Name.^{Acts.22:14-16} *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 the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized [by John].*^{Lk.7:29-30} Baptism is more than a ceremony – it literally means to be immersed or

saturated. **Basic Biblical Christianity** is about being immersed in Jesus – in His Presence, His life and His love so that we leave a “*trail*” of Him wherever we go. Let’s aspire to emulate Paul’s example and **go back to the basics - keeping it simple but also sound and scriptural**. *“As for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD. “My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever,” says the LORD.*^{Is.59:21}

March: I am Forgiven in Christ

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Eph.4:32

Sunday 1st March 2015. Ps.21.

'Gone Fishing'

People have been fishing from the beginning: *So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over (govern, have dominion over, take responsibility for) the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."*^{Gen.1:27-28} And fishing is still very popular, whether for fun or for food - the *Angling Times* estimate that over 6,000,000 people in the UK have gone fishing within the last 2 years. Basically fishing is the feat of catching fish for profit – to sell and eat – or for pastime – to relax and enjoy.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a fishing net: *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net. It was let down into the lake. It caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and gathered the good fish into baskets. But they threw the bad fish away. This is how it will be on judgment day. The angels will come. They will separate the people who did what is wrong from those who did what is right. They will throw the evil people into the blazing furnace. There the evil ones will sob and grind their teeth.*^{Matt.13:47-50} The Bible explains that none of us are “good” and actually even the best we that can do is way below God’s standard of “good”! *All of us have become like someone who is “unclean.” All of the good things we do are like polluted rags to you.*^{Is.64:6} *No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one.*^{Rom.3:10-12} And so the “good fish” in Jesus’ parable are not people who have lived good lives or who have been nice to others but “righteous” people: *And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.*^{Matt.25:46} Righteousness is credited to us when we “believe” God – that is when we trust Him: *For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*^{Rom.1:17} *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.*^{Rom.4:16} *Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.*^{Rom.4:3} *But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.*^{Rom.4:5} Faith is believing God and trusting Him to do what He said He would do, which including what He says about us and our sin: *But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment. The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me. Righteousness is available because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more. Judgment will come because the ruler of this world has already been judged.*^{Jn.16:7-11} But if we don’t believe what God says, we make Him out to be a liar: *All who believe in the Son of God know in their hearts that this testimony is true. Those who don't believe this are actually calling God a liar because they don't believe what God has testified about his Son. And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life.*^{1Jn.5:10-12}

At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, He met some fishermen and told them that they would now catch people instead of fish: *“Come. Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.*^{Matt.4:19-20} These weren’t “pastime fishermen” who went fishing to relax and unwind but “professional fishermen” who fished for food and

to earn their living. But now they would spend their time “catching” people for the kingdom of God

Fish have to be caught. Fish don’t normally just jump in the net – someone has to catch them. People don’t normally just come to Church or even read the Bible – someone has to invite them and explain what God has said: *Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked. “Come and see,” said Philip.*^{Jn.1:45-46} *Then Philip began with that same part of Scripture. He told him the good news about Jesus.*^{Acts.8:35} *When the day arrived, they came back to his home with a number of their friends. Paul talked to them all day, from morning to evening, explaining everything involved in the kingdom of God, and trying to persuade them all about Jesus by pointing out what Moses and the prophets had written about him. Some of them were persuaded by what he said, but others refused to believe a word of it.*^{Acts.28:23-24} The Church is a “life-boat” not a “pleasure boat” where it is “all hands to deck” because everyone has a ministry under the headship of Jesus: *We will grow up into Christ in every way. He is the Head. He makes the whole body grow and build itself up in love. Under the control of Christ, each part of the body does its work. It supports the other parts. In that way, the body is joined and held together.*^{Eph.4:15-16} Jesus didn’t say that Church Leaders would minister in His Name but **Believers**: *And those who believe will be able to do these things as proof: They will use my name to force out demons. They will speak in new languages. They will pick up snakes and drink poison without being hurt. They will touch the sick, and the sick will be healed.*^{Mk.16:17-18} The “ministry gifts” in the Church are not there to do all the work but to equip the whole body of Believers to work: *Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.*^{Eph.4:11-12}

Fish have to be cleaned. Once the fish are caught they have to be prepared which can be quite a messy job. Once people come to Jesus, they have to be taught and disciplined: *Then Jesus came to them. He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So you must go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And you can be sure that I am always with you, to the very end.”*^{Matt.28:18-20} Preaching and teaching is an important ministry in the Church: *the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus... with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God.*^{Rom.15:15-16} *The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.*^{1Tim.5:17} But like all gifts, Jesus is the archetype and the perfect model, especially as Apostle,^{Heb.3:1} Prophet,^{Acts.3:22} Evangelist,^{Lk.4:18} Pastor^{1Pet.5:4} and Teacher;^{Jn.13:13} then there are those who are recognised as functioning publicly in those areas; and then it is the ministry of **everyone** to function in those gifts because it is the **Holy Spirit who is our Gift** not the ministry or function. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us and who empowers us - so none of can boast of our “gifting”! *No one can ever boast in the presence of God. God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD."*^{1Cor.1:29-31} *As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died.*^{Gal.6:14}

After every sermon we should ask: **So what? How do I apply what I have just heard?** Hopefully our response today is: **Let’s go fishing!** Some will excel in inviting others, some in explaining about Jesus **BUT we should all go fishing!** “Everyone who calls, ‘Help, God!’ gets help.” *But how can people call for help if they don't know who to trust? And how can they know who to trust if they haven't heard of the One who can be trusted? And how can they hear if*

nobody tells them? And how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it? That's why Scripture exclaims, "A sight to take your breath away! Grand processions of people telling all the good things of God!"^{Rom.10:13-15} **Remember this:** Huge numbers of people who lie dead in their graves will wake up. Some will rise up to life that will never end. Others will rise up to shame that will never end. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the sky. Those who lead many others to do what is right will be like the stars for ever and ever.^{Dan.12:2-3}

Sunday 8th March 2015. Ps.22:1-21. Acts 23

Doing our Duty

My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.^{Acts.23:1}

During the Napoleonic Wars England was under threat of invasion and possible conquest by France. At the Battle of Trafalgar, (northwest of the Strait of Gibraltar) Lord Nelson signalled all the necessary battle instructions to his ships but then decided that something extra was required and so he instructed his signal officer, Lieutenant John Pasco, to signal to the fleet the message "England confides that every man will do his duty" ("confides" means "is confident") and added 'You must be quick, for I have one more to make which is for close action.' Pasco replied, 'If your Lordship will permit me to substitute the "confides" for "expects" the signal will soon be completed, because the word "expects" is in the vocabulary, and "confides" must be spelt,' Nelson said 'That will do, Pasco, make it directly.' Thus, at around 11:45am on 21st October 1805, the most famous naval signal in British history was sent: "England expects that every man will do his duty". As Nelson lay dying, he was heard to say "Thank God I have done my duty." Although Nelson lost his life, the Battle was won and England remained free!

God expects that every Christian will fulfil their duty – and He also confides that we will do our duty because it is God who works in us and He will complete what He has started: *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.1:6} **So what is our duty? Our duty is to be Jesus' witnesses**^{Act.1:8} – to proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ: *Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God.*^{Lk.9:60} Although some have a publically recognised ministry of formally preaching structured sermons, we are all called to "preach" in the sense of testifying about God's grace: *my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.*^{Acts.20:24}

Testifying to God's grace as shown in Jesus, is what God expects from every Believer because there is no other way to be saved: *For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, "The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone." There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.*^{Acts.4:11-12} For the Believer there is no sacred/secular divide^{Zech.14:20-21} but our whole life is to be dedicated to His service: *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*^{Col.3:23-24} The Hebrew word "abad" is translated both work and worship: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work (abad) it and take care of it.*^{Gen.2:15} Worship (abad) the LORD your God and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you.^{Ex.23:25} So our physical work is actually part of our spiritual worship. *So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture*

around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.^{Rom.12:1-2}

God expects us to live our lives to the full,^{Jn.10:10} which includes being joyful and enthusiastic: *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*^{Rom.12:11-12} Sincerity and zeal are good if mixed with the truth, but if they are not, they are dangerous. To zealously take the wrong medicine – even in all sincerity – could be fatal! *Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always.*^{Gal.4:16-18} Paul had been zealous and sincere in persecuting the Church! *If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.*^{Phil.3:4-7}

God has saved us to share about His salvation and witnessing is an act of worship so when it comes to “preaching” or testifying to God’s grace we need to do it passionately and perfectly – ardently and accurately. We need to study the Scriptures so that we can share confidently and authoritatively as well as effectively. We cannot worship God with lies or untruths: *God is spirit. His worshipers must worship him in spirit and in truth.*^{Jn.4:24} That is why it is so important that we believe, obey and **know the truth**: *Jesus spoke to the Jews who had believed him. “If you obey my teaching,” he said, “you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth. And the truth will set you free.”*^{Jn.8:31-32} Testifying is a high and holy calling as well as being our duty: *Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles. He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.*^{Rom.15:15-17} So when we do “preach” or witness to what we have seen and heard of God we are not being extra “spiritual” – it is what God expects us to do. Neither can we claim any credit when God answers our prayers because He has commissioned every Believer to proclaim the Good News and to pray for others.^{Mk.16:17-18} *So you too, when you have done everything you were commanded to do, should say, ‘We are slaves undeserving of special praise; we have only done what was our duty.’*^{Lk.17:10} *Yet preaching the Good News is not something I can boast about. I am compelled by God to do it. How terrible for me if I didn't preach the Good News! If I preach because I want to, I get a reward. If I preach because I have to, I'm only doing my duty. Then what reward do I get? Here is what it is. I am able to preach the good news free of charge. And I can do it without making use of my rights when I preach it.*^{1Cor.9:16-18}

We also have an obligation or duty to live under the control of the Holy Spirit and not the control of our natural desires (the flesh). *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death... Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. **You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit**, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. 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 because of his Spirit who lives in you. **Therefore**, brothers and sisters, **we have an obligation**—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live*

according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.^{Rom.8:1-14}

Let's all endeavour to finish our lives saying: "Thank God I have done my duty"

Sunday 8th March 2015. Ps.22:22-31.

Mothers' Sunday

**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!**

Bill West

As Kody Friesen is preaching I have adapted this week's notes from Greg Koukl (www.str.org)

Why is it so crucial to pray in Jesus' name?

To pray in Jesus's name means to acknowledge that we only have access to the Father's attention and grace through the mediation and work of our Saviour. So just using the words "in Jesus' name" is not sufficient. We use the words to reinforce the required attitudes and motives. To pray "in Jesus' name" is to come before God in both humility (*knowing we don't deserve God's help*) and confidence (*knowing that we are clothed in Christ's righteousness and worthiness*), as well as grateful joy. To pray in Jesus' name, then, is to be aware of the grace of the gospel as the basis of prayer, and to have our attitude in prayer deeply enriched—both humbled and exalted. When we consciously or unconsciously expect God to hear our prayer because of our relative freedom from overt sin or because of our service and moral effort, we are praying in our own name.

The Jews under the OT were supposed to reflect morality to the world. Israel was to witness to the name of God. When they talked about the name of God and witnessed to God's name, that does not mean that they were to let everybody know that they called God, "Yahweh." Their goal wasn't to cover the countryside with evangelists who just let everybody know what the right word for God was. It meant something different.

What is surprising, though, is that Christians, have a very similar practice. We think we are doing something spiritual and end up doing something superstitious. In the process we don't really do the spiritual thing that we intended to accomplish. The "*name of God*" or "*in the name of Jesus*" means something different than repeating those words. Read the New Testament. It says there, "*Go out unto all the world, baptizing the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.*" It says "*Anything you ask in my name, that will I do.*" We have presumed that what that means is that we must add a phrase after both prayer and baptism in order to make it work. We dip them and say, "*In the name of Jesus*" or "*in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*" Just about every time we finish praying we tack this phrase on at the end, "*In the name of Jesus. Amen.*" We do that because we were told to pray in the name of Jesus and God would answer. We expect that in doing so it seals the power of the prayer. I think that is superstitious because praying in the name of Jesus doesn't mean **saying**, "*In the name of Jesus.*"

A prayer that is at the beginning and sometimes at the end of many Epistles is: "*Grace to you and peace in the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Paul reflects a prayer here: "*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father.*" And again: "*I pray that the eyes of your heart might be opened and, that you would understand the length and breadth and depth of the love of Christ which is beyond comprehension.*" One thing you will notice when you highlight every prayer or every supplication towards God in the text of the New Testament is that you will never see a New Testament prayer that ends with the phrase "*In Jesus' name. Amen,*" even though the same text teaches you to pray in Jesus' name. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to draw the conclusion that we are, first, to pray in the name of Jesus, and second, praying in the name of Jesus doesn't mean ending your prayer with the phrase "*In the name of Jesus. Amen,*" because it is never done in the New Testament. Ending prayers with that phrase might do nothing whatsoever to the efficacy of your prayer. I even submit that it might be hurting your prayer, depending on what you mean by the phrase.

What does it mean to pray in the name of someone if it doesn't mean saying, "*In the name of...*"? Here's what it means. The name of someone, in the sense that the Bible authors used it, was what the person stood for, the substance of their character, or their authority. Israel was to witness to God's name i.e. His character and who He is. "*The Lord, God, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving kindness and truth, who keeps loving kindness for a thousand.*" ^{Ex.34:6-7} This phrase is repeated at least six times in the Old Testament and is testifying to the name, or nature, or power, or substance of God. When we pray in the name of Jesus or baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, what we are doing is acting in their authority, in their stead, according to their command, and consistent with their desires. When we pray "*In the name of Jesus. Amen*" it is usually the Christian exit. Translated it means, "*the prayer is over, let's go do what we were doing, or let's eat*" - generally we don't mean, "*I am praying in the authority of Jesus Christ.*" But there is great power in praying in the authority of Jesus Christ, by the authority He has given us, consistent with His character, His desire, and His will. It's like when a policeman says, "*Stop in the name of the law.*" He is saying that because he is standing in the place of the law and speaking on behalf of it. To the degree that he speaks for the law, then he can enforce the law and he has authority. When he steps outside of the law, he has lost his authority even though he still says, "*Stop in the name of the law.*"

It might be better for us to start our prayers by saying, "*Father, I come before you, not in my own power, not in my own righteousness, not in my own capability. I come before you in the authority of Jesus, your Son, who gave me access in this faith in which I stand because of His blood. I come on the merits of Jesus, not on my own merits.*" If we are praying in a group and we don't want to leave people mystified as to what is happening, we could just simply say, "*The prayer is over, let's eat,*" or

"We're done, let's go on." Praying in the name of Jesus is when we come on the basis of Jesus' merits, then we are heard for Jesus' sake. The important thing is that we approach the throne of God based on the authority of Jesus Christ. If we are thinking that way and that is our attitude, it doesn't matter what we say at the end of the prayer. God will hear us according to His promise. From www.str.org

However, when we pray in public, especially at civic events where unbelievers or nominal Christians are present, it is important that we make it clear that we are coming to God in Jesus' name. For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, "The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone." There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." *Acts.4:11-12* **By using the phrase "in the Name of Jesus" we clearly declare our trust and confidence in Jesus:** *When the believers heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Lord and King," they said, "you made the heavens, the earth and the sea. You made everything in them. Long ago you spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of our father David, who served you. You said, "Why are the nations angry? Why do the people make useless plans? The kings of the earth take their stand against the Lord. The rulers of the earth gather together against his Anointed King." (Ps.2:1-2) "In fact, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together in this city with those who weren't Jews. They also met with the people of Israel. All of them made plans against your holy servant Jesus. He is the one you anointed. They did what your power and purpose had already decided should happen. Now, Lord, consider the bad things they say they are going to do. Help us to be very bold when we speak your word. Stretch out your hand to heal. Do miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They were bold when they spoke God's word.* *Acts.4:24-31*

Sunday 22nd March 2015. Ps.23. Acts 23-24

True Worship is Obedience to Jesus in response to Belief

I worship the God of our ancestors. I am a follower of the Way of Jesus... I believe everything that agrees with the Law. I believe everything written in the Prophets. I have the same hope in God that these men have. I believe that both the godly and the ungodly will rise from the dead. *Acts.24:14-15*

We were created with a purpose - to worship God: *Worship the Lord your God. He is the only one you should serve.* *Lk.4:8* Our English word "worship" is derived from the Old English word "weorþscipe", meaning worthiness or worth-ship - to give worth to something. So we worship God when we honour Him **but** this has to be a genuine reflection of our heart – our actions & attitudes and our lives & lips. **In fact true worship is obedience:** "We will worship and then we will come back to you." ...*The Lord declares, "I will surely bless you... because you have obeyed me."* *Gen.22:5;17-18* Worship is linked to what we do – our work (see *Ex.23:25* & *Gen.2:15*). Abel's offering was accepted because he gave his offering as an act of worship (in faith *Heb.11:4*), whereas Cain gave his offering with a bad attitude and out of duty. *Gen.4:5* When we come to God with our offerings – our gifts of praise, prayer, appreciation or even our money – they must be an expression of our trust and a token of His worth to us. *No one is to appear before me empty-handed.* *Ex.23:15* *When you come together, every one of you brings something. You bring a hymn or a teaching or a word from God.* *1Cor.14:26* **That's why praise is passionate!** Giving to God is a response to His blessings and should never be an attempt to obtain His blessings. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.* *Eph.1:3* However there is a cycle of sowing and reaping: *In that day I will respond, declares the LORD—I will respond to the skies and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and the olive oil and they will respond to Jezreel. [Jezreel means God plants or sows.]* *Hos.2:21-22* Remember this: *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also*

reap generously... 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.^{2Cor.9:6-11}

I worship the God of our ancestors. There is only one God and so Christians worship the same God that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob worshipped BUT we are under the New Covenant. The Old Covenant is obsolete and finished^{Heb.8:13} and so our method of worship is completely different. Because we have direct access to God through Jesus Christ at any time and at any place, we don't have an earthly holy place or an earthly holy priest to assist our worship. *For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. He gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone. This is the message God gave to the world at just the right time.*^{1Tim.2:5-6} To deny that Jesus Christ is God's Son is to deny God and reject eternal life: *Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:22-25}

I am a follower of the Way of Jesus. Syncretism is the blending of two or more religious belief systems and was a real issue for the early Church. But although they worked their way through the transition from Judaism and Christianity, syncretism is still an issue today. Last week there was a Muslim prayer service at St John's church, Waterloo in central London. The vicar, who described the service as "very moving", joined in the event, read a passage from the Bible and invited the congregation to give thanks to "the God that we love, Allah". Although some evangelicals complained that it was offensive to Christians who are being persecuted for their faith around the world, it appears that there will not be any action taken by the Church's hierarchy! Six times in the NT Believers are called "Followers of the Way"^{2Acs.9:2;19:9,23;22:4,24;14,22} because Jesus is the only way to God. *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.*^{Jn.14:6} Because Believers were dogmatic in their conviction that Jesus is the only way they were persecuted and given the name "Christian" to ridicule them.^{Acs11:6} But it is better to be right and suffer for it, than to be wrong and live a comfortable life. *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*^{1Pet.4:14-16} For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.^{Ps.73:3;16-17} To be recognised as a "**Christian**" - someone who is **anointed and empowered by God** - is not an insult but an **honour**: *The apostles went out of the High Council overjoyed because they had been given the honour of being dishonoured on account of the Name.*^{Acs.5:41}

I believe everything that agrees with the Law. I believe everything written in the Prophets. We take God seriously and we take His Word seriously too. Whilst we believe everything written in the Scriptures, we also realise that the Law was a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ and so it does not restrict us today as it did in the OT era. *Wherefore the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ that we might be made righteous by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.*^{Gal.3:24-25} The Holy Spirit is now our schoolmaster and He confirms everything about Jesus. *But I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me.*^{Jn.15:26} This frees us from trying to keep the Law and enables us to rejoice in our true freedom: *So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.*^{Gal.5:1} However, although we believe everything in the Bible, we must read it in the light of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension because that was the reason it was

written - to explain our salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection! This is especially clear in the book of Isaiah, especially chapters 7, 9 and 53.

I have the same hope in God that these men have. I believe that both the godly and the ungodly will rise from the dead. Although Paul had the same hope in God as his fellow Jews, Paul also had faith – which they didn't. *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*^{Heb.11:1} Many religions teach that there is life after death and some even teach that there is a judgement but only Christianity teaches that we can know for sure that we will rise to everlasting life. This is because God has already judged us, found us guilty and paid the penalty for our sins. *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. All of us are like sheep. We have wandered away from God. All of us have turned to our own way. And the LORD has placed on his servant the sins of all of us.*^{Is.53:4-6} All we have to do is believe this and accept God's forgiveness - in fact that is all we can do! *Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. 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. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:13}

Let's continue to worship God *in Spirit and in Truth*^{1n.4:24} as we obey Jesus because we believe Him. It's not only the right thing to do but it is also the best thing to do - and there are eternal consequences!

Sunday 29th March 2015. Ps.24. Matt.21:1-27

Is your house clean enough for God?

Jesus was called Teacher because His teaching ability was amazing. It wasn't just what Jesus said that amazed people but it was also His authority: *When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike their teachers of religious law.*^{Matt.7:28-29} Jesus not only taught by what He said but also by what He did – Jesus' deeds were didactic! So when Jesus cleared the commerce in the Temple,^{Matt.21:12} He hadn't lost His temper but was actually instructing them – and us – about the Kingdom of God. There was a proper place for commerce in the Temple because pilgrims would have found it difficult to bring an acceptable (ceremonially clean) Offering with them on a long journey. The money exchangers were also essential as the Priests wouldn't accept pagan currency in the money Offerings.

Jesus actually cleared the Temple of commerce twice – once at the beginning of His ministry^{Jn.2:13f} and also at the end of His ministry.^{Matt.21:12f} The first cleansing is linked with the turning of water into wine and the second with the cursing of the fig tree. On both occasions Jesus was teaching that the Old Covenant with its rituals was being made obsolete^{Heb.8:13} because the New Covenant was being introduced to replace it. *So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.*^{Col.2:16-17} The Old Covenant rituals were visual symbols of the New Covenant realities - they had spiritual meanings and many were copies of what was in heaven. This is why they had to be made so precisely to the pattern: *We have a High Priest who sat down in the place of honour beside the throne of the majestic God in heaven. There he ministers in the heavenly Tabernacle, the true place of worship that was built by the Lord and not by human hands... If he were here on earth, he would not even be a priest, since there already are priests who offer the gifts required by the*

law. They serve in a system of worship that is only a copy, a shadow of the real one in heaven. For when Moses was getting ready to build the Tabernacle, God gave him this warning: "Be sure that you make everything according to the pattern I have shown you here on the mountain." But now Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is far superior to the old priesthood, for he is the one who mediates for us a far better covenant with God, based on better promises.^{Heb.8:1-6}

By turning water into wine, Jesus showed right at the beginning of His ministry that we are cleansed, by the "wine" of the New Covenant (i.e. the blood – the life - of Jesus) not by ritual washing (the jars contained about 150 gallons of water to be used for ceremonial washings). *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*^{Matt.26:28} We are cleansed by drinking (receiving) not by doing! By cursing the fig tree, Jesus showed at the end of His ministry that religion is finished and even the good religion that God once prescribed is now proscribed! Fig leaves symbolize man's attempt to cover his shame before God. *At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.*^{Gen.3:7} So when He cursed the fig tree and its leaves withered, Jesus was teaching us that God has finished with human attempt to cover the shame of our sin and now we have to rely totally on His provision to make ourselves acceptable: *And the LORD God made clothing from animal skins for Adam and his wife.*^{Gen.3:21} *For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*^{Is.61:10} *I put on righteousness as my clothing.*^{Job.29:14} *I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.*^{Phil.3:9-10}

In both of the Temple cleansings, Jesus referred to His "Father's House". At the first cleansing, Jesus made reference to **His body being the true Temple**. *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.*^{Jn.2:19-22} At the second cleansing, **Jesus states that His Father's House is a House of Prayer**. The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations'^{Is.56:7; Je 7:11} but you have turned it into a den of thieves.^{Mk.11:17}

In the New Covenant our body is God's Temple – we are the place where God meets us and we are the place where God dwells. *Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.*^{1Cor.6:19-20} We no longer go on pilgrimages or use special rituals or festivals in order to meet with God. God comes to us and takes away our shame. *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} God fellowships with us – permanently! *Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will go to them and make our home with them."*^{Jn.14:23} The sacrifices we bring to God are offerings of praise and obedience – words and works. *Through Jesus we should always bring God a sacrifice of praise, that is, words that acknowledge him.*^{Heb.13:15} *You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*^{1Pet.2:5} *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship.*^{Rom.12:1} There is no place for bartering or buying in God's new Temple and we can't exchange the pagan currency of the world (lying, cheating, hate etc.) when we come to worship – we have to use the new currency of the Kingdom (*righteousness, peace and joy*^{Rom.14:17} and *power.*^{1Cor.4:20}) all the time! We have to bring our own "sacrifice" and ensure

that it is “*clean*” (spiritually acceptable). Our conversations must acknowledge Jesus^{Heb.13:15} and we need to live “*holy*” lives. *Holy* means *dedicated to God* so our lives must be clean and wholesome. The Old Covenant Law was a schoolmaster whose role was to lead us to Christ but now Jesus has come we are not under the jurisdiction of that schoolmaster: *Wherefore the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ that we might be made righteous by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.*^{Gal.3:24-25} Religion with its ceremonies, customs and clothes, is a denial of the New Covenant that Jesus died to introduce. Pageantry and elaborate ceremonies are fine for state and civil occasions but they have no place in our spiritual worship because *God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.*^{Jn.4:24} *For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*^{Rom.14:17}

Because God has cleansed us by the new “wine” of Jesus’ blood and now lives within us, our house (body) really is clean enough for God.

So let’s join in the passionate praise of the crowd that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem: *Right at the crest, where Mount Olives begins its descent, the whole crowd of disciples burst into enthusiastic praise over all the mighty works they had witnessed: Blessed is he who comes, the king in God's name! All's well in heaven! Glory in the high places! Some Pharisees from the crowd told him, “Teacher, get your disciples under control!” But he said, “If they kept quiet, the stones would do it for them, shouting praise.”*^{Lk.19:37-40}

April: I am Justified in Christ

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 1Cor.6:11

Sunday 5th April 2015. Ps.25:1-11. John 20.

Does God really know us personally? *Jesus said to her, "Mary."*^{Jn.20:16}

Christianity is a personal relationship that is instigated by God: *We love because he first loved us.*^{1Jn.4:9} He chose us before we were even born: *Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.*^{Eph.1:4} Unlike human parents or friends, God will never forget us or our name: *But the city of Zion said, "The LORD has deserted me. The Lord has forgotten me." The LORD answers, "Can a mother forget the baby who is nursing at her breast? Can she stop showing her tender love to the child who was born to her? She might forget her child. But I will not forget you. I have written your name on the palms of my hands.*^{Is.49:14-16}

God always speaks to us personally: *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."*^{Is.43:1-3}

When God called Adam by name he was afraid because of his shame of sin: *But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*^{Gen.3:9-10} Sin will always cause us to be afraid of God and to feel shame, especially when we realise who God really is: *When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm too much of a sinner to be around you."*^{Lk.5:8} Peter had not then understood about the forgiveness of sins and so he felt his unworthiness. But when **God forgives us we have nothing separating us from Him** – there is no barrier between us and God and so we are ready and equipped to serve Him: *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go..."*^{Is.6:5-9}

God was angry with Moses after he made 5 excuses as to why he should not obey Him: *But Moses said, "Lord, please send someone else to do it." Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses.*^{Ex.4:13-14} God made plans for us before we were born so **there is no excuse for us making excuses:** *The LORD gave me this message: "I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations." "O Sovereign LORD," I said, "I can't speak for you! I'm too young!" The LORD replied, "Don't say, 'I'm too young,' for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you. And don't be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you. I, the LORD, have spoken!" Then the LORD reached out and touched my mouth and said, "Look, I have put my words in your mouth! Today I appoint you to go..."*^{Jer.1:4-10} We should have the same response to God's call as Samuel did: *And the LORD came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel replied, "Speak, your servant is listening."*^{1Sam.3:10}

Lazarus was dead^{Jn.11:43} when Jesus called him by name and Paul was "dead in his sins":^{Eph.2:1} *He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting."*^{Acts.9:4-5} So whatever our condition when God calls us, we can and should respond - and encourage others to respond too: *If you hear God speak today, don't be stubborn. Don't be stubborn like those who rebelled and tested me in the desert... Be careful, brothers and sisters, that none of you ever develop a wicked, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living*

God. Encourage each other every day while you have the opportunity. If you do this, none of you will be deceived by sin and become stubborn. After all, we will remain Christ's partners only if we continue to hold on to our original confidence until the end.^{Heb.3:7-14}

When William Shakespeare wrote "What's in a name? that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet;"^{Romeo & Juliet} he implied that the names of things do not affect what they really are. But when it comes to Jesus, His name is important because it is linked with His character and Person. *You have exalted above all things your name and your word.*^{Ps.138:2} *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.*^{Phil.2:9}

We honour Jesus' name and respect Him because He is important to us. "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, this stone is precious.^{1Pet.2:6-7} But we are also precious to God and He honours our name too – in fact He has given us a new name: *The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.*^{Is.62:2} *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.*^{Rev.2:17} Jesus the Good Shepherd calls us by name as He fellowships with us day by day: *the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice.*^{Jn.10:3-5}

The Electoral Register is updated regularly and those who have moved away or died are deleted from the register. But **we have a permanent home with God:** *Jesus answered them, I can guarantee this truth: Whoever lives a sinful life is a slave to sin. A slave doesn't live in the home forever, but a son does. So if the Son sets you free, you will be absolutely free.*^{Jn.8:34-36} and we will never die (be separated from Him): *Jesus said to her, "I am the one who brings people back to life, and I am life itself. Those who believe in me will live even if they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe that?"*^{Jn.11:25-26} So **God will never remove our name from the Lamb's Book of Life:** *He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{Rev.3:5-6} In fact **He records every time we talk about Him and fellowship with other believers:** *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 always thought about the honour of his name.*^{Mal.3:16} [Paul mentions people by name when he sends his greetings^{Rom.16} and this is a good principle for us to use and especially to mention by name those we pray for.]

Yes God really does know us personally.^{Is.49:16} **Because He speaks to us personally, we can be sure that His instructions and promises are for us personally too.** *We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God—those whom he has called according to his plan. This is true because he already knew his people and had already appointed them to have the same form as the image of his Son.*^{Rom.8:28-29}

Sunday 12th April 2015. Ps.25:10-22.

I am away this week so I have included this article from Greg Koukl (www.str.org)

Two Miracles.

Charles Dickens begins A Christmas Carol, his classic story of a life transformed, with an observation central to his tale: "Old Marley was as dead as a doornail....This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate."

Put another way, *A Christmas Carol* is a redemptive Christmas story that has meaning only because of the connection between a man who died and a man who had been raised anew. Dickens begins with a corpse and ends with a life so transformed it's almost as if Ebenezer Scrooge—the one spiritually dead in this account—had been born again. This storyline reminds me of something I have been thinking about lately—an odd conjunction between Christmas and Easter, both holidays now just behind us.

First, the Easter connection. As far as the Gospel is concerned, “*nothing wonderful can come of the story*” if Good Friday didn't end with a dead Messiah hanging from a cross.

Second, Christmas. The cross is what the first Christmas was all about—the innocent babe in a manger offering promise of new life **only because of a brutal death awaiting Him.**

Death was the goal of the incarnation, but it wasn't the end of the story. A miracle followed. Further, the death itself was no ordinary death, but rather a miracle all on its own. **Two miracles. The first one left a corpse. The second one brought life.**

This message of the early Christians preached got them killed, why?

It was Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest days on the Jewish liturgical calendar, and I was sitting before an audience of 300 religious Jews doing my best to explain to them why Jesus was the only way of salvation.

I wasn't alone. My Jewish host had also asked another Christian clergyman to weigh in with me on issues the audience was interested in. The question of Jesus was the first one, and he had a completely different take on the matter than I did. Yes, Jesus was the only way, he said, but that was largely irrelevant to our audience because they were religious Jews, honouring God the best way they knew how. God took that, implicitly, as devotion to Jesus and thus they were all saved by Jesus even though they didn't believe in Jesus.

As stunning as such a statement was coming from a Christian, it didn't surprise me. This view (called “*inclusivism*”) has been a cancer spreading in the church for years now reaching epidemic proportions. It wasn't appropriate (nor helpful) to have a “*that's-your-interpretation-not-mine*” battle in front of our listeners, but I did press the issue a bit further by asking for any New Testament verse that supported the assurance he had just given the audience. He quoted: “*Those who are not against Me are for Me.*”^{Mk.9:40} Since these nice Jewish people before us weren't against Jesus, they must be for Him, he reasoned.

He had misquoted slightly (“*For he who is not against us is for us*”), but the bigger concern had to do with the larger context of the verse. In this passage, Jesus referred to those outside His core group of disciples who were performing miracles in His name. Jesus was referring to His own followers, then, not unbelieving Jews.

By contrast, when Jesus was talking with Jews who rejected His Messianic claim, His response was exactly the opposite: “*He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters.*”^{Matt.12:30} Clearly, this second set of circumstances was more like those we faced that day. Therefore, the passage giving warning, not assurance, was the relevant one for our audience. In fact, this was exactly the answer other New Testament authorities gave when referring to audiences like ours that afternoon.

When Jesus faced devout religious Jews who denied He was the Messiah, He said, “*Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.*”^{Jn.8:24} When Peter stood before the Jewish leadership as a criminal for preaching the Gospel to Jews, he said, “*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under Heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.*”^{Acts.4:11} When Paul reflected on his Jewish countrymen's rejection of Jesus, he said, “*I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not*

subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes”.^{Rom.10:1-4}

There is no room in any of these passages (or the rest of the New Testament, for that matter) for the kind of assurances my friend gave the Jewish audience that day. Further, if this is the same message the early disciples delivered, why were they beaten, jailed, and executed first by Jews and later by gentile authorities? An inclusivist message would bring no such reprisal—it’s completely unoffensive. The message the early Christians preached, by contrast, cost many of them their lives.

No, the early Christians had the right message—Jesus’ message. The other Christian clergyman with me that day did not. Nor do any others speaking for Christianity who advance this distorted gospel. Their soothing message helps no one. Instead, it gives false hope to multitudes on the gravest of issues, their eternal destinies.

Some messages sound soothing, but give false comfort. We should give the truth, yet with grace and wisdom. We don’t want our manner to be a stumbling block to attracting people to Christ, but we also don’t want the truth of our message to be sacrificed simply to protect people’s feelings. Knowing how to manoeuvre through those minefields makes all the difference and will help to both encourage and equip you to engage with confidence whenever the inclusivist distortion of the truth comes up.

Sunday 19th April 2015. Ps.26. Jn.20:24-31

There’s a Blessing in Believing

Jesus said, “So, you believe because you’ve seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.” Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.^{Jn.20:29-31}

We are blessed by believing but we are not blessed if we take our stand with the mockers and scoffers: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD and who meditates on his law day and night.*^{Ps.1:1-2} Whilst “I don’t believe it!” is a humorous catchphrase of Victor Meldrew in the sitcom “*One foot in the grave*”, in real life unbelief is language of the ungodly. Even the father struggling with his faith stated that he believed: *Jesus said “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “**I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!**”*^{Mk.9:23-24}

When we realise what God’s blessing is like we would be foolish not to avail ourselves of it. *The blessing of the LORD makes one rich and He adds no sorrow with it.*^{Pron.10:22} Which is why Abraham asked God to bless Ishmael: *And Abraham said to God, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!” Then God said, “Yes... And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation.”*^{Gen.17:18-20}

“God Bless you” is an everyday expression mostly used superstitiously now – especially when sneezing! But actually it’s a prayer for God to speak well of someone and to make them happy. In the NT there are 2 words used for “**bless**”: *eulogeō* – meaning **to speak well of** (as in a eulogy at a funeral); and *makarios* – meaning **happy or fortunate**. No one in the New Testament ever pleaded with God to bless them. Nearly all of the references state “*blessed are ...*” (cf Matt.5), or “*you are blessed...*” This is because believers **are already** blessed: *Praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Through Christ, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing that heaven has to offer.*^{Eph.1:3}

The Bible often uses “*parallelisms*” where it states something in one way and then repeats it using slightly different words – a bit like a Thesaurus which lists synonyms for a

particular word. An example of a Biblical parallelism is: *Enter his gates with thanks giving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*^{Ps.100:4} This is not a theological distinction between thanksgiving and praise but a reinforcement of the principle that we come to God happy, thankful and saying good things about Him.

God gave Moses a “*priestly blessing*” to speak over the people: *The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*^{Nu.6:23-26} **So here God was explaining what His blessing really meant** - that God keeps us (He watches over us); that God shines His Face on us (He smiles upon us); that God is gracious to us (He is kind to us); that God lifts His countenance upon us (He looks on us with favour); that God gives us His peace. **These are all aspects of God’s blessing!**

Under the New Covenant we have no need of a priest (or pastor!) to bless us because God has already blessed us in Christ Jesus^{Eph.1:3} and He has already given us everything we need: *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*^{2Pet.1:3} **What we do need to do however, is to believe that God has actually done what He said He has done!** This is called *revelation* (literally an *unveiling*) where God opens the eyes of our heart and we can “*see*” - we can understand what we couldn’t understand before. *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.*^{Eph.1:17-18} Simon Peter said, “*You’re the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” Jesus came back, “*God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn’t get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am.*^{Matt.16:16-17}

Unbelievers cannot see what God has done for them because they are blind: *So if the Good News that we tell others is covered with a veil, it is hidden from those who are dying. The god of this world has blinded the minds of those who don’t believe. As a result, they don’t see the light of the Good News about Christ’s glory. It is Christ who is God’s image. Our message is not about ourselves. It is about Jesus Christ as the Lord. We are your servants for his sake. We are his servants because the same God who said that light should shine out of darkness has given us light. For that reason we bring to light the knowledge about God’s glory which shines from Christ’s face.*^{2Cor.4:3-6} Revelation of who God is and what He has done (the removal of the blindfold) comes when Jesus is preached. *But the people’s minds were hardened, and to this day whenever the old covenant is being read, the same veil covers their minds so they cannot understand the truth. And this veil can be removed only by believing in Christ. Yes, even today when they read Moses’ writings, their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand. But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*^{2Cor.3:14-17} *So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ.*^{Rom.10:17}

Church meetings give us opportunity to collectively express our appreciation of God in our praise and prayers but they also give us the opportunity to be built up in our faith as **we encourage one another to believe what God Has done for us.** We do this through **preaching** (i.e. studying and explaining the Scriptures) and **proclaiming** (i.e. personal testimony and conversation). Thomas believed when he physically saw Jesus but *even better blessings are in store for us*^{Jn.20:29-31} when we believe because of the Scriptures. By believing we are automatically blessed and so our “*work*” (or spiritual energy) needs to be exerted into continuing to believe what God has said. We need to make our lips do their duty saying what God says about us and not allow them to say anything to the contrary. If we hear other Christians contradicting what God has said we should gently but firmly correct them. We will never have all the answers but by faith we accept what

God has said: *By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*^{Heb.11:3} God backs up His Word with His Name. *I will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.*^{Ps.138:2} *He gave him the name that is above every name.*^{Phil.2:9}

God's blessings means that God keeps us safe – **He watches over us** (*He is in charge but not control!*); God shines His Face on us – **He smiles upon us** (*He is happy with us*); God is gracious to us – **He is kind to us** (*He is generous to us*); that God lifts up His countenance upon us – **He looks on us with favour** (*we are the apple of His eye*); and that God gives us His peace – **we have inner contentment in every situation.** *I've learned to be content in whatever situation I'm in.*^{Phil.4:11} *But godliness with contentment is great gain.*^{1Tim.6:6} It was this peace that enabled Jesus to sleep through a storm that was about to sink the boat: *But He was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. And they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. But He said to them, "Why are you so fearful? How is it that you still have no faith?"*^{Mk.4:38-40}

Let's keep on encouraging one another to believe (trust) God and so enjoy His richest blessings.

Sunday 26th April 2015. Ps.27:1-6. Jn.21

You must follow me.^{Jn.21:22}

Christians are going to heaven because they are born-again: *Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*^{Jn.3:3} When we were born-again we were washed, sanctified and justified^{1Cor.6:11} which prepares us for heaven and equips us for that journey as well. This was God's choice: *We were also chosen to belong to him. God decided to choose us long ago in keeping with his plan. He works out everything to fit his plan and purpose. We were the first to put our hope in Christ. We were chosen to bring praise to his glory.*^{Eph.1:11-12} When God chose us, He qualified us too: *giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.*^{Col.1:12}

But being a Disciple is much more than just going to heaven by having a "fire-insurance" policy to save us from hell. Being a Disciple is **choosing** a different way of life from the world by putting God above our own priorities and making His values our values. It is hearing God say "well done good and faithful servant"^{Matt.25:21} not "well! what have you done?" And we are expected to make other Disciples too: *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.*^{Matt.28:19-20}

Choosing is what makes the difference between an adult and a baby, between maturity and immaturity: *For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.*^{Heb.5:13-14} When Peter asked Jesus about John: "What about him, Lord?" Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me."^{Jn.21:21-22} Everyone is accountable to God for their own choices and so **I am responsible** for **my choices** and **my commitment** to Jesus. God will judge each of us on our **faithfulness** including how **faith-full** (how full of faith) we are! *This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.*^{1Cor.4:1-2}

A Disciple **chooses** to follow Jesus by denying their own priorities and comforts. If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he **cannot be my disciple.** *And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*^{Lk.14:26-27}

The Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek not English and so many of the expressions and illustrations are “*un-English*”. In English, *hate* means to despise, detest and loathe but when Jesus said we should **hate** our *father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters and even our own life* He was using the word comparatively. The Law and the Prophets were summarised by the 2 commandments of *loving God and our neighbour as our self*,^{Mat.22:40} so clearly we are not meant to *hate* (in the English sense of the word) our self and others. No! Jesus meant that we should put Him first even if it means loss of our own comfort or possessions.

(Interestingly Jesus never said that we should *leave* our wife: *Then Peter began to speak up. "We've given up everything to follow you," he said. "Yes," Jesus replied, "and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property—along with persecution. And in the world to come that person will have eternal life. But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.*"^{Mk.10:28-31})

Although we aim to be friendly people and good citizens, ultimately we will always be at odds with the world because God's kingdom has such different values. *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world."*^{Jn.18:36} *These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.*^{Acts.17:6} *Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God.*^{Jas.4:4}

Actually if we look at the facts, our choices should be straight forward because the long-term benefits of making the right decisions far outweigh the perceived gains. *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*"^{Lk.9:23-26} *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*^{2Cor.4:17-18} *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*^{Rom.8:18}

The greatest and most important choice we have to make is **to believe God** especially when our feelings and emotions are raw or unstable. Actually “*spiritual warfare*” is our **fight for faith** (i.e. to believe God) – it is not “*fighting*” the devil because he is already disarmed^{Col.2:15} and defeated^{Rev.12:8} and his work has been destroyed on the Cross.^{Heb.2:14;1Jn.3:8} *But you are a man of God. Run away from all of those things. Try hard to do what is right and godly. Have faith, love and gentleness. Hold on to what you believe. Fight the good fight along with all other believers.*^{1Tim.6:11-12} This decision to believe God is not just a “*once-for-all*” choice but a daily, hourly and even minute-by-minute choice.

When life is difficult and things go wrong, **we should choose to say good things about God** and not blame Him: *You are good, and what you do is good,*^{Ps.119:68} [*Job said*]: *The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.*” *In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.*^{Job.1:21-22} **God is charge not in control.** We decide whether to obey or disobey. Bad things happen for a variety of reasons – our own mistakes, other people's wrong choices, or even just “*chance*”^{Ecd.9:11} but God always does what is right and to say otherwise is to disbelieve and deny Him: *Won't the Judge of the whole earth do what is right?*^{Gen.18:25}

When we are feeling down, **we should choose to praise God** (i.e. say good things about God) and not have a “*pity-party*”. *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*^{Ps.42:5}

When we are weak, **we should choose to rejoice in God's grace** and not complain: *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*^{2Cor.12:9-12}

Let's make sure that we are not just Christians but that we are true Disciples because then Jesus will call us His friends. *You are my friends if you obey my commandments. I don't call you servants anymore, because a servant doesn't know what his master is doing. But I've called you friends because I've made known to you everything that I've heard from my Father. You didn't choose me, but I chose you. I have appointed you to go, to produce fruit that will last, and to ask the Father in my name to give you whatever you ask for. Love each other. This is what I'm commanding you to do.*^{Jn.15:14-17}

May: I am Righteous in Christ

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

Sunday 3rd May 2015. Ps.27:7-14.

...and the government will be on his shoulders.^{Is.9:6}

As we approach our General Election let's look at the Government of the UK and then compare it with the Government of God's Kingdom. Our national and local Governments make **rules** and utilises its **resources** (gained from taxes) by spending money on defence, law & order, education, health and community.

In the OT, God was Israel's King: *And the Lord told him: they have rejected me as their king but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do.*^{1Sam.8:7} But it was Jesus who was the true King that introduced God's true Kingdom: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*^{Is.9:6} *Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*^{Zech.9:9} And God's true Kingdom is the Rule of Jesus Christ within people – in our heart: *The Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come. He answered them, "People can't observe the coming of the kingdom of God. They can't say, 'Here it is!' or 'There it is!' You see, the kingdom of God is within you."*^{Lk.17:20-21}

But God's Kingdom is very different from the kingdoms of this world! *Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."*^{Jn.18:36} *Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves."*^{Lk.22:25-26}

God's Kingdom has rules – in the OT there were the 10 Commandments^{Ex.20} which can be summarised as two: *Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*^{Matt.22:37} In the NT there is just one rule – love one another (you cannot be a Christian without loving God with all your heart, soul and mind so that is now obsolete as a rule!): *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*^{Jn.13:34} *Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble.*^{Jn.2:7}

However there are other rules by which we must live. The “rules” for kings in the OT are very similar to the standards required for Elders in the NT.

The King (OT)^{Deut.17:14-20} **and Elder** (NT)^{1Tim.3:1-13} **must:**

Be a Believer (be chosen by God)

Be in Fellowship (be from among his brothers)

Have Faith (not to have lots of horses *i.e. not to trust in this world's resources*)

Be honest (not to go back to Egypt *i.e. not to have this world's values*)

Be husband of one wife (not have many wives)

Not be a lover of money (not to accumulate much gold)

Hold on to the faith (read and write out Scriptures)

Be humble (not consider himself better than others)

Like the UK, God's kingdom not only has **rules** but also has **resources** – and the **resources of God's Kingdom are the gifts or empowerment of the Holy Spirit**. *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere.*^{Acts.1:8} 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} **But unlike the UK, the resources of God's kingdom cannot be bought with money**. *Come, all of you who are thirsty. Come and drink the water I offer to you. You who do not have any money, come. Buy and eat the grain I give you. Come and buy wine and milk. You will not have to pay anything for it. Why spend money on what is not food? Why work for what does not satisfy you? Listen carefully to me. Then you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the richest food there is.*^{Is.55:1-2} *When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power. "Let me have this power, too," he exclaimed, "so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!" But Peter replied, "May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God's gift can be bought! You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God. Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts, for I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin."*^{Acts.8:18-23}

God's resources provides our

Defence: *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* So we say with confidence, *"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*^{Heb.13:5-6}

Law & Order: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding in all your ways submit to him, and he will direct your paths*^{Pron.3:5-6} *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.*^{Is.26:3}

Health: *He sent forth his word and healed them.*^{Ps.107:20} *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.*^{Pron.4:20-22}

Education: *Jesus began to teach them. God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.*^{Matt.5:1-3}

Community: *God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy.*^{Ps.68:6} *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.2:11}

Let's continue to be good citizens of the UK and God's Kingdom as we keep the rules and access the resources available to us.

Sunday 10th May 2015. Ps.28. Acts 24

What we are, How we live and What is coming: *righteousness, self-control and judgement to come.*^{Acts.24:25}

What we are: Righteous. The word *righteousness* (to be right, correct or just) was adapted from the earlier English word *rihtwis* (i.e. *rightwise* or *rightways*) by William Tyndale when he translated the Bible into English in 1526. In the Christian context *righteousness* (right-wiseness) is *being right with God and being wise about it*. So unless we act on the fact that we are right with God, that information is of little value to us. *Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense? ...Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.*^{Jas.2:17-18}

Righteousness is God's character. There is no flaw in God's character and He makes no mistakes. *He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment.*^{Is.11:4-5} The LORD sees it, and he's angry because there's no justice. He sees that there's no one to help. He's astounded that there's no one to intercede. So with his own power he wins a victory. His righteousness supports him. He puts on righteousness like a coat of armour and a helmet of salvation on his head. So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance.^{Is.59:15-17} **No one is naturally righteous** (right with God) because we all inherited Adam's sinful nature: *No one is right with God, no one at all. No one understands. No one trusts in God. All of them have turned away. They have all become worthless. No one does anything good, no one at all.*^{Rom.3:10-12} But at conversion **God exchanged Jesus' righteousness for our sin:** *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} And so our righteousness is not what we do or our behaviour but **righteousness is our new God-given nature.** Abraham was **counted** righteous (right with God) because he **believed** God (note: Abraham did not earn his righteousness): *Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith.*^{Gen.15:6} As this verse is quoted 3 times in the NT^{Rom.4:3;Gal.3:6;Jas.2:23} we can be sure that it has significance for us today and Abraham is actually called the Father of Believers: *Abraham is the father of all believers... Those who have the same faith that Abraham had are also included. He is the father of us all. It is written, "I have made you a father of many nations."*^{Rom.4:11-17} *Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father.*^{Is.51:1-2}

Our **righteousness** comes by faith in Jesus Christ: *This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "The righteous will live by faith."*^{Rom.1:17} *But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law... We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.*^{Rom.3:21-24} Although this righteousness is credited to us because of faith, we must continue to live by faith after we become right with God: *But the one who is right with God will live by faith.*^{Hab.2:4} This verse is also quoted 3 times in the NT^{Rom.1:17;Gal.3:11;Heb.10:38} showing that this too has significance for us today. (N.B. some Versions translate it: *He who is righteous by faith shall live.*) So we can never be more righteous than we are right now. *For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.*^{Rom.5:17-19} **We should have an appetite for righteousness and then pursue it:** *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*^{Matt.5:6} *But you are a man of God; so run from all these evil things. Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness.*^{1Tim.6:11} *Run from anything that stimulates youthful lusts. Instead, pursue righteous living, faithfulness, love, and peace. Enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts.*^{2Tim.2:22} **We should display righteousness as if we were wearing a coat:** *I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*^{Is.61:10} *be made new in the attitude of your minds and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*^{Eph.4:23-24} Although we have become slaves to righteousness, we must yield to righteousness for it to control us. *Now you are free from*

your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living... Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy.^{Rom.6:18-19} *The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.*^{Is.32:17} Talking about being right with God (i.e. aligning our conversation with our doctrine) is an essential part of maturing in the faith: *for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child (literally a non-speaker). But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*^{Heb.5:13-14} *that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*^{Phile.1:6}

How we live: Self-controlled. Self-control is part of the Christian's new nature of **righteousness** because self-control is a fruit of the Spirit: *But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things.*^{Gal.5:22-23} Actually for the Christian, self-control is really spirit-control because we are led by the Spirit^{Rom.8:14} and we aim to make our soul yield to our spirit.^{Ps.42:5} This is not “mind-over-matter” or just positive thinking but the result of the miracle of New Birth and all “part of the package” of being a Christian where we confess that “Jesus is Lord.”^{Rom.10:9-10} It is about changing our thinking (that is what “repentance” literally means) and we changing our thinking by renewing our minds. *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*^{Rom.12:2} God has given us a “saved mind” – now it is up to us to use it! *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline (literally a “saved mind”).*^{2Tim.1:7}

What is coming: Judgement to come. God has set a day when He will judge the world – and that means everyone who has ever lived. His standard is perfection and anyone who fails to meet that standard is guilty. The fact that we inherited a bias against God will not let us off! The only way to escape our punishment is to plead guilty now and accept God's forgiveness. But even for us Believers who have been forgiven, there is still a day of reckoning where we will have to give an account for every word we have spoken. *A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*^{Matt.12:35-37} This should motivate each of us to live good and holy lives: *You ought to live holy and godly lives as you wait eagerly for the day of God to come.*^{2Pet.3:11-12} For a more complete study on Judgement please see Mike Petzer's booklet [Miracle of Judgement](#) (available to download from our website).

Let's make sure we hear God say “well done good and faithful servant”^{Matt.25:21} not “well! what have you done?” as we discourse *righteousness, self-control and judgement to come.*^{Acts24:25}

Sunday 17th May 2015. Ps.29.

As Sasha Rodionov (from Latvia) is preaching this Sunday I have included this excerpt from Mike Petzer's booklet [Forgiveness](#) that can be down loaded from our website.

Forgiveness never has depended on man's performance but on Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. We are not forgiven because we did things worthy of forgiveness, but because Jesus paid for our sin. It is our blood-bought right to be forgiven for all our sin. According to the New Testament, neither feelings of regret nor sorrow **but faith in the finished work of Jesus is the only ground for forgiveness.** The Bible says that, *without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*^{Heb.9:22} You cannot pray long enough, cry hard enough, plead sincerely enough, promise never-to-do-it-again enough, regret enough or even fast enough for forgiveness. If any of these were the basis for forgiveness, then Jesus need

not have died. Forgiveness and salvation would be available without His shed blood. Just as it says, *If righteousness comes through the Law [good works], then Christ died needlessly.*^{Gal.2:21} Will we make a "Christ" out of our repentance and regret? These are too vague and inexact conditions to stir up any faith. How will you ever know if you have repented or regretted enough to be forgiven? This would move forgiveness out of the realm of faith in a final sacrifice and into the area of mere speculation and emotion. A forgiveness based upon variable human opinion and speculation which have no absolutes, is totally unacceptable for faith since there can be no faith in the undefined. No! It is by faith and by faith alone – only confidence in what God has done with no human additives!

No Record Of Our Sins? *God was reconciling the world to himself, not charging men's transgressions to their account.*^{2Cor.5:19} Or as another translation puts it, *not putting their trespasses down on the liability side of their ledger.* God is not making a case against you. God is not making a list of your sins so that He can call you into account for them. He is not saving them up so that He can confront us with them and make us pay for them. God is not calling man into account for sins, but to account for His gift of life in Jesus Christ. John the Baptist introduced Jesus to us as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*^{Jn.1:29} John writes in his first epistle that Jesus is *the propitiation [atoning sacrifice, or the payment] for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.*^{1Jn.2:2} We are confronted in these verses with the startling truth that, not only is God not holding the believer's sins against him, but He is also not holding the world's sins against it. When Jesus died, He paid not only for the believer's sins but He also died and removed the unbelievers' sins. Just as it says that *God gives proof of his love to us in Christ's dying for us while we were still sinners.*^{Rom.5:28} As surely as He died for all men, just so surely have all men had their sins dealt with. Jesus has settled the sin issue for all men. There is no outstanding debt or any unpaid account as far as man's sin is concerned. "It is finished," was more than just a cry of relief, it was a statement of fact!

Total Forgiveness: Scripture tells us that we were made alive together with Him after He had *forgiven us all our transgressions and cancelled out the certificate of debt.*^{Col.2:13-14} Yes, the certificate of debt (or invoice) has been cancelled. It is as if we had never been billed. As if we had never owed anything. Sins that are forgiven are sins that are cancelled. They do not exist. Most believers can accept that they have been forgiven of all their pre-salvation sins but what about our subsequent sins?

Firstly, Jesus died for all our sins. When did He die for our sins? The day we believed? No! He died for them approximately 2000 years ago. Jesus did not go to the cross and die for your sins the day you believed and were saved, but 2000 years before you were saved. When Jesus died for your sins 2000 years ago, how many of your sins were pre-salvation sins then? Obviously all of them! Yes, it is true - Jesus not only died for sins that were committed but also for sins that were yet to be committed.

Secondly, God is eternal, not only unrestricted by time, but *time-less*. Whenever God speaks, He speaks from His own point of view which is eternal. For Him "**all**" is "**all**" - without the restriction of past, present and future. In short, God's "**all**" is an unqualified "**all**" without any disclaimer attached to it. In order for you to visualize this more clearly, imagine a long line that stretches to your left as far as you can see it and still continues. Next, continue the same line to your right as far as you can see it and it still continues. Now, place a ruler on the line. This is time on the background of eternity. Now place your left hand at the beginning of the ruler. You are now at the beginning of time. Next, place your right hand at the end of the ruler. You are now at the beginning of time and the end of time at the same time! From this perspective, your "**all**" includes all of time. Just so with God. When He dealt with **all** sin it was with absolute knowledge. God does

not learn anything, He has always known everything. Because God already knows everything, His knowledge cannot increase. No sin you can commit can catch Him by surprise. He knows every sin that has been committed and every sin that will be committed and because of this He is thoroughly qualified to have placed **all** our sins upon His Son. We will never do anything that He has not already made provision for – **there is Total Forgiveness!**

The Perfect Sacrifice: The Old Covenant required constant repetition of the sacrifice because the sacrifice was limited in its consequences. It paid for the sins that were committed most recently by the individual or, as in the yearly atonement, it paid for the sins committed by the nation of Israel for the entire previous year. This left those under the Old Covenant with the unhappy situation of always having to live on credit for the next year. So the Old Covenant sacrifices were only concerned with former sins never with future sins. As such it was an imperfect Covenant. The book of Hebrews calls it *imperfect* simply because it did not deal with future sins.^{Heb.7:11,19;9:9;10:1} More than this, the scripture reveals that the sacrifices were themselves never the actual basis for forgiveness. On the basis of them, God merely *passed over the sins previously committed*.^{Rom.3:25} The sacrifices were only "*shadows*" of the perfect sacrifice and the perfect sacrifice would, when He came, have to pay for these sins also, so that God could be just in having passed them over. Remember that it is on the basis of *justice satisfied and punishment served* that sins are forgiven. God could not just forget men's sins. He had to punish them to uphold His justice. So, through Jesus, He dealt with sin and its punishment. By this He established the fact of His having forgiven men, as a righteous thing for Him to have done. Since there is *no forgiveness without the shedding of blood*,^{Heb.9:22} if there is still a need for more forgiveness then there must be another sacrifice brought. It is precisely this reasoning that caused the believers in the book of Hebrews to return to the Old Covenant sacrifices. For them, the blood of Jesus was no more effective than the blood of bulls and goats in that it only paid for their former sins. Subsequent sins therefore, needed subsequent sacrifices. The only alternative to animal sacrifices, as far as they were concerned, is that Jesus should come down from heaven and die again. The writer of the book of Hebrews points out that this is unnecessary, since **Jesus' sacrifice is perpetually valid**. That is, no future sin, no matter how bad, can invalidate its effects and require an additional sacrifice. His single sacrifice has pre-empted all possible sins and paid for them for *all time*. The book of Hebrews emphasizes no less than nine times from chapter 7 to chapter 10 that **Jesus died once, for all sin, for all men, for all time**. Thus he terminates the necessity for any additional sacrifice and the old covenant that required it.^{Heb.7:27; 9:12,26-28;10:2,10-14}

Sunday 24th May 2015. Ps.36. 2Kings 4

We feast on the abundance of Your house.^{Ps.36:8}

Last week *Sasha Rodionov* preached from 2Kings 4 and explained that the problem with the world is not materialism but belief in self-help! The Shunamite woman had the world-philosophy of "*getting-by*" regardless of how she really was: "*Now what can be done for you?*" She replied, "*Nothing. I'm secure and satisfied in my family.*"^{2Kg.4:13} But actually the lady was desperate because she was childless (which was a disgrace and humiliation in the OT). Many people are hiding their hurts and even shame by pretending that everything is alright. They say: "*God is still on His Throne and I'm blessed*" but really they are suffering inside. While it is true that God on His Throne and that we are truly blessed,^{Eph.1:3} we should never be content with a "*half-way house*" when God wants to **graciously give** us so much more! His **gracious giving** is a totally sovereign act - which means that, a) we don't earn it (or deserve it), and b) we can't add to it. God's forgiveness is a gracious gift

to us, but so is everything else that God gives to us (actually everything else is a by-product of God's forgiveness). Jesus' proclamation of *good news to the poor, release to prisoners, sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed*^{Lk.4:18-19} is because of God's favour (His kindness or grace). God is not obligated to us but to His Name and His Word. *I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.*^{Ps.138:2-3} *His name is the Word of God... On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORDS OF LORDS.*^{Rev.19:13-16} *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*^{Ps.23:2-3} When the father exclaimed: *I believe; help my unbelief!*^{Mk.9:24} Sasha interpreted it as an intention to start living in the Kingdom theology of believing God and a cry for help to “*un-believe*” the world's philosophy of “*I'll get through this, I'll manage, I'll cope*”. We need to be like that father who wanted Jesus to help him stop beholding his own ability and circumstances and start believing God. And we need to be like the Shunamite lady who broke out of her “*half-way house*” because God was true to His Name and Word.

The story of the Shunamite lady doesn't end there because tragedy struck and the child died! But her story illustrates **7 spiritual principles** that will help us stay faithfully (*full-of-faith*) on course and live in a “*full-house*” rather than go back to the “*half-way house*”.

1 Take your cares to God – and leave them with Him: *She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.*^{2Kg.4:21} It's easy to “*pray*” about our concerns but it takes faith (*complete trust in God and His Word*) to leave those cares with God. We can only really trust God when we know who He really is – His character, His reputation and His ability. *So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honour. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.*^{1Pet.5:6-7}

We need to be mature enough to accept God's answers to our prayers rather than getting upset because we think He hasn't heard us or answered us – or even worse, think that He is against us!

2 Don't be a “Sunday only Christian”. “*Why go to him today?*” he asked. “*It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath.*” “*That's all right,*” she said.^{2Kg.4:23} We can come to God anytime, anyplace and anywhere so we shouldn't treat Sunday as the only day that God answers prayers or wants us to fellowship with Him. God is too important for us to pay our respects to Him on just one day a week or to treat as a mere commodity to make life easier. He is worthy of our praise and honour all the time and everywhere. *Day and night they never stop saying: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.”*^{Rev.4:8}

3 Keep a good confession: “*Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?*” “*Everything is all right,*” she said.^{2Kg.4:26} A good confession is not “*mind over matter*” or just positive thinking but it is telling the truth from God's perspective. It is seeing the spiritual dimension and believing what God says about our situation. God says that if He is our Refuge then nothing will be a disaster for us – i.e. even bad things will turn out for His glory and our good: *If you say, “The LORD is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.*^{Ps.91:9-10} *We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God—those whom he has called according to his plan. This is true because he already knew his people and had already appointed them to have the same form as the image of his Son. Therefore, his Son is the firstborn among many children.*^{Rom.8:28-29} In fact the hardship we endure will grow, establish and mature our faith: *Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.*^{Jas.1:2-4} *In view of all this, make every effort to*

respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence (integrity), and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone. The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who fail to develop in this way are shortsighted or blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sins.^{1Pet.1:5-9}

4 Be real with God: "Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes'?"^{2Kg.4:28} Don't be afraid to tell God your concerns (and even how you feel), **but don't make your concerns your confession.** Asking "why?" is not asking for an answer but asking for an argument. Debating evil has little to do with faith, except knock it flat. We are ministers (servants), not philosophers. Our calling is compassion, prayer, faith and the Word. "Does the Most High know anything?" Look how wicked they are! They never have a worry. They grow more and more wealthy. I've received no reward for keeping my life pure and washing my hands of any blame. I'm plagued with problems all day long and every morning my punishment begins again. If I had said, "I will continue to talk like that," I would have betrayed God's people.^{Ps.73:11-15}

5 Stay in close fellowship with God: But the child's mother said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you."^{2Kg.4:30} It is those who are close to Jesus who can ask Him questions: One disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, was near him at the table. Simon Peter motioned to that disciple and said, "Ask Jesus whom he's talking about!" Leaning close to Jesus, that disciple asked, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered...^{Jn.13:23-26} Believers are united with God: "the person who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him."^{1Cor.6:17} But we need to live like it!

6 God's life (His Spirit) is the only answer to our needs: He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm.^{2Kg.4:33-34} Jesus breathed on His Disciples and imparted to them His Spirit^{Jn.20:22} just as God breathed His life into Adam.^{Gen.2:7} God's life through His Spirit is God's answer to all our needs – and the world's need too! God's Presence empowers us by bringing us into a spiritual dimension where we can see life from God's perspective and receive God's promises. This is true revelation where the "blindfold" of human philosophy^{Col.2:8} and logic is removed^{2Cor.3:14} and we are able to see God at work and appreciate Him.

7 Always worship God: She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.^{2Kg.4:37} We are to **always** praise God (i.e. say good things about Him): I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.^{Ps.34:1-3} We can only worship God in Spirit and in Truth^{Jn.4:24} but true worship is obedience,^{Gen.22:5;18} not singing songs.

Let's make every effort to confirm our calling and election. For if we do these things, we will never stumble, and we will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.^{2Pet.1:10-11}

Sunday 31st May 2015. Ps.30. Acts 25

"I appeal to Cæsar"^{Acts25:11}

Life isn't fair! The government and legal system of even the best country of this world is flawed so what do you do when things go wrong? Obviously our first response should be to appeal to God - but we should also do that when things go right for us! Prayer is communion with God where we first and foremost show our appreciation of Him by our praise and thanks (praise = eulogy, which means to say good words); but in prayer we should also cast our cares on Him - and then leave them with Him - because He cares for us.^{1Pet.5:6-7}

God's character of grace, love and compassion is clearly seen in the values that He promotes: *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*^{Ps.103:8} *Pure, unstained religion, according to God our Father, is to take care of orphans and widows when they suffer and to remain uncorrupted by this world.*^{Jas.1:27} *The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.*^{Prov.29:7} But God is "nobody's fool" and no one can take advantage of His generosity. *Those people are on a dark spiral downward. But if you think that leaves you on the high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again. Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one. Judgmental criticism of others is a well-known way of escaping detection in your own crimes and misdemeanours. But God isn't so easily diverted. He sees right through all such smoke screens and holds you to what you've done... Or did you think that because he's such a nice God, he'd let you off the hook? Better think this one through from the beginning. **God is kind, but he's not soft.** In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life-change.*^{Rom.2:1-4} Jesus is our model and He always does what is right: *Christ suffered for you. He left you an example. He expects you to follow in his steps. You too were chosen to suffer. Scripture says, "He didn't commit any sin. No lies ever came out of his mouth." People shouted at him and made fun of him. But he didn't do the same back to them. He suffered. But he didn't say that bad things would happen to them. Instead, he trusted in the One who judges fairly.*^{1Pet.2:21-23} *Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.*^{Ps.45:6-7}

However, God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom not a physical (geographical) kingdom, Jesus answered, *"My kingdom doesn't belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. My kingdom doesn't have its origin on earth."*^{Jn.18:36} In order to oversee the geographical kingdoms of this world God has set in place rulers ("kings") and their "domains" (kingdoms) to rule righteously, irrespectively of their personal trust in Him. Even though many Rulers rebel against God and rule unrighteously, God still expects justice to prevail – and He expects us to pray for those rulers: *The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation. This is the way our Saviour God wants us to live.*^{1Tim.2:1-3} God also expects us to submit to their authority (remember Paul wrote this letter when Nero was Emperor). *Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished... The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience... Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honour to those who are in authority.*^{Rom.13:1-7}

But when there is a conflict between God's values and this world's values, we must make a choice and take the consequences. *Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*^{Acts.4:19-20} However, we can and should, use this world's systems to promote justice and even confront injustice. Paul used his Roman citizenship to confront the injustices against him in Philippi: *But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out. The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city."*^{Acts.16:37-40} Paul also used the privilege

of his Roman citizenship at Cæsarea to bypass the weak and corrupt local courts: *Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"* After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: *"You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"*^{Acts.25:10-12}

This world (including its government) is focused on the physical and the tangible, on the here and now, (what can be experienced by our 5 senses) and so the world rarely takes into account the really important factors of the spiritual and eternal dimensions. As Christians we must make God's kingdom our priority: *Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.*^{1Jn.2:15-17} *"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.*^{Matt.6:31-33}

Even the Church has been influenced by this world's values of prioritising the sensual and reduced religion to a set of rules: *So, then, if with Christ you've put all that pretentious and infantile religion behind you, why do you let yourselves be bullied by it? "Don't touch this! Don't taste that! Don't go near this!"* Do you think things that are here today and gone tomorrow are worth that kind of attention? Such things sound impressive if said in a deep enough voice. They even give the illusion of being pious and humble and ascetic. But they're just another way of showing off, making yourselves look important.^{Col.2:20-23}

Jesus told a parable about using our resources for our own advantage: *Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home.*^{Lk.16:9}

Let's continue to remember that we belong to Jesus Christ, keeping our head alert and learn how to use this world's resources to our advantage but also keeping our heart alert to God and His kingdom and use His kingdom's resources too.

Don't you know that to be a friend of the world is to hate God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Don't you know what Scripture says? The spirit that God caused to live in us wants us to belong only to God. Don't you think Scripture has a reason for saying that?^{2as.4:4-5}

June: I am Reconciled to God in Christ

But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation. Col.1:22

Sunday 7th June 2015. Ps.31:1-8. 2Kings 5

Testimonies, Trials and Temptations.

The story of Naaman is really three stories in one: **the young girl's testimony; Naaman's trial and Gehazi's temptation.** How we develop as a Christian will depend on how we use our **Testimonies, Trials and Temptations.**

Testimonies: Our Testimony is our story of our testing – how we have come through trials and temptations BUT the emphasis is NOT on the trouble but on the triumph. **Never make your testimony a moaning about your testing!** Don't promote the devil but praise the Deliverer because our testimony is our story of God's love not of our life; His goodness not our grubbiness! The young girl had been taken to a foreign land as a spoil of war but instead of moaning about her situation she said: *If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.*^{2Kg.5:3} The eventual result was Naaman's confession: *Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.*^{2Kg.5:15} A simple testimony to God's grace can change someone's life eternally. Remember: a good seed planted in good ground grow all by itself. *This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain... As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.*^{Mk.4:26-29}

Trials: Life isn't fair but James says that we should be very happy and joyful when we are tested – not because it is amusing but because testing will mature us: *Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colours. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.*^{Jas.1:2-4} How we face life's challenges will determine how we develop both spiritually and emotionally. As we see the spiritual dimension to our situation and believe what God says about it, we will easily keep a good confession by telling and re-telling the truth from God's perspective. God has already *blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus,*^{Eph.1:3} so we should live like it and expect God to display his power and wisdom in **our** situation. *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*^{Ps.77:14} *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*^{Eph.3:10-12} God is in charge and “macro-managing” our life to ensure that we can have our needs met: *The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.*^{Ps.34:10} *What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 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.8:31-32} When Naaman followed God's instructions, he was healed of his physical leprosy and then he was also healed of his spiritual leprosy – sin. When we follow God's instruction we are also healed of our spiritual leprosy – sin: *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. The same Lord is Lord of all. He richly blesses everyone who calls on him. Scripture says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*^{Rom.10:9-13} And as Naaman was told, God's gift cannot be bought with money or favours – it is totally free.

Temptations: Although the words *testing* and *tempting* are translated from the same Greek word, the context shows that they can have very different meanings: to *test* is to prove or show what is real: *Happy is the one who endures testing, because when he has proven to be genuine, he will receive the crown of life that God promised to those who love him.*^{Jas.1:12} But to *tempt* is to try to make someone fail or sin: *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*^{Jas.1:13-15}

God never tries to make us fail or to sin but He does prove us through difficult situations so that our trust (faith) is refined and we know that we are really His. *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.*^{Matt.6:12} *What a God we have! And how fortunate we are to have him, this Father of our Master Jesus! Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now! God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The Day is coming when you'll have it all—life healed and whole. I know how great this makes you feel, even though you have to put up with every kind of aggravation in the meantime. Pure gold put in the fire comes out of it proved pure; genuine faith put through this suffering comes out proved genuine. When Jesus wraps this all up, it's your faith, not your gold, that God will have on display as evidence of his victory.*^{1Pet.1:3-7}

Gehazi was tempted with this world's valuables and became tainted by them. The same thing happened in the early Church: *May your money be destroyed with you! Do you think you can buy God's gift with money? You have no part or share in this holy work. Your heart is not right with God. Turn away from this evil sin of yours. Pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. I see that you are very bitter. You are a prisoner of sin.*^{Acts.8:20-23} What this world calls important is not important to God: *Don't fool yourself. Don't think that you can be wise merely by being up-to-date with the times. Be God's fool—that's the path to true wisdom. What the world calls smart, God calls stupid.*^{1Cor.3:18-19}

Who was the greatest of these three people?

Good, better, best, let us never rest till our good is better and our better best!

Good: Gehazi appears to be the most “*spiritual*” because he had seen more miracles and heard more preaching than the other two but he succumbed to **temptation** and ended up a lonely outcast. We need to finish the race not just start it. *I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.3:12-14}

Better: Naaman was a great war hero but with no health he was helpless and hopeless. When God healed him and he triumphed through his **trials**, he had a great testimony but had no opportunity to learn about God's word which left him vulnerable. We need to *do our best to present our self 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} *The gracious hand of his God was on him. This was because Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the LORD and to teach those decrees and regulations.*^{Ezra.4:9-10}

Best: But the greatest of these three was the young girl who **testified** to God's goodness – and we don't even know her name! Even though God did not “*deliver*” her from her captors she witnessed to God's goodness and Naaman was healed. **The sign of greatness**^{Lk.7:28} **is our witness:** *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} Never think you are not “*spiritual*” enough for God to use you – just testify^{Rev.19:10} to God's goodness. Tell others that there is a God heaven who performs miracles and

saves. Your name may not make the papers but it is certainly recorded in heaven^{Mal.3:16} –
and that is what I call true greatness!

Sunday 14th June 2015. Ps.31:19-24. Acts 26

How clear is your confession?

Paul the Apostle had the privilege of sharing his faith with Herod Agrippa II, two of his sisters and even the Emperor Nero - and Herod almost became a Believer! *Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."*^{Acts.26:28-29} We know that there were believers in the household of Herod Antipas (who was Agrippa's uncle) and also Nero's household: *He took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women... Among them were Mary Magdalene; Joanna the wife of Chuzza, the manager of Herod's (Antipas) household and many others who were contributing from their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples.*^{Lk.8:1-3} Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch – i.e. Antipas) and Saul.^{Acts.13:1} All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.^{Phil.4:22} Britannicus, a brother of Nero, visited a church in Rome in about AD50. *Nothing could have been more simple than the order of worship... They had no distinctive dress... They knelt or stood in prayer, as though the mud floor were sacred ...and every look and gesture was happy, as of those who felt that not only angels and archangels were among them, but the invisible presence of their Lord Himself. First they prayed; and Britannicus had never before heard real prayers. But here were men and women, the young and the old, to whom prayer evidently meant direct communion with the Infinite and the Unseen.*

Throughout history, Believers have been able to influence national leaders (which is why we are expected to pray for them^{1Tim.2}). Wesley encouraged George III to relinquish the American Colonies, Mdme Guyon met with Louis XIV, Billy Graham used to telephone the Queen each Christmas. If we are not clear and credible in our testimony, we will lose the impact that we should have. But our testimony should carry a personal "health-warning" as it will have consequences both for us and for those who hear it. Because the early Christian witnesses often died for their testimonies, the Greek word for "witness" ("martyr") entered the English language as a loanword meaning someone who endures suffering and/or death on account of their witness. Our testimony is what we have experienced of Jesus and is meant to "whet the appetite" i.e. give others something that will encourage them to experience God for themselves because they can see the difference He has made to us. *Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."*^{Acts.26:29}

Our testimony doesn't have to be a full-blown Gospel message but rather an "appetiser" with enough ingredients to get people hungry and thirsty for righteousness. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*^{Matt.5:6} *Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*^{Jn.6:35} But although our testimony doesn't need to include everything about being saved, we must convey the basic ingredients of salvation. So what should our testimony include? *But God has helped me to this very day. So I stand here and give witness to both small and great. I have been saying nothing different from what the prophets and Moses said would happen. They said the Christ would suffer. He would be the first to rise from the dead. He would announce the light of life to his own people and to those who aren't Jews.*^{Acts.26:22-23}

Our testimony is primarily about Jesus (not us): *At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters*

who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus."^{Rev.19:10}

Our testimony must be true to the Scriptures: *I have been saying nothing different from what the prophets and Moses said would happen.*^{Acts.26:22} Our testimony must agree with what was prophesied about Jesus in the OT and recorded about Jesus in the NT. When the Scriptures were completed so was God's revelation to mankind. So unlike the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses and Muslims, we have no "new revelation" because God has spoken to us through Jesus. *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*^{Heb.1:1-4} No prophesy, dream or vision can add to God's revelation that is recorded in the Scriptures – we mustn't get distracted with spurious ideas that were not taught by Jesus in the Gospels, practised by the Apostles in Acts or taught in the Epistles. *Let me be blunt: If one of us—even if an angel from heaven!—were to preach something other than what we preached originally, let him be cursed. I said it once; I'll say it again: If anyone, regardless of reputation or credentials, preaches something other than what you received originally, let him be cursed.*^{Gal.1:8-9} *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*^{Rev.22:18-19} If our testimony is not based on what God says, we have no hope for ourselves or any hope to give to others: *Consult God's instruction and the testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. (People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.)*^{Is.8:20} *Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker.*^{Is.45:9}

Our testimony must be based on the fact that Jesus suffered and died: *They said the Christ would suffer.*^{Acts.26:23} Jesus died for us that we might live: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*^{Is.53:5} Jesus is our only Hope – there are other helps available from medicine and science etc. but our priority is the welfare of our spirit and Jesus is the only One to help.

Our testimony must be based on the fact that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead: *He would be the first to rise from the dead.*^{Acts.26:23} **The Resurrection of Jesus is absolutely essential to us** – not just as a fact but also because He now lives to intercede for us and to empower us. *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained.*^{2Tim.2:8-9} Jesus was God's *one and only Son*,^{Jn.3:16} but is now God's "firstborn": *when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."*^{Heb.1:6} *And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*^{Col.1:18}

Our testimony must be based on the fact that Jesus announces the light of life to all: *He would announce the light of life to his own people and to those who aren't Jews.*^{Acts.26:23} Not only is there hope but it is Jesus who brings this hope! *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:6}

Our testimony is the story of how these historical and spiritual facts about Jesus impacted us. So let's continue to share our certain hope with courage, confidence and credibility so everyone who meets us will see at least a glimpse of Jesus. *This is what the*

LORD of Heaven's Armies says: *In those days ten men from different nations and languages of the world will clutch at the sleeve of one Jew. And they will say, 'Please let us walk with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'*^{Zech.8:23}

Remember – although we sow, it is God who makes it grow!

Sunday 21st June 2015. Ps.32. Acts 27. Father's Day.

The God of the second chance

You should have taken my advice... Then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, Because not one of you will be lost.^{Acts27:21-22}

Newton's third law is: *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.* Whilst this is primarily applied to physics, it has application to every part of life. Our decisions affect our actions which have consequences -we ignore God's rules at our peril: *What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator.*^{Is.45:9} *Children, obey your parents as believers in the Lord. Obey them because it's the right thing to do. Scripture says, "Honour your father and mother." That is the first commandment that has a promise. "Then things will go well with you. You will live a long time on the earth."*^{Eph.6:1-3}

God has not promised an easy life but He has planned that we enjoy life. *It is good for people to eat, drink, and enjoy their work under the sun during the short life God has given them, and to accept their lot in life. And it is a good thing to receive wealth from God and the good health to enjoy it. To enjoy your work and accept your lot in life—this is indeed a gift from God. God keeps such people so busy enjoying life that they take no time to brood over the past.*^{Ecc.5:18-20} Believers are called "blessed" which means *happy, contented, spiritually fulfilled and satisfied.* *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it,*^{Rev.1:3} *Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.*^{Rev.4:7} "Shalom" is more than a nice greeting – it means *completeness, soundness, welfare, peace* and is how God planned for us to live. *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} This peace is not the absence of problems or difficulties but the reconciliation to God and it affects every part of our life – our spirit, soul and body. *But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*^{Col.1:22}

Difficulties arise for many reasons – often of our own making – like the Captain of the ship Paul was sailing in. Sometimes we do wrong intentionally! Sometimes we ignore God's instructions and values. *Don't let anyone fool you with words that don't mean anything. Because of things like that, God is angry with those who don't obey. So don't go along with people like that. At one time you were in the dark. But now you are in the light because of what the Lord has done. Live like children of the light. The light produces what is completely good, right and true. Find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the acts of darkness. They don't produce anything good. Show what they are really like. It is shameful even to talk about what people who don't obey do in secret.*^{Eph.5:6-12}

Sometimes we get distracted and *the worries of this life and the lure of wealth* choke us like thorns.^{Matt.13:22} We should get rid of those "besetting sins" – things that divert and distract us. *Since we are surrounded by so many examples of faith, we must get rid of everything that slows us down, especially sin that distracts us. We must run the race that lies ahead of us and never give up. We must focus on Jesus, the source and goal of our faith.*^{Heb.12:1-2} Sometimes we simply don't know what we should do and make the wrong choice. In many situations there is not a clear right or wrong and so we have to make decisions based on what we know of God and His values. Whatever the reason – even if it is our fault – God has promised to re-direct our lives for His glory and our good (if we love God and are called by Him): *For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*^{Rom.8:29}

God's rules and morals are not recorded just to define "sin" for us but to protect us and provide His best for us. And when we sin... *God is faithful and reliable. If we confess our sins, he forgives them and cleanses us from everything we've done wrong.*^{1Jn.1:9} God doesn't "forget" our sins in a lapse of memory only to "remember" them again when we least expect it. No! He consciously and deliberately eliminates the record of our sins from His memory and He will never hold them against us – ever: *For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds."* Then he adds: ***"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."*** *And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.*^{Heb.10:14-18} That is why our testimony should never focus on our bad past but on Jesus and how the historical and spiritual facts of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension^{Acts.26:22-23} have affected us. **We don't glory in our sin (which God no longer has any record of) but in our Saviour who always lives!**

But in order to reap the benefits of God's second chance we must act on His instructions: We must believe that God really has removed the past and restored us. Then we must also want to live in the blessings God that has for us. **If Esau was able to shake off the consequences of his failure and Jacob's deceit, then so can we!** *By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.*^{Heb.11:20} *Esau said to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" ...His father Isaac answered him, "Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will... serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck."*^{Gen.27:38-40} (Esau was later reconciled with his brother before they buried their father,^{Gen.25:29} and also became a Patriarch of 12 tribes.^{Gen.36:40}) And we must also live out our faith so that our lifestyle lines up with our lips – we walk the talk! *Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove. Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That's just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands?*^{2Jas.2:18-20} That means that we **"put God's Word into practice"** i.e. **we actually do what God says** so our confession, our conversation, our character and our lifestyle are all in harmony with God's morals and values: *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*^{Josh.1:9} *Be careful, brothers and sisters, that none of you ever develop a wicked, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. Encourage each other every day while you have the opportunity. If you do this, none of you will be deceived by sin and become stubborn. After all, we will remain Christ's partners only if we continue to hold on to our original confidence until the end.*^{Heb.3:12-14}

Because God is now with us – **Emmanuel**^{Matt.1:23} – and has made His home with us,^{Jn.13:23} we can be sure that He will never leave us.^{Heb.13:5-6} Jesus has declared that He has never, nor will He ever, lose anyone (save Judas): *Holy Father, you have given me your name; now protect them by the power of your name so that they will be united just as we are. During my time here, I protected them by the power of the name you gave me. I guarded them so that not one was lost, except the one headed for destruction, as the Scriptures foretold.*^{Jn.15:11-12} **Yes God is the God of the second chance so never give up:** *The vilest sinner out of hell, Who lives to feel his need, Is welcome to a Throne of Grace, The Saviour's blood to plead. It speaks of pardon, full and free, Through Christ, the Lamb once slain; Whose blood can cleanse the foulest soul, And take away all stain.* God will turn our situation around for His glory and your good – we can either believe Him and enjoy His benefits^{Psa.103:1-5} or we can disbelieve Him and reap the consequences – the choice is ours! *Try hard to do what is right and godly. Have faith, love and gentleness. Hold on to what you*

believe. Fight the good fight along with all other believers. Take hold of eternal life. You were chosen for it when you openly told others what you believe. Many witnesses heard you.^{1Tim.6:11-12}

Father's Day Song

**Where would I be, What would I be,
Who would I be, without You?
You're walking with me and talking with me
Everywhere that I go.
At work, at school, at home, at play
You stay with me every day.
Where, what, who would I be
What would I do without You?**

**Well You gave me a Mum and a Dad
And without them I would be sad
They clothe, feed me and love me
And tell me off when I'm bad.
I am their child it's plain to see
They laugh and play and read with me
Their home, their faith they share with me
Even their car's a taxi for free!
I'm glad, so glad, I'm glad and I'm blessed
To have them, Lord, in my life.**

**Jesus my Saviour, Jesus my Light
Jesus my Protector and Might
Always keeping me, always leading me
Along the path that is right
Emmanuel, my Shield, my Sword
My Friend, my Wisdom, my Guide and my Lord
I'm glad, so glad, I'm glad and I'm blessed
To have You, Lord, in my life.**

Margaret Fermor

Sunday 28th June 2015. Ps.33:1-11. Acts 27:27-43

How do you eat your food?

He took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged.^{Acts27:35-36}

Our values and behaviour are powerfully shaped by our culture and family, especially our childhood – the way we were brought up. These influences determine our preferences (our likes and dislikes) of how we live and behave, what we do or wear, our pastimes, music and food and even the way we eat i.e. whether we use a knife and fork, a spoon, chop-sticks or just our hands. But when we became a Christian, we were born-again into God's kingdom and became His family, so our natural culture and family influence should be superseded by our spiritual culture and family because God is our heavenly Father.

God's values and the expected behaviour of His household were modelled by Jesus when He became human. *The Word became human and lived among us. We saw his glory. It was*

the glory that the Father shares with his only Son, a glory full of grace and truth.^{Jn.1:14} Jesus' overriding characteristics were grace and gratitude which was seen in the way He honoured God and submitted to His will: *Look, I have come to do your will, O God—as is written about me in the Scriptures.*^{Heb.10:7} *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*^{Matt.6:9-10} Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.^{Matt.26:39} When Jesus ate food, He publicly thanked God: *And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.*^{Matt.14:19} *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.*^{Lk.24:30} Giving thanks to God for our food – saying “grace” before meals - is a good pattern for us to follow: *If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*^{1Cor.10:30-31} Not to give thanks to God is the quickest way to dull and darken our minds: *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.*^{Rom.1:21-22} However our appreciation to God shouldn't be restricted to food but include our whole life: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life.)*^{Phil.4:6-7} **There some things that God can't do or won't do and making us grateful is one of them.** So whilst saying “grace” before meals is a good routine, merely saying the words doesn't automatically mean we are “giving thanks”! Our thanks is perhaps the only thing that we can give to God that He hasn't first given to us and our appreciation is our own responsibility – either we are thankful or we aren't thankful!

Here are some Biblical principles about food and how we should eat.

All food is good and given by God: *Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.*^{Gen.1:29-30}

We can choose what we eat: *And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden."*^{Gen.2:16}

God has given us meat to eat as well as vegetables and fruit: *Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.*^{Gen.9:3-4}

OT food laws explained the holy nature of God: *Then the LORD said to Aaron, "You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the tent of meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, so that you can distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and so you can teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses."*^{Lev.10:8-11} *You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.*^{Lev.11:47}

Food does not make us holy (clean) or unholy (unclean): *After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him `unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him `unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man*

unclean."^{Mk.7:17-23} Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."^{Acts.10:9-23}

During the transition from OT to NT some regulations over-lapped: *Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.*^{Acts.15:20} (written AD49/50)

Later those regulations were dropped: Just a year later (AD 51) when Paul wrote to the Church at Thessalonica, he made no mention of food: *As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality.*^{1Thess.4:1-3} Nine years after that (AD 57/58), Paul clearly explained that all food is "clean" and so may be eaten: *As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.*^{Rom.14:14-16} "Everything is permissible"—but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others. *Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."*^{1Cor.10:23-33}

Food is not spiritual but natural or temporal: *But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.*^{1Cor.8:8} Someone may say, "I'm allowed to do anything," but not everything is helpful. I'm allowed to do anything, but I won't allow anything to gain control over my life. *Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food, but God will put an end to both of them.*^{1Cor.6:12-13} Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.^{Col.2:16} They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. *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.*^{1Tim.4:3-5}

Christianity is a "heart religion" and our motives are as important as our actions. Unlike Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's spin chief, who infamously declared "we don't do God" – **we do "do God"!** So let's enjoy our food as we unashamedly show our appreciation to God.

July: I am Sanctified in Christ

To the church of God... to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours: 1Cor.1:2

Sunday 5th July 2015. Ps.43. Matthew 8

I am away this week so I have included this article from Dr. Andrew Corbett, (www.andrewcorbett.net)

Holy Relevant.

"**Holy**" seems to be the most precious word used to describe God. It is the only word emphasized three times to describe God (Isaiah 6). The Hebrews used this literary device to emphasize. If a word was used twice, such as "*Truly, truly...*", what was about to be said was very true. If a word was used three times it was absolute and ultimate. God is described not as being "*holy, holy*" but as "*holy, holy, holy*". *And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"* ^{Rev.4:8}

The word "*holy*" means "*different*". But it's more than just obscure, it means *different* in the sense of "**not common**", "**very very special**". As it pertains to God, the word *holy* carries a sense of beauty, magnificence, awesome. While God is **holy, holy, holy**, what is directly associated with Him is **holy**. Thus, God calls His redeemed people, **holy**. **To be a Christian is to be made holy**. Without being made holy, a person cannot see God let alone enter Heaven after this life - *Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.* ^{1Heb.12:14}

But, unlike God whose intrinsic nature is holy, we who have come to realise our need for God, are holy by virtue of God's election of us. In this sense it is a new legal standing for us. It is an apt adjective of what Christ has done for us. But we are also told to be holy. In this sense, holy is a verb for a believer- something we are required to do or be. *Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.* ^{2Cor.7:1}

In the **Book of Revelation**, the word **holy** is used very strikingly. It is used in its absolute sense to describe God ("*holy, holy holy*"). But it is also used to describe the people that God had called to be holy, yet were not. Initially in the Book of Revelation, Jerusalem is described as "*the holy city*". But then God laments that it was the city which had rejected His Son and become like Sodom and Egypt: *and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.* ^{Rev.11:8}

So God calls a **New Jerusalem** into existence with the **New Covenant**. He then designates this **new people** (comprising of converted Jews and Gentiles) as **the holy city**. *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* ^{Rev.21:2}

The people who were called to be holy under the Old Covenant failed to transition to the New Covenant. Yet they went further than just missing it - they opposed it! The Book of Revelation describes them not just as "*Sodom and Egypt*" ^{Rev.11:8} but also as "*Babylon*". ^{Rev.14:8;16:19;17:5;18:2,10,21} Their depiction as "*Babylon*" conjures up the memory of ancient Babylon which on several occasions had significant demonstrations of God's glory (read the Book of Daniel) but still maintained their idolatry and wickedness. To be described as "*Babylon*" was to be labelled as "*unholy*". The Book of Revelation describes their backslidden state in terms of drinking wine, of lusting and immorality. *Another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.'* ^{Rev.14:8}

Revelation goes on to describe the people who were supposed to be holy as having "prostituted" themselves with the world. *And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."* ^{Rev.17:5}

The modern application that we can draw from this chilling book is that **God is holy and He calls His people to be holy.**

To be called to holiness and to refuse to comply is called wickedness (which God takes a rather dim view of). But for some believers, holiness is about mere rule-keeping or looking good. For them there is great effort involved. This effort sometimes leads to distinctions being made in their lives that takes them so far from the everyday reality of the people around them that they become irrelevant.

There are other Christians who react to this form of legalism. They regard holiness as something entirely derived from God and so there is nothing to be overly concerned about. For this group, their concept of holiness is one that says they have been made holy by God and there is nothing they can add to that - so why not relax and enjoy the freedoms and liberties that God's grace has afforded them. This might include excessive drinking, smoking, casual church commitment, loose language, lurid entertainment. What the latter group accuse the former group (legalists) of doing, they themselves manage to commit just as successfully - albeit, unwittingly. This is because they are no longer different, distinct, mysterious, other-worldly - that is: **they are no longer living as if they are holy.**

The lessons of the Book of Revelation for today is that just as God wanted the Old Jerusalem in the world as a beacon of difference - a light to the world - **so He has called the New Jerusalem (the New Covenant Church) down from Heaven to be in the world but not like the world. By living like Daniel lived in Babylon, we can be holy and relevant.** This is one of the greatest applications from one of the greatest books in the Bible. *Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.* ^{2Cor.7:1}

(For Andrew Corbett's ebook on Revelation please see his website or ask Paul)

Sunday 12th July 2015. Ps.33:12-22

As Leke Adebisi is preaching I have included this article entitled "How pagan is Christianity?" by Andrew Corbett (www.andrewcorbett.net) where he evaluates the book "Pagan Christianity" which proposes that "the church in its contemporary, institutional form has neither a biblical nor a historical right to function as it does."

A Faulty Foundational Premise. The authors weave through the entire book reasons why they believe the Church is worshiping in an ungodly way based on the premise that the earliest church was "the purest form" of Church "before it was tainted and corrupted". But within one chapter of this statement they acknowledge that when the church is planted cross-culturally it legitimately adopts structures and worship patterns that relate to its culture. Whenever I hear somebody make the thoughtless appeal for the modern Church to return to the church model of the Book of Acts, I always wonder which chapter of the Book of Acts are they referring to? In every chapter of Acts we see the Church growing, developing, changing, and confronting new problems that require doctrinal refinement and structural adjustment. The authors more than suggest that not even God can correct His Church when it deviates from His glory: *The contemporary church is like a jet airplane that has no capacity for in-flight course corrections* (p30). The other main premise of the book is that all traditional leadership models of church government are evil (pagan). This premise is based on the authors' narrow understanding of what "the priesthood of all believers" means. With such glaringly bad argumentation and extremely shallow support

for such arguments, you would think that those who are supposed to be Biblically-literate would be able to discern this straight away. But amazingly, it has bowled over many believers and brought great confusion to many good-hearted pastors who have not known how to respond to this attack.

Is Our Worship Really Pagan? The book asserts that song leaders, choirs, and worship directors are pagan in origin and are therefore wrong. They base this assertion on their premise that worship services in the New Testament were only conducted in homes where everybody had the opportunity to lead a part of it. They even suggest that musical instruments were not used and therefore are out of New Testament order for today. But again they are wrong in both their premise and their conclusions. The New Testament does not condemn those who are gifted musically to be used as the worship leader of an assembly. On the contrary, the New Testament seems to encourage people to focus their ministry in the area of the spiritual gifting^{1Cor.12}. Secondly, it is likely that when Paul instructs his readers to worship God by singing hymns, Psalms and spiritual songs^{Eph.5:19;Col.3:16} with all their heart, that this could have and probably did include musical accompaniment. The New Testament Church honoured the Psalms. In the Psalms we read over and over that worshipful melody unto the Lord can be made with musical instruments. *Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!*^{P.s.150:3-5} If the book criticises some expressions of modern church worship because it is more akin to entertainment than praise for God, then their criticisms are valid. But from anecdotal evidence and personal observation, by far the majority of worship leaders genuinely do what they do to bring glory to God and inspire believers to worship God. Setting yourself up as a judge of another believer's expression of worship is a very dangerous (and presumptuous) thing to do.

How Should We Read Our Bible? When it comes to using the Bible, this book advocates a similar error to that of the *Emerging Church* leaders. The Bible is not meant to be used for "proof texting" they argue, but to establish and build a relationship with God. On first reading this statement seems tame if not even true. But when we consider what these authors are really advocating, there are a lot reasons to be very concerned. *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*^{2Tim.3:16-17} Despite what the authors assert, the Bible can not only be used to establish doctrine (right belief), **it should!** Other *Emerging Church* leaders such as Rob Bell have rejected traditional, orthodox Christianity in favour of "neo-liberalism" where such foundational doctrines to Christianity such as: *the virgin birth of Christ, the physical resurrection of Jesus, the exclusive nature of salvation through Christ, the authority of Scripture*, have been abandoned. Christians should not be caught off guard by the crafty language used by those advocating for the "Emerging Church". The Bible should never be used out of context in a way that an obscure verse is made to mean something that the overall tenor of Scripture does not advocate. In this sense, being "doctrinaire" is against the tenor of Scripture, but being doctrinally precise is not.

A Biblical Concept Of Church Needed. The authors argue for an organic model of Church. They claim that this is the model presented in the New Testament and this model looks like House Churches. While there is nothing wrong with House Churches, there is something seriously wrong with claiming that this is the model for every church congregation. Healthy churches know how to assemble publicly^{Heb.10:24-25} **and** meet in small groups semi-privately^{Acts.2:42-44}. On the Day of Pentecost, the day the New Testament Church was birthed, the believers were no longer in the Upper Room but

were in the Temple precinct seeking God. Thus, when the Holy Spirit fell upon them it was a very public event! Therefore, the early Church most naturally saw that its worship of Jesus was a public event to be conducted in a public venue. For the ensuing weeks the believers continued this practise of worshiping Christ in the public venue of the Temple and meeting in one another's homes^{Acts.2:42-44}. During these public meetings in a public venue, they prayed, probably sang, and one of them would preach. Acts 2 records the main points of Peter's sermon and Acts 7 records the main points of Stephen's sermon. As the church spread, the default format for Christians to gather was to do so in a public setting. This most naturally involved Synagogues, Public Squares, and riversides (which was where Jews would meet in towns where their numbers were insufficient to form a Synagogue^{Acts.16:13; Ps.137:1}). Only as a fall-back position did the church meet in homes. When the State-sanctioned persecution of the Church ended in the fourth century, the Church immediately established public venues for worship. This was not a "paganising" of the Church, but a consistent strategy of outreach and witness established from the Day of Pentecost. A local congregation of believers is a group that meets under the headship of Christ, submitted to His appointed leaders, guided by the Holy Spirit through the teaching of God's Word, where believers are supported and equipped to glorify God with their gifts.

History tells us that God has a way of shutting down congregations. In the opening chapters of the Book of Revelation Christ instructs His apostle John to write to the "angels" of the 7 churches of Asia Minor. These "angels" were God's appointed messenger to each congregation. That is quite literally what the word angel means (messenger). Today we generally use the word "pastor"^{Heb.13:17; 1Pet.5:1ff} to describe the person fulfilling this role. To each of the churches Christ warned them that if they abandoned Him He would remove their candle stick (shut them down). Perhaps there are church congregations that need to die because they have ceased to seek and represent Christ to a needy world. But for those churches that have culturally adapted to sincerely reach their societies for Christ as a Word-based, worshipful witness, they don't need the kind of scurrilous allegation that would seek to label them as "pagan".

Sunday 19th July 2015. Ps.33:12-22. Acts 28

He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!^{Acts28:24}

What would Luke write about you in Acts chapter 29? All the books of the New Testament except Acts have a conclusion. The Gospels end with Jesus' Ascension or Commission and the Epistles end with a greeting of peace and grace or an Amen, but Book of Acts doesn't even end with Paul's release from prison! Acts is normally known as the "Acts of the apostles" but perhaps it should be called the "Acts of the Holy Spirit" because although those apostles died, the story continues and we are the next chapter – **chapter 29** because we too must *proclaim the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!*^{Acts28:24} That is why we pray for those in authority – so we can live a peaceful and quiet life.^{1Tim.2:1-3} This is the Commission that Jesus gave us (think of our "Commission" from Jesus as our "Mission by His Command"): *God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.*^{Matt.28:18-20} So our Commission is to *go and proclaim the kingdom of God*^{Lk.9:60} but the Kingdom of God is not a geographical place nor is it just a "concept". **The Kingdom of God is the King's dom(ain) - the rule of Christ in our**

heart! The Kingdom of God is actually within us: Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is *within* you."^{Lk.17:20-21}

So what is the Kingdom of God like?

The Kingdom of God is spiritual (i.e. being right with God and living right with God) **not sensual** (what we can know through our 5 senses) **or social** (talking or being "nice"): *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*^{Rom.14:17} *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.*^{1Cor.4:20}

Because God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom, it's citizens should display the characteristics of the Holy Spirit: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*^{Gal.5:22-23}

You can't legislate for or against the fruit of the Spirit - it is a result of abiding (remaining) in Jesus.^{Jn.15:1-8} We like (and probably need) to "feel" something, but our **trust** is based on **what God has already explained in the Scriptures**, not on our emotions.

The Kingdom of God is eternal: *But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom."*^{Heb.1:8} *But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.*^{Dan.7:18} *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.*^{Dan.2:44-45} Never lose sight of this statement, especially when life gets tough and seems unfair.

The Kingdom of God is here – it has already come because the King has come: *Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.*^{Rev.12:10} Before the Church began, Jesus sent His disciples out to preach that the Kingdom was near: *These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give."*^{Matt.10:5-8} Later Jesus said that the Kingdom had come: *But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*^{Matt.12:28} And then He told them that the Kingdom must be preached in all the world: *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*^{Matt.24:14} We are not expecting for utopia right now because the Kingdom of God is not yet in its final state as there is still sin, sickness, disease and death in the world: *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first-fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*^{1Cor.15:22-26} But when Jesus returns, **He will usher in "utopia" - a perfect kingdom led by a perfect King.** *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." And the*

one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children."^{Rev.21:1-7} Until Jesus returns we must persevere through hardships in the confidence that God is with us in every situation.

The Kingdom of God is inseparable from teaching about Jesus Christ because Jesus is God's King: *The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."*^{Ps.2:4-7} Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place." "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."^{Jn.18:36-37} This gives us the confidence to face life because we can always appeal to the highest Authority.

There are many "Jesus'es" but **only ONE JESUS CHRIST who is the Son of God:** *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."*^{Matt.16:16-17} Other religions and cults talk about (and even "pray" to) their "Jesus" but if their Jesus is not God's Son who died for us and rose again for our justification, he is not our Jesus! Although we are Trinitarian (we know that the Father is God, Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God), we are Jesus focused because He is the only way to come to God.^{Jn.14:6} We are told to hold firmly to the testimony of Jesus. *I am God's servant, just like other believers who hold firmly to what Jesus has taught. Worship God! What Jesus taught is the very heart of prophecy.*^{Rev.19:10}

Let's continue to *proclaim the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance*^{Acts28:24} as we live out **our Acts chapter 29** because we know that this is the only way to live and we will reap the benefits – **eternal life with Jesus.** We never need to be afraid because God has given us the Kingdom: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*^{Lk.12:32} And this Kingdom life is full of surprises too! *Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.*^{Matt.13:52}

Sunday 26th July 2015. Ps.34:1-10. John 1

Bless you! We often hear these words and we all (I hope!) say "God bless you!" to encourage others to trust God but actually there can be no blessing apart from Jesus Christ. Our English Bible uses "bless" in two ways: to bless and to be blessed. *The LORD had said to Abram, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*^{Gen.12:1-3} (Actually to be blessed is the lowest form of Christianity because every Christian is already blessed: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*^{Eph.1:3} **The highest form of Christianity is to be a blessing:** *We must remember the words of the Lord Jesus. He said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*^{Acts.20:35} *Melchizedek however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater.*^{Heb.7:6-7} Believers are greater than Kings and Presidents: *Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from his presence.*^{Gen.47:10} Actually the least of us in God's kingdom is greater than any of the OT saints! *I can*

guarantee that of all the people ever born, no one is greater than John. Yet, the least important person in the kingdom of God is greater than John [the Baptist].^{Lk.7:28})

To bless God is an act of worship and honour. Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.^{Ps.103:1-2}

Here the word “bless” in Hebrew is “barak” which means “to (energetically) kneel” i.e. to willingly and enthusiastically submit to God as an act of worship. It also conveys the thought of “abundance”: God blessed (barak) them. He said to them, “Have children and increase your numbers. Fill the earth and bring it under your control. Rule over the fish in the waters and the birds of the air. Rule over every living creature that moves on the ground.”^{Gen.1:28}

Most modern Bible versions translate “barak” as “praise”: Praise (barak) the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. True worship is honouring God with our heart and head, life and language: Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise.^{Ren.5:12} But the righteousness that is by faith says: “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim.^{Rom.10:6-8}

⁸ The same word “barak” is sometimes used in a negative way to mean “curse” (i.e. an act of worship that wasn’t a genuine submission to God or was only half-hearted): Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, “Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed (barak) God in their hearts.” This was Job’s regular custom.^{Job.1:5}

True worship is spiritual (i.e. from our spirit and in unity with the Holy Spirit): But the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.^{Jn.4:23-24}

But worship also involves every part of us, not just our spirit: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.^{Matt.22:36-37}

Although God is worthy of our praise, when we know we are forgiven, we will unashamedly express our love for God: “Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn’t offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn’t greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.” Then Jesus said to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.”^{Lk.7:44-48}

When we bless God, He is blessed (honoured, glorified and praised). When we ask God to bless others, we expect God to bless them (honour them with goodness, love and grace): This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”^{Nu.6:23-27} When we bless others, they can receive blessings from us of honour, goodness, love and provision.

We acknowledge that all good things come from God: Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.^{Jas.1:17}

The OT saints had faith and were blessed but didn’t receive what God has promised us – including a good conscience! Because of their faith they took over kingdoms. They ruled fairly. They received the blessings God had promised... All of those people were praised because they had faith. But none of them received what God had promised. God had planned something better for us. So they would only be made perfect together with us.^{Heb.11:33;39-40}

This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.^{Heb.9:9} Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.^{Heb.10:22-23} But now

Jesus has actually come - He was born of Mary, He died for our sins, He rose from the dead for our justification and He ascended to the Father where He sent the Holy Spirit - we have received so much more than those OT saints: *We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift. We got the basics from Moses, and then this exuberant giving and receiving, this endless knowing and understanding—all this came through Jesus, the Messiah.*^{Jn.1:16-17} *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 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.8:31-32} This grace and truth comes from Jesus^{Jn.1:17} which means that when we know that God has truly forgiven all our sins, our conscience is clear: *I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.*^{1Cor.4:3-4}

We should keep on reminding each other of God's precious promises to us who believe, so we keep the faith, not shipwreck the faith! *Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*^{1Tim.1:18-20} Although we would not “blaspheme” (say evil things about God), to misrepresent God's truth is to speak ill of Him.

Let's continue to acknowledge our abundant blessings in Jesus Christ (see our Memory Verses this year) **and then be a blessing to others.** *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed. (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.) ... This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*^{Rom.4:18-25}

Bless you!

August: I am Standing Firm in Christ

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ 2Cor.1:21

Sunday 2nd August 2015. Ps.34:11-22

The Riddle of the Rain

The story of the Flood as divine retribution is found in most cultures of the world - in Asia (including Babylon, India and China), Africa, Australasia, North and South Americas and Europe. With such a universal acceptance, this story is still discounted by most people in the West as a “myth” – something from folklore that is a nice story but has no factual basis.

Flood Facts: The riddle “*The oldest man that ever lived, died before his father did!*” is about Noah’s Grandfather, Methuselah (who lived 969 years) who died before his father Enoch did: *Enoch walked with God. Then he couldn't be found, because God took him from this life.* ^{Gen.5:24} Methuselah died the year of the flood and his son (Noah’s father) Lamech died 5 years before the flood. Noah was 600 years, 2 months and 17 days when the flood came (it took 7 days for the animals to all get into the ark). It rained for 40 days and 40 nights, the flood waters were over the earth for 150 days and Noah came out of the Ark after 1 year and 10 days.

We Christians are people who follow Christ and we are also called “Believers” because we believe! Even though there are many things we don’t understand, we have made a public commitment to trust God with our life (past, present and future) based on who God is, what God has done and what God has said (as recorded in the Bible). Our very existence is miraculous because God intervened and created the world: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... And God said, “Let there be...” and there was...* ^{Gen.1:1-3} Our salvation is miraculous because it is based on Jesus’ virgin birth, sinless life, vicarious death, physical resurrection and ascension. Our Christian life is miraculous too because Jesus lives within us through the Holy Spirit: *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?* ^{2Cor.13:5} *And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. 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 because of his Spirit who lives in you.* ^{Rom.8:9-11} John G. Lake was right when he said “Christianity is 100% supernatural – God possessing man”. The stories in the Bible are not there to record history (even though they are historically accurate) but are there to teach and instruct us about Jesus and the salvation God has planned for us. *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.* ^{Rom.15:4} So when people discount the Bible story of the Flood, they are also discounting the lessons that God wants to teach us from it.

God is angry with sin. God has cursed the earth twice because of man’s sin– at the Fall and at the Flood: *To Adam he said, “Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return.”* ^{Gen.3:17-19} *Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and there he sacrificed as burnt offerings the animals and birds that had been approved for that purpose. And the LORD was pleased with the aroma of the sacrifice and said to himself, “I will never again curse the ground because of the human race, even though everything they think or imagine is bent toward evil from childhood. I will never again destroy all living things. As long as the earth remains, there will*

be planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night."^{Gen.8:20-22} God will not judge the whole earth again until the final Judgement: *Long ago, God's word brought the heavens into being. His word separated the earth from the waters. And the waters surrounded it. But those people forget things like that on purpose. The waters also flooded the world of that time. It was destroyed. By God's word the heavens and earth of today are being reserved for fire. They are being kept for the day when God will judge. Then ungodly people will be destroyed. Dear friends, here is one thing you must not forget. With the Lord a day is like a thousand years. And a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow to keep his promise. He is not slow in the way some people understand it. He is patient with you. He doesn't want anyone to be destroyed. Instead, he wants all people to turn away from their sins. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar. Fire will destroy everything in them. God will judge the earth and everything in it. So everything will be destroyed. And what kind of people should you be? You should lead holy and godly lives. Live like that as you look forward to the day of God.*^{2Pet.3:5-12}

God will judge the world. God will bring judgement on sin and this judgement will be terrible and final. *Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ...every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*^{Matt.3:7-10} The Flood story gives us an insight into God's heart and His plans – to save those who are in Covenant with Him. *The earth was very sinful in God's eyes. It was full of mean and harmful acts. God saw how sinful the earth had become. All of the people on earth were leading very sinful lives. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people. They have filled the earth with their harmful acts. You can be sure that I am going to destroy both them and the earth... But I will make my covenant with you. You will enter the ark. Your sons and your wife and your sons' wives will enter it with you."*^{Gen.6:11-18} *For if did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes... if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment. This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority.*^{2Pet.2:4-10} *But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.*^{2Pet.3:5-7}

This story shows us that God can - and will – save those who are in the New Covenant: *Then he took the cup. He gave thanks and handed it to them. He said, "All of you drink from it. This is my blood of the new covenant. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many."*^{Matt.26:27-28}

God has made a way of escape. God was (and still is) angry about sin because sin is rebellion - it is totally dishonouring and repulsive to Him, **BUT** God has provided a way of escape. In the Flood story, the way of escape was the Ark through the water. This is an example or picture of Jesus who saves us, not through the water of baptism, but by what baptism represents – **Jesus' Resurrection:** *You know, even though God waited patiently all the days that Noah built his ship, only a few were saved then, eight to be exact—saved from the water by the water. The waters of baptism do that for you, not by washing away dirt from your skin but by presenting you through Jesus' resurrection before God with a clear conscience.*^{1Pet.3:20-22}

God is no longer angry with us. When God placed the rainbow in the sky, He said it would remind us that He has made a Covenant (agreement) never to curse the earth because of man's sin. *Then God said, "I am giving you a sign of my covenant with you and with all living creatures, for all generations to come. I have placed my rainbow in the clouds. It is the sign of my covenant with you and with all the earth. When I send clouds over the earth, the rainbow will appear in the clouds, and I will remember my covenant with you and with all living creatures. Never again will the floodwaters destroy all life. When I see the rainbow in the clouds, I will remember the eternal covenant between God and every living creature on earth."* Then God said to Noah, "Yes, this rainbow is the sign

of the covenant I am confirming with all the creatures on earth."^{Gen.9:12-17} But it is also a reminder that God is not angry with us because Jesus was punished for our sins: "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.^{Is.54:9-10} 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.53:4-5}

So let's not forget the purpose of the Riddle of the Rain – the Flood story in the Bible: to teach us that God is angry with sin, that God will judge the world and that God has made a way of escape in Jesus and He is no longer angry with us.

Sunday 9th August 2015. Ps.35:1-10. John 1

Emmanuel – Jesus is God most High and God most Nigh!

For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."^{Is.57:15}

In the Bible, the word "heaven" is used to describe **space: inner space** (the atmosphere of our air and sky above the earth), **outer space** (where the celestial objects like our sun, moon, stars are in orbit) and **spiritual space** (where God dwells). The first two "heavens" (**inner space** and **outer space**) are physical places that can be seen and measured, whereas the 3rd "heaven" (**spiritual space**) is completely different – it's not physical but spiritual. The physical heavens were created by God: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth^{Gen.1:1} and they display God's glory: The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.^{Ps.19:1} There are things about [God] that people cannot see—his eternal power and all the things that make him God. But since the beginning of the world those things have been easy to understand by what God has made. So people have no excuse for the bad things they do.^{Rom.1:20} These physical "heavens" – the inner and outer space - are temporal and will be destroyed by the same God who created them: Long ago, God's word brought the heavens into being. His word separated the earth from the waters... By God's word the heavens and earth of today are being reserved for fire. They are being kept for the day when God will judge. Then ungodly people will be destroyed.^{2Pet.3:5-7}*

But God's heaven (the spiritual space) is eternal and will never be destroyed: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.^{Lk.12:32-33} His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.^{Dan.4:34} Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.^{Ps.119:89} Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.^{Matt.24:35} Before Jesus came, this spiritual space was elusive because God is holy and nothing unclean (unholy) can enter there. A wide road will go through the land. It will be called The Way of Holiness. Only those who are pure and clean can travel on it. Only those who lead a holy life can use it. Evil and foolish people can't walk on it.^{Is.35:8} God is in heaven Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.^{Ecd.5:1} **But when Jesus came, heaven's door was opened:***

*What I'm about to tell you is true. You will see heaven open. You will see the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man.^{Jn.1:51} (Actually **Jesus is the Door:** Jesus said to them again, "I tell you the solemn truth, I am the door...^{Jn.10:7}) Jacob had a glimpse of God's "spiritual space" and was afraid: He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top*

reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD... When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel.^{Gen.28:12;16-19} **But because Jesus has come to us, we can now go to Him - in heaven – without being afraid:** They will call him Emmanuel - which means, God with us.^{Matt.1:23} The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.^{Jn.1:14} We have a great high priest. He has gone up into the heavens. He is Jesus the Son of God... 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 most.^{Heb.4:14-16} **Now heaven's door is open** and we can walk through the Doorway into the "heavenly realms". Paul probably went physically through heaven's door into the "heavenly realms": I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.^{1Cor.12:2-4} But every Believer can spiritually experience these heavenly realms – God's "spiritual space" - because that's our home – we belong there! 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 our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control.^{Phil.3:20-21} All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ... I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honour at God's right hand in the heavenly realms. Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the world to come.^{Eph.1:3;20-21}

Being in the "heavenly realms" – God's spiritual space – is also called being "in the Spirit". After this I looked, and there in front of me was a door standing open in heaven. I heard the voice I had heard before. It sounded like a trumpet. The voice said, "Come up here. I will show you what must happen after this." **At once I was in the Spirit**, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.^{Rev.4:1-2} Jesus was led by the Spirit.^{Matt.4:1} That day the Spirit led Simeon to the Temple.^{Lk.2:27} To "walk in the Spirit" (i.e. to regularly enjoy the close relationship with God), we need to align our minds and hearts with God's mind and heart and live as God's children. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.^{Rom.8:14} Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.^{Gal.5:25} "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.^{Rom.10:8-9} **However, if we oppose God and His values, we won't "walk in the Spirit".** In the last days, some people will make fun of the truth. They will follow their own ungodly longings. They are the people who separate you from one another. They do only what comes naturally. They are not led by the Holy Spirit. Dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Let the Holy Spirit guide and help you when you pray.^{Jude.1:18-21}

Let's be like Nathaniel and see Jesus with an open heaven: Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.^{Jn.1:51} **But let us also walk through the Door into the "heavenly realms":** Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.^{Col.3:1-2} **Then we will see and experience the "atmosphere" of heaven - which is God being with us:** 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, and God himself will be with them and be their God."^{Rev.21:3} **That's the "glory" realm where God shows Himself as God and miracles become normal** (see Ruth Heflin's book "**Glory**"; [also my dissertation on Miracles in the Church](#) – from our Church Website under "[What we Teach/Resources](#)"). *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*^{Ps.77:14} Church is the easiest place to receive from God because that's where He displays **His Wisdom - Jesus**. *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.*^{Eph.3:10} *Jesus has become our wisdom sent from God, our righteousness, our holiness, and our ransom from sin.*^{1Cor.1:30} **Let's see what God can do for us because Jesus is now with us – Emmanuel – God most high but also most nigh!**

Sunday 16th August 2015. Ps.36:5-12. John 2

Jesus is the Father's Glory

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.^{Jn.2:11}

A miracle is when God does something that can't do! Christianity is miraculous because it is God intervening in our lives – from conversion when we are *born-again*^{Jn.3:3} and we become a *new creation*,^{2Cor.5:17} all through our Christian life when we are indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit,^{Acts.1:8} and even our physical death when we are escorted by angels into God's presence.^{Lk.16:22;Phil.1:23} So it is not surprising that sometimes we experience "*miraculous*" events in our life – events that accompany the revelation of God's glory (i.e. we catch a glimpse of the resurrected Jesus in His majesty and glory). *We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*^{Jn.1:14}

When John saw heaven, he was "*in the Spirit*" (i.e. conscious of, and attentive to, the Holy Spirit): *After this I looked, and there in front of me was a door standing open in heaven... **At once I was in the Spirit** and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.*^{Rev.4:1-2} And it is this attentiveness to the Holy Spirit that allows us to function in the "*heavenly realms*" – when we are willing to do what God says, rather than just doing what He makes us do. *I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.*^{Ps.32:8-9} **But if we oppose God and His values, we can't "walk in the Spirit" and we will miss out on God's supernatural intervention in our life.** *In the last days, some people will make fun of the truth. They will follow their own ungodly longings. They are the people who separate you from one another. They do only what comes naturally. They are not led by the Holy Spirit. Dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Let the Holy Spirit guide and help you when you pray.*^{Jude.1:18-21} Actually we don't just rob ourselves of God's intended blessings but we also rob others of the blessings that God intends to give them through us (such as encouragement and comfort). *The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.*^{Is.50:4} *God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.*^{2Cor.1:3-4}

However, just seeing God's glory and seeing miraculous signs does not produce faith. Neither does receiving prayer or even going to Church or other spiritual meetings produce faith because faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ. That's why we preach Jesus and our praise and worship is focused on Jesus. *But not everybody is ready for this, ready to see and hear and act. Isaiah asked what we all ask at one time or another: "Does anyone*

care, God? Is anyone listening and believing a word of it?" The point is: Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to. (So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ.)^{Rom.10:16-17} But because Disciples already believe in Jesus and are following Him, when they see God's glory revealed in His miracles, it encourages, strengthens and reinforces their faith.^{Jn.2:11}

God has given Ministry Gifts to His Church. God in his kindness gave each of us different gifts. If your gift is speaking God's word, make sure what you say agrees with the Christian faith. If your gift is serving, then devote yourself to serving. If it is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. If it is encouraging others, devote yourself to giving encouragement. If it is sharing, be generous. If it is leadership, lead enthusiastically. If it is helping people in need, help them cheerfully.^{Rom.12:6-8} We take these Gifts to the Church seriously but they are the most effective when they are used "under the anointing" or "in the Spirit" (i.e. when we are conscious of, and attentive to, the Holy Spirit). That's why Christian Counselling should primarily take place "in the pulpit" (i.e. by coming to Church and hearing the preaching of God's Word in a conscious and attentive attitude to the Holy Spirit). We are spirit, have a soul and live in a body: *May the God who gives peace make you holy in every way. May he keep your whole being—spirit, soul, and body—blameless when our Lord Jesus Christ comes.*^{1Thes.5:23} **If we keep our spirit healthy, it will be easier to keep our soul healthy and that will also help us keep our body healthy too!** *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. Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*^{Prov.4:20-23} 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} It only took a word from God to create the universe^{Gen.1} so it is easy for God to change us and our situation by another word from Him – we just have to hear it! *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{Rev.3:6} Those with closed minds will not hear that word from God: *You will hear clearly but never understand. You will see clearly but never comprehend. These people have become close-minded and hard of hearing. They have shut their eyes so that their eyes never see. Their ears never hear. Their minds never understand. And they never turn to me for healing.*^{Acts.28:26-27}

There is a proper place for counselling (including the use of psychology and philosophy) but self-help and psychology can only assist our mind not our spirit (which is the eternal part of us that is God-conscious and depends on Jesus): *Make sure no one captures you. They will try to capture you by using false reasoning that has no meaning. Their ideas depend on human teachings. They also depend on the basic things the people of this world believe. They don't depend on Christ... The people of the world believe certain basic things. You died with Christ as far as things like that are concerned. So why do you act as if you still belong to the world? Here are the rules you follow. "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" Rules like that are all going to die out as time goes by. They are only based on human rules and teachings.*^{Col.2:8-22} **Our Commission is to present Jesus as God's complete answer to all our needs:** *A living Christ and a Living Father God perfectly satisfies and we need no philosophy or meta-physics. When faith dies, philosophy flourishes.*^{E.W.Kenyon} And we should also make every effort to be "in the Spirit" when we present Jesus and we get "in the Spirit" by seeing heaven's door open and entering in!^{Rev.4:1} We are already blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ^{Eph.1:3} and so it should be easy to enter into God's "space" and be "in the Spirit". When we remember who we are (*children of God, redeemed by Jesus' death*) and where we are (*seated with Christ in heavenly places*), it will not be difficult to bring the atmosphere of heaven and a sense of eternity and elevate our situation from the mundane to the majestic! This is what Jesus prayed for us: *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*^{Jn.17:24} When God's

glory brings the supernatural into our situation, it is much more than a nice feeling or sense of well-being because **God's glory brings God's solution to our situation:** *For nothing is impossible with God.*^{Lk.1:37} So let's be ready to share God's glory and the atmosphere of heaven with others as we make our lips do their duty by filling them with the God's Word and making them say what God says about our situation.

I'm going to keep on talking like God, feeding my body on His living Word; feeding my mind on what Jesus said, changing my weakness for His strength instead.

His Word is true, His Word is real, never depending on what I feel,

I'm going to say everything that He says, speaking to mountains while He does the rest.

I'm going to let it settle on me, all of its truth is setting me free;

becoming what God has made me to be, a joint heir with Jesus, I have liberty!

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.^{Heb.12:1-2}

Sunday 23rd August 2015. Ps.87. John 3

Seeing is not Believing!

It is hard to believe something you haven't seen but even when you have seen something it is not always what it appears. Conjuring tricks work by deliberately distracting people so that they don't see what is really happening. Counterfeiting and false-accounting are also methods to get people to believe what they see rather than what is actually happening! Last week we saw that because Disciples already believe in Jesus, when they see God's glory revealed in His miracles, it encourages, strengthens and reinforces their faith.^{Jn.2:11} But just seeing miracles does not produce faith because faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ. *But not everybody is ready for this, ready to see and hear and act. Isaiah asked what we all ask at one time or another: "Does anyone care, God? Is anyone listening and believing a word of it?" The point is: Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to.*^{Rom.10:16-17}

When Nicodemus saw Jesus perform miracles he was amazed! But that was all because he didn't understand the "heavenly realms" – the spiritual dimension of the "God space". So when Nicodemus spoke with Jesus, he was immediately **confronted with the real issue – conversion** (i.e. being "born-again" by God through faith in Jesus as the Son of God). *"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. We know that God is with you. If he weren't, you couldn't do the miraculous signs you are doing." Jesus replied, "What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can see God's kingdom without being born again."*^{Jn.3:2-3} The new-birth comes through the Word of Truth which is an imperishable (incorruptible) seed: *He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created.*^{Jas.1:18} *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*^{1Pet.1:23} That's why we can be sure that we will go to heaven the moment we take our last breath. *And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*^{Phil.1:6} Because we inherit God's nature at new-birth, **we no longer make a practice of sinning:** *Those who have been born into God's family do not make a practice of sinning, because God's life is in them. So they can't keep on sinning, because they are children of God. So now we can tell who are children of God and who are children of the devil. Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God.*^{1Jn.3:9-10}

Jesus explained to Nicodemus that the spiritual world - the "God space" - is just as real as the natural world except that it can't be seen with just physical eyes. *Jesus answered, "What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can enter God's kingdom without being born through water and the Holy Spirit. People give birth to people. But the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised*

when I say, 'You must all be born again.' "The wind blows where it wants to. You hear the sound it makes. But you can't tell where it comes from or where it is going. It is the same with everyone who is born through the Spirit."^{Jn.3:5-8} **Believing** helps us to see what God is doing but seeing doesn't help us to believe – **we have to take God on trust**. Trust in God is not blind nor is it unreasonable, because it is based on what He has said and what He has done (**God's Word and God's Character as recorded in the Scriptures**). Trust in God is also confirmed by what we can see around us in creation. Anyone can make up stories about heaven and the "God space" but because Jesus has actually lived in heaven, we can accept His testimony about God as valid: *No one has ever gone into heaven except the One who came from heaven. He is the Son of Man. Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. The Son of Man must be lifted up also. Then everyone who believes in him can live with God forever. God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life.*^{Jn.3:13-16} *The One who comes from above is above everything. The one who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks like someone from the earth. The One who comes from heaven is above everything. He gives witness to what he has seen and heard. But no one accepts what he says. Anyone who has accepted it has said, 'Yes. God is truthful.' The One whom God has sent speaks God's words. God gives the Holy Spirit without limit. "The Father loves the Son and has put everything into his hands. Anyone who believes in the Son has eternal life. Anyone who says no to the Son will not have life. God's anger remains on him.*^{Jn.3:31-36}

A Prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of God: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country."*^{Ex.7:1-2} *You shall speak to him 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} And in the NT a Prophet testifies of Jesus: *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus. [or What Jesus taught is the very heart of prophecy.]*^{Rom.19:10} John the Baptist was accepted as a genuine Prophet and he affirmed that Jesus really was the Son of God. Jesus said: *If I give witness about myself, it doesn't count. There is someone else who gives witness in my favour. And I know that his witness about me counts. "You have sent people to John. He has given witness to the truth. I do not accept human witness. I only talk about it so you can be saved. John was like a lamp that burned and gave light. For a while you chose to enjoy his light. The witness I have is more important than John's. I am doing the very work the Father gave me to finish. It gives witness that the Father has sent me. The Father who sent me has himself given witness about me. You have never heard his voice. You have never seen what he really looks like. And his word does not live in you. This is because you do not believe the One he sent. You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. The Scriptures you study give witness about me. But you refuse to come to me and receive life.*^{Jn.5:32-40}

So if we accept Jesus' testimony as true, (as well as John the Baptist's, the Father's the Holy Spirit's and the Scripture's testimony,) we need to be serious and act on it – because actually our very lives depend on it! *And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment.*^{Jn.3:36}

Believing God is an instruction not an invitation: *God has commanded us to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ.*^{1Jn.3:23} Although seeing is not believing, believing God is logical and sensible because not only does trusting God honour Him, but it also has wonderful benefits for us:

Believing God makes us right with Him: *We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe.*^{Rom.3:22} *Brothers, listen! We are here to proclaim that through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in him is declared right with God—something the law of Moses could never do.*^{Acts.13:38-39}

Believing God facilitates His promises to us. God is good, His Word is true and it works in my life! Jesus said to the father, “You said, -If you can!” All things are possible for the one who believes.” Immediately the father cried out, “I do believe! Help me to believe more!”^{Mk.9:23-24} You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.^{1Thes.2:13}

Believing God puts praise onto our lips – we will always want to say good things about God: So let us never stop offering to God our praise through Jesus. Let us offer it as the fruit of lips that say they believe in him.^{Heb.13:15}

Believing God gives us peace: May God give peace to all of you who believe in Christ.^{1Pet.5:14}

As we obey God’s instruction to believe Him, we will live a blessed and contented life (which is the best life: So I saw that there is nothing better for people than to be happy in their work. That is why we are here!^{Ecc.3:22}) Then Jesus told him, “You believe because you see me. Those who believe without seeing me will be truly blessed.”^{Jn.20:29} Since we believe human testimony, surely we can believe the greater testimony that comes from God. And God has testified about his Son. All who believe in the Son of God know in their hearts that this testimony is true. Those who don't believe this are actually calling God a liar because they don't believe what God has testified about his Son. And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life.^{1Jn.5:9-12}

Sunday 30th August 2015. Ps.46. John 4

Jesus refreshes the parts that religions cannot reach

In 1974 Heinekin used this advert: *Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach.*

Jesus’ ministry included teaching people about their spiritual life – how to be spiritually healthy and also how to stay spiritually healthy. To keep physically healthy we need to physically eat, rest and exercise properly. To keep spiritually healthy we need to spiritually eat, rest and exercise properly. This is what Jesus taught in the story of the woman at the Well.

Jesus supplies super foods and super drinks! Are you weary of work and tired of toil? Then you need the high energy spiritual food that only Jesus can give. *But anyone who drinks the water I give him will never be thirsty. In fact, the water I give him will become a spring of water in him. It will flow up into eternal life.*^{Jn.4:14} Obviously Jesus was not referring to physical needs because He was hungry and thirsty Himself: *Jesus returned to the city, he became hungry.*^{Matt.21:18} And the food Jesus was talking about was not physical food either: *Jesus told them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never become hungry, and whoever believes in me will never become thirsty.”*^{Jn.6:35} Our spiritual food and work is to believe in God who sent Jesus. Then Jesus explained: *“My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work.”*^{Jn.4:34} Jesus told them, *“This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent.”*^{Jn.6:29} *But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.*^{Acts.20:24}

Jesus strengthens us and keeps us sharp. Although Jesus has promised us rest, our spiritual rest doesn’t come from “time-out” or holidays but taking Jesus’ “yoke” (i.e. working with Him). *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} When God finished His work, He rested. We can enter that same rest from our work, not by **trying** to be good enough for God but **trusting** His goodness: *God's promise of enjoying his rest still stands. So be careful that none of you fails to receive it... So there is still a Sabbath rest for God's people. God rested from his work. Those who enjoy God's rest also rest from their work. So let us make every effort to enjoy that*

rest.^{Heb.4:1-11} Those people who are getting spiritually tired and forget about God's rest for their souls are called "fools": *A fool's work wearies him;*^{Ecc.10:15} They "work" at **trying harder** to please God instead of **trusting Him** and then wonder why they are worn out and have lost their "cutting edge". The answer is not to use more effort and wear yourself out further but to use Wisdom (who is Jesus^{1Cor.1:30}) and stay in fellowship with God, His Word and His People. *Using a dull axe requires great strength, so sharpen the blade. That's the value of wisdom; it helps you succeed.*^{Ecc.10:10} We "sharpen" our faith by encouraging one another in the Lord and "spurring" one another on in the faith. *As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.*^{Prov.27:17} *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*^{Heb.10:24-25}

There are no new "tricks" or short cuts to keeping ourselves "sharp" – we have to take the old trusted path of routinely doing what God has told us to do and continually choosing right from wrong: *Stop at the crossroads and look around. Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls.*^{Jer.6:16} *For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.*^{Heb.5:13-14} The "old godly way" that we should walk in, is the way that Jesus taught us – the way of loving God and His values (which we have incorporated into our Church's 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 of Him – His worth-ship!

Love for God's Word: The Scriptures point to Jesus^{Jn.5:39} and are reliable.^{Jn.10:35} They are an insight into God's character and values and a manual for right and blessed living.^{Ps.119:11} The Word of God really works in us who believe.^{1Thes.2:13}

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.

Love for the people of the world: We witness to others about God's glory, goodness and love through our attitude, behaviour and conversations. This witness is rooted in our indebtedness to God for His love and grace toward us.

Love for life – now and for ever: We realise that this life is the gateway to eternity and our response to God now determines what happens when we die. We have already been blessed with every spiritual blessing^{Eph.1:3} so we aim to be a blessing to others.^{Gen.12:2; Acts.20:35}

We are to fight for our faith (i.e. make every effort to believe God, as if our life depends on it – which it does!) *Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called*^{1Tim.6:12} Paul wrote again to Timothy saying that he had successfully fought to keep his faith and was about to receive his reward: *I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is a crown waiting for me. It is given to those who are right with God.*^{2Tim.4:7-8}

Sometimes we get put on the spot with our faith and if we were to give a blunt response for our faith it could get us into trouble. Greg Koukl makes this suggestion: *If someone asks if you think Jesus is the only way to be saved and everyone else is going to Hell, give this answer: "Since I'm a follower of Christ, my view on salvation is the same as Jesus' view. He made His view clear so I stand with Jesus." You get the point. Pit the challenger against Jesus whenever you can. Step aside whenever you can and let Jesus shoulder the responsibility, so to speak, for His own claims. It really helps balance the scales.*

Jesus satisfies not stupefies. By doing God's will i.e. believing in God and His Son,^{Jn.4:34;6:29} and also sharing what we believe,^{Phile.1:6} we are spiritually refreshed and energised. But when Jesus said we will never thirst again,^{Jn.4:14;6:35} He didn't mean that we

will never drink again. As Believers we drink God's "living water" out of a normal healthy appetite not out of dearth or drought. This is illustrated in the Exodus story by the water that came out of the Rock: *I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. All of them ate the same spiritual food, and all of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that travelled with them, and that rock was Christ.*^{1Cor.10:1-3} The "water" represents the Holy Spirit who came out of the "Rock" Jesus when He was "struck" (i.e. died on the Cross). The Holy Spirit "travels with us" like the Rock and water that travelled with the Israelites. So we should never "dry up" because the source of our "water" – the Holy Spirit – is within us. Instead of going to a well for water, the Holy Spirit gushes out of our "innermost being" (i.e. our spirit) like a river. *Jesus stood up and spoke in a loud voice. He said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Does anyone believe in me? Then, just as Scripture says, streams of living water will flow from inside him." When he said this, he meant the Holy Spirit. Those who believed in Jesus would receive the Spirit later. Up to that time, the Spirit had not been given. This was because Jesus had not yet received glory.*^{Jn.7:36}

The Holy Spirit is symbolised as a river whose source is God. *There I saw a stream flowing east from beneath the door of the Temple.*^{Ez.47:1} This river is seen throughout Scripture from Genesis^{Gen.2:10} to Revelation.^{Rev.22:1} If you really want to live a restful and refreshed life, don't just come to the "river" – get established by the river that flows from God's Temple. Then you will always be fruitful and verdant. *The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."*^{Ps.92:12-15}

September: I am Victorious in Christ

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him. 2Cor.2:14

Sunday 6th September 2015. Ps.84

Are you a Sitter, a Splasher or a Swimmer?

The summer is almost over and many people have been to the sea-side – some to sit by the water, some to splash in the water and some to swim in the water. Those who sat on the beach stayed dry (unless it rained!). Those who splashed, sampled the water but never really personally appreciated the fullness and vastness of the sea or enjoyed benefits of swimming – that is reserved for the swimmers!

Water, and especially a **River**, is used symbolically in the Bible to represent the **Holy Spirit**: *Jesus stood up and spoke in a loud voice. He said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Does anyone believe in me? Then, just as Scripture says, streams of living water will flow from inside him." When he said this, he meant the Holy Spirit. Those who believed in Jesus would receive the Spirit later. Up to that time, the Spirit had not been given. This was because Jesus had not yet received glory.*^{Jn.7:36}

This symbol of water as the Holy Spirit is used right through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The river in the Garden of Eden had one source but flowed out into four directions (i.e. into all the world – the number 4 represents the earth: “four corners and four winds of the earth”). *A river watered the garden and then flowed out of Eden and divided into four branches.*^{Gen.2:10} And the river of the Holy Spirit is still there at the end of the Bible: *Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the centre of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.*^{Rev.22:1-2} Ezekiel also saw this flow of the Holy Spirit coming out of God’s Temple: *The man brought me back to the entrance to the temple. I saw water flowing east from under a temple gateway... Then the man went toward the east. He had a measuring line in his hand. He measured off 1,000 cubits. He led me through water that was up to my ankles. Then he measured off another 1,000 cubits. He led me through water that was up to my knees. Then he measured off another 1,000 cubits. He led me through water that was up to my waist. Then he measured off another 1,000 cubits. But now it was a river that I could not go across. The water had risen so high that it was deep enough to swim in. He asked me, “Son of man, do you see this?” Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a large number of trees. They were on both sides of the river. The man said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern territory... This water flows there and makes the salt water fresh. So where the river flows everything will live. “Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not dry up. The trees will always have fruit on them. Every month they will bear fruit. The water from the temple will flow to them. Their fruit will be used for food. And their leaves will be used for healing.”*^{Ez.47:1-12}

In the Bible symbol, **1000** represents a **large number** and when linked with years stands for a long time. It also equates to “**the Kingdom of God**” thus Ezekiel was linking the “**river**” of the Holy Spirit with the Kingdom of God. When Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives, He sent the Holy Spirit: *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. After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight... Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives.*^{Acts.1:8-}

¹² This is what Zechariah prophesied about when he saw a river flowing out of Jerusalem and dividing the world after the Lord stood on the Mount of Olives: *Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle. 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, forming a great valley... On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter. The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name.^{Zech.14:3-9}

When Jesus ascended to heaven He sent the Holy Spirit and the world is now divided into those who are “born again” and those who are not “born again”: Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.... Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”^{Jn.3:3-18}

Ezekiel saw the river after the glory of the Lord had returned to the Temple: *Then the man brought me to the east gate. There I saw the glory of the God of Israel. He was coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters. His glory made the land shine brightly. The glory of the LORD filled the temple... I heard someone speaking to me from inside the temple. He said, “Son of man, this is the place where my throne is. The stool for my feet is also here. I will live here among the people of Israel forever. They will never again treat my name as if it were not holy... “Son of man, tell the people of Israel about the temple. Then they will be ashamed of their sins. Let them think carefully about the plan of the temple. What if they are ashamed of everything they have done? Then show them all of the plans of the temple. Explain to them how it is laid out. Tell them about its exits and entrances. Show them exactly what it will look like. Give them all of its rules and laws. Write everything down so they can see it. Then they will be faithful to its plan. And they will obey all of its rules. “Here is the law of the temple. The whole area on top of Mount Zion will be very holy. That is the law of the temple.”*^{Ez.43:1-12} The Bible uses “**West**” to represent **God's Presence** and “**East**” to represent the **world**. So [Abram] built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD.^{Gen.12:7-8}

(**Bethel = House of God; Ai = heap of ruins** i.e the **world** or **life without God**. So Joshua burned Ai and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day.^{Josh.8:28})

Hence the entrance to the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) was on the east side so the Worshipers always faced West when they entered God's Presence and turned their backs on the “world”. The glory of God (i.e. the Holy Spirit) had departed from the Temple via the East: *Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim... They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the LORD's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.*^{Ez.10:18-19}

When Ezekiel saw the Holy Spirit returning via the East it was prophetic of the Jesus coming to the world and returning to the Father to send the Holy Spirit: *The Word became a human being. He made his home with us. We have seen his glory. It is the glory of the one and only Son. He came from the Father. And he was full of grace and truth.*^{Jn.1:14} But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.^{Jn.16:7}

God hasn't planned for us to just sit and look at the “river” of His glory (the presence of the Holy Spirit), nor even to just “splash” in His glory but to “swim” in His glory and be totally saturated or “baptised” with the Holy Spirit. *Then I remembered what the Lord had said: John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*^{Acts.11:16}

Those who sit and splash may sample the “water” but they will never really personally appreciate the fullness and vastness of God's glory – that is reserved for the swimmers! How wet are you prepared to get – just a “dabble” or to get “drenched” in God's glory?

Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.^{Eph.5:18-20}

Don't just go to the "seaside" - Make your home there! *Blessed is the person who trusts the LORD. The LORD will be his confidence. He will be like a tree that is planted by water. It will send its roots down to a stream. It will not be afraid in the heat of summer. Its leaves will turn green. It will not be anxious during droughts. It will not stop producing fruit.*^{Jer.17:7-8} **Get established there and stay in fellowship with God, God's Word and God's People.** Then your sadness will be turned into gladness and you will be strong, joyful and refreshed. *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.*^{Ps.46:4} *What joy for those whose strength comes from the LORD, who have set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When they walk through the Valley of Weeping, it will become a place of refreshing springs. The autumn rains will clothe it with blessings. They will continue to grow stronger, and each of them will appear before God in Jerusalem.*^{Ps.84:5-8}

Sunday 13th September 2015. Ps.37:1-9 John 4:43-54

God's word is God's bond. *The man believed what Jesus said.*^{Jn.4:50}

We are all familiar with sayings such as "A man's word is his bond," or "A handshake is as good as a contract." But sadly these sayings belong to another age. We are living in a world where contracts are worth only the paper they are written on, and promises are broken with impunity. Today, a man's word means little, and a handshake is merely a handshake but **God does not change neither does He change His mind.** *I am the LORD. I do not change.*^{Mal.3:6} *God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through?*^{Nu.23:19} We can trust Him in every situation because He always keeps His word - **God's word is God's bond.** That's why we need to be "Bible Literate" and properly understand God's Word – what He has said and to whom, what is OT and what is NT - rather than just say "this is in the Bible so I claim it!" *Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven.*^{Ps.119:89} *My dear brothers and sisters, don't be fooled. Every good present and every perfect gift comes from above, from the Father who made the sun, moon, and stars. The Father doesn't change like the shifting shadows produced by the sun and the moon.*^{Jas.1:16-17} Like the father in today's reading, we too can believe what Jesus says. *Jesus replied, "You may go. Your son will live." The man believed what Jesus said, and so he left. While he was still on his way home, his servants met him. They gave him the news that his boy was living. He asked what time his son got better. They said to him, "The fever left him yesterday afternoon at one o'clock." Then the father realized what had happened. That was the exact time Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and all his family became believers.*^{Jn.4:50-53}

Not only does God keep His Word but **He expects us to keep our word too:** *If a man makes a promise to the LORD or says he will do something special, he must keep his promise. He must do what he said.*^{Nu.30:2} *When you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him. It is better to say nothing than to make a promise and not keep it. Don't let your mouth make you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved. Talk is cheap, like daydreams and other useless activities. Fear God instead.*^{Ecc.5:4-7}

Perhaps the two greatest promises or vows that we will ever make are at our **Conversion and our Marriage** - actually they are linked because Marriage is an example of Christ's love for us: *Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another. Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands. Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty.*

Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favour—since they're already “one” in marriage. No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become “one flesh.” This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honour her husband.^{Eph.5:21-33} In the **Marriage Service** the couple promise to **live together in union according to God's laws; to respect, love, comfort, honour and keep one another in sickness and in health and forsaking all other, keep only unto each other as long as they both shall live.** This is like conversion when we promised Jesus that we would **stay in fellowship with Him** (live together in union according to God's laws) and that we would **respect, love and honour Him whatever happens** (in sickness and in health) and then we **committed our self to serve Him for ever** (forsaking all other [gods], keep only unto God as long as we are alive).

However, we should be cautious about making promises (including **Conversion and Marriage**) because **our word is our bond.** And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong. (You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'Never break your oath, but give to the Lord what you swore in an oath to give him.' But I tell you don't swear an oath at all. Don't swear an oath by heaven, which is God's throne, or by the earth, which is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, which is the city of the great King. And don't swear an oath by your head. After all, you cannot make one hair black or white. Simply say yes or no. Anything more than that comes from the evil one.)^{Matt.5:33-37} We don't know the future so we should always submit our plans to God and allow Him to direct our paths. Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.” Otherwise you are boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil. Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.^{Jas.4:13-17} Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him and he will direct your paths.^{Prov.3:5-6}

Jesus told a parable about 2 sons who didn't keep their word: *But what do you think about this? A man with two sons told the older boy, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.'* The son answered, 'No, I won't go,' but later he changed his mind and went anyway. Then the father told the other son, 'You go,' and he said, 'Yes, sir, I will.' But he didn't go. “Which of the two obeyed his father?” They replied, “The first.” Then Jesus explained his meaning: “I tell you the truth, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. For John the Baptist came and showed you the right way to live, but you didn't believe him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to believe him and repent of your sins.”^{Matt.21:28-32} In this story Jesus made the point that it is better to change your mind and obey God than keep to your original rebellion! However it is much better to say “yes” to God and then obey Him willingly. God doesn't want people to just say they will obey Him – **He wants us to obey Him willingly and cheerfully.** And there is great blessing (happiness, contentment and peace) in doing what God says. *But suppose you take a good look at the perfect law that gives freedom. You keep looking at it. You don't forget what you've heard, but you do*

what the law says. Then you will be blessed in what you do (that person will find delight and affirmation in the action).^{Jas.1:25}

Jesus had strong words for those whose actions didn't meet God's requirements: *I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don't wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief. "Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine. "Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.*^{Rev.3:1-6} **So let's continue to affirm our trust in God because His Word is His bond, but also continue to be trustworthy ourselves and make our word our bond.**

Sunday 20th September 2015. Ps.37:16-26. John 5

I've started so I'll finish! *I am doing the very work the Father gave me to finish.*^{Jn.5:36}

From 1972 – 1997 the BBC ran a quiz programme called *Mastermind*, where contestants were each asked questions for 2 minutes, on their specialised subject and then on general knowledge. This subsequently became one of the most-watched shows on British television and Magnus Magnusson, who originally hosted the quiz, was famous for his catchphrase "*I've started so I'll finish.*"

When Jesus became human, He determined to finish the work that His Father had sent Him to do – which was to give eternal life to all who believe in God and Jesus: *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*^{Jn.17:3-5} Eternal life was made possible when Jesus made peace through His death: *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.*^{1Pet.2:24} For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.^{Col.1:19-20} So when Jesus died, He declared that His work was completed: *When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished."* *With that, he bowed his head and released his spirit.*^{Jn.19:30}

Doing God's work (and finishing it) is not wearisome but energising – it strengthens us like food! Jesus said, *"My food is to do what my Father sent me to do. My food is to finish his work.*^{Jn.4:34} Jesus said that we should make every effort to obtain that food (i.e. to make every effort to do what God wants - which is to believe in Jesus whom God the Father has sent): *Do not work for food that spoils. Work for food that lasts forever. That is the food the Son of Man will give you. God the Father has put his seal of approval on him."* Then they asked him, *"What does God want from us? What works does he want us to do?"* Jesus answered, *"God's work is to believe in the One he has sent."*^{Jn.6:27-29}

Paul said that he toiled night and day to help others believe in Jesus: *I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*^{Acts.20:19-21} But Paul was determined that he actually finished the work because there is a prize to win: *I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings. Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just*

shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.^{1Cor.9:23-27} *For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 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, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*^{2Tim.4:6-8}

Last week we said that probably the greatest promises that we will ever make are our Marriage and Conversion vows because they are lifelong commitments. We should consider the implications of our commitments and not make the vows lightly or wantonly. *Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'*^{Lk.14:28-30}

Although we may have good intentions, none of us are capable of completely staying the course. We all fail and miss God's perfect standard - including our trust in Him - which is why the Bible states that God will complete the work that He started in us. *Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*^{2Cor.1:21-22} *Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*^{Phil.1:4-6}

The work of believing in Jesus is not just a mental ascent to the historical facts (although that is a good place to start). The work of believing in Jesus is the confident trust in Him, His Word and His Work - God will do what He has said that He will do - because **God's word is God's bond**. This trust in Jesus is especially important regarding trusting Him for eternal life. *We accept human testimony. God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony that he has given about his Son. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony of God in them. Those who don't believe God have made God a liar. They haven't believed the testimony that God has given about his Son. This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is found in his Son. The person who has the Son has this life. The person who doesn't have the Son of God doesn't have this life.*^{1Jn.5:9-12} In fact, if we doubt what God has said and done, we make Him out to be a liar! *But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—eternal life.*^{1Jn.2:20-25}

The Christians in Galatia (now part of modern day Turkey) started well in their trust in Jesus but they were deceived and went back to relying on religious rituals. *You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? So also Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.*^{Gal.3:1-7}

All God's gifts are just that – gifts! **God's gift of Grace means that God does give us what we do not deserve – His love and forgiveness. God's gift of Mercy means that that God does not give us what we do deserve – punishment for our sins and eternal condemnation.** We can never work hard enough to earn anything from God – except the due penalty for our sins! That's why He reveals Himself as a gracious God: *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*^{Ex.34:6} But the next verse explains that if we reject His grace we remain unforgiven: *Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.*^{Ex.34:7}

So let's remember that because **we have already started doing the very work the Father gave us to finish and so we can be confident that we will finish that work of trusting God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) because it is God who wills and enables us.** *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*^{Rom.9:16} *And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*^{Phil.1:4-6}

Sunday 27th September 2015. Ps.37:23-40. John 6

Give us this day our daily bread.

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again."^{Jn.6:35}

"Let them eat cake" is the traditional translation of the French phrase "*Qu'ils mangent de la brioche*". Marie Antoinette, the wife Louis XVI King of France, was supposed to have uttered this upon learning that the peasants had no bread. Since brioche was made from dough enriched with butter and eggs, making it more expensive than bread, the quote reflected her disregard for the peasants. However, there is no evidence that Queen Marie-Antoinette ever uttered this phrase but it was said 100 years before by Marie-Thérèse, the wife of Louis XIV and is an alteration of a much older anecdote: *An ancient Chinese emperor who, being told that his subjects didn't have enough rice to eat, replied, 'Why don't they eat meat?'*

Bread is called "*the staff of life*": *Son of man, I will break the staff of bread (or I am about to cut off the food supply) in Jerusalem. The people will eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair.*^{Ez.4:16} (A staff is a strong walking stick that is used for support: *Even though I walk through the dark valley of death, because you are with me, I fear no harm. Your rod and your staff give me courage.*^{Ps.23:4} *Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, which lives by itself in a forest, in fertile pasturelands.*^{Mic.7:14}) So when Jesus taught us to pray: **Give us this day our daily bread**, He was using "bread" to represent the basic sustenance for life (as is clear from some translations: *Give us the food we need for each day*^{Matt.6:11}). But because we are spirit, soul and body,^{1Thess.5:23} we need the spiritual food of God's Word for our spirit as well the physical food for our body! *During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*^{Matt.4:3-4} When Jesus was hungry, He was re-energised by the spiritual food of doing God's will – telling others about the eternal life that He came to bring: *But Jesus replied, "I have a kind of food you know nothing about." ... Then Jesus explained: "My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work."*^{Jn.4:32-34} However, Jesus still needed physical food: *Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry... Then the devil left him, and angels came and began ministering to his needs.*^{Matt.4:1-11} **Jesus did not use His Deity to His own advantage:** *In your relationships with one another, have the same mind-set as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature*

God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!^{Phil.2:5-8} **But Jesus did use His Deity to bless others:** “Tell everyone to sit down,” Jesus said. So they all sat down on the grassy slopes. (The men alone numbered 5,000.) Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed them to the people. Afterward he did the same with the fish. And they all ate as much as they wanted. After everyone was full, Jesus told his disciples, “Now gather the leftovers, so that nothing is wasted.” So they picked up the pieces and filled twelve baskets with scraps left by the people who had eaten from the five barley loaves. When the people saw him do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, “Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!”^{Jn.6:10-14}

God expects us to bless others and not just keep the abundance of God’s blessings to ourselves. Just as when Abraham was blessed, he was also a blessing to others (*I will bless you. I will make your name great. You will be a blessing to others.*^{Gen.12:2}) - so we also, having received so much from God, must be a blessing to others. *Through Christ, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing that heaven has to offer.*^{Eph.1:3} *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*^{2Cor.1:3-4}

These blessings include forgiveness of sins, peace with God and eternal life. *I will praise the LORD. Deep down inside me, I will praise him. I will praise him, because his name is holy. I will praise the LORD. I won't forget anything he does for me. He forgives all my sins. He heals all my sicknesses. He saves my life from going down into the grave. His faithful and tender love makes me feel like a king. He satisfies me with the good things I long for. Then I feel young and strong again, just like an eagle.*^{Ps.103:1-5} The fruit of the Spirit is also a part of these blessings: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*^{Gal.5:22-23} Yet Jesus said that there is even more blessings in giving to others: *remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*^{Acts.20:35}

When Jesus fed others He always took the bread, gave thanks and broke it: *He looked up to heaven and gave thanks. He broke the loaves into pieces. Then he gave them to the disciples. And the disciples gave them to the people.*^{Matt.14:19} And the “bread” that we receive is to be broken (both literally and figuratively) then given to others. *I passed on to you what I had received from the Lord.*^{1Cor.11:23} *The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.*^{2Tim.2:2} There is great joy and happiness in sharing what God has given to us. *As they sat down to eat, he took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared! They said to each other, “Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?”*^{Lk.24:30-32}

Jesus has removed the curse of slavery – including the slavery of tirelessly toiling to live: *All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made.*^{Gen.3:17-19} Christ took away the curse the law put on us. He changed places with us and put himself under that curse. It is written in the Scriptures, “Anyone whose body is displayed on a tree is cursed.”^{Gal.3:13} So keeping God’s commands (especially the command to pass on to others what we have received) are not burdensome for Believers: *In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, 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 the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:3-5}

Because Christ is in us (Emmanuel), we are able to live in victory and overcome our difficulties by trusting Him: *You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the*

one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.^{1Jn.4:4} And if we trust God till the end, we will be overcomers till the end and inherit eternal life – with all its benefits: *He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.*^{Rev.21:7} *To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations.*^{Rev.2:26} But after we have done everything that God expects from us, we have no room for boasting because we have only done what we should have done. *Would any one of you say to your slave who comes in from the field after ploughing or shepherding sheep, 'Come at once and sit down for a meal'? Won't the master instead say to him, 'Get my dinner ready, and make yourself ready to serve me while I eat and drink. Then you may eat and drink'? He won't thank the slave because he did what he was told, will he? So you too, when you have done everything you were commanded to do, should say, 'We are slaves undeserving of special praise; we have only done what was our duty.'*^{Lk.17:7-10}

So let's **eat** our “daily bread” with thanksgiving – our “daily bread” of physical blessing (food, clothes, home etc.) and also our “daily bread” of spiritual blessing (God’s Word - both the Living Word of Jesus and the Written Word of Scripture). But let us also **break** our “daily bread” by sharing those blessings with others. Not only will it do them good but it will do us good as well. And like the Disciples going to Emmaus, we will find that *our hearts burn within us as we talk and explain the Scriptures together* and we will never go hungry again.

October: I am Rich in Christ even if I feel poor

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. 2Cor.8:9

Sunday 4th October 2015. Ps.100 Esther 6.

Spiritual Etiquette

Etiquette comes from the French word *étiquette*, (which literally means a tag or label) and is the code of behaviour that describes expectations for social behaviour according to contemporary conventional norms within a society, social class, or group. The etiquette for formal occasions often includes an established dress code. For instance formal public events (such as Royal Ascot, Henley Royal Regatta etc.) the required dress code often depends on what type of ticket or enclosure badge you have. For private events (such as parties, balls etc.) the dress code is usually be stated on the invitation. If this etiquette is not strictly observed it would be considered rude and maybe you would even be refused entry. The publisher *Debrett* has printed a range of guides on traditional British Etiquette, including Countryside Rules, Dress Codes, Meeting Royalty etc. There is also a **Spiritual Etiquette** of expected **Dress Code** which God has stated on His invitation (the Gospel) which He has given to us. **God's Dress Code** includes **Salvation, Righteousness** and **Praise**.

God's Dress Code: Garment of Salvation. *I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with **garments of salvation**.*^{Is.61:10} Until we are saved, we cannot delight in God neither can we even pray to Him. We can always talk to God but that is not the same as praying. *But God came to Abimelek in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman." ...Abimelek said, "Lord..." Then God said to him in the dream, "Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die." ...Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelek, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again.*^{Gen.20:3-17} Christian Prayer is communication with God our Father, knowing that He always hears us and will answer us (even though we may not like His answer). *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.*^{1Jn.5:14-15} *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*^{Heb.4:16} *Brothers and sisters, because of the blood of Jesus we can now confidently go into the holy place. Jesus has opened a new and living way for us to go through the curtain. (The curtain is his own body.) We have a superior priest in charge of God's house. We have been sprinkled with his blood to free us from a guilty conscience, and our bodies have been washed with clean water. So we must continue to come to him with a sincere heart and strong faith. We must continue to hold firmly to our declaration of faith. The one who made the promise is faithful.*^{Heb.10:19-23} True prayer is based on **Faith** (i.e. the absolute and confident trust in God based on who He is, what He has said and what He has done). And faith does not waver nor is it disappointed, (irrespective of God's answer) **because our trust is in God not what He does.** *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} *But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.*^{Jas.1:6-8} God is creative so even seemingly impossible situations should never make us doubt Him. *And Abraham's faith did not weaken, even though, at about 100 years of age, he figured his body was as good as dead—and so was Sarah's womb. Abraham never wavered in believing God's promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God. He was fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises. And because of*

Abraham's faith, God counted him as righteous. And when God counted him as righteous, it wasn't just for Abraham's benefit. It was recorded for our benefit, too, assuring us that God will also count us as righteous if we believe in him, the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was handed over to die because of our sins, and he was raised to life to make us right with God.^{Rom.4:19-25} Our **Garment of Salvation will keep our conscience clear.** Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins.^{Heb.9:14}

God's Dress Code: Robe of Righteousness. I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a **robe of his righteousness.**^{Is.61:10} The English word **Righteousness** means "right-wise-ness" - we are right with God and wise about it (i.e. we are acting upon the information). **How are we "right with God"?** 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} But now God has shown us how to become right with him. The Law and the Prophets give witness to this. It has nothing to do with obeying the law. We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe. It is no different for the Jews than for anyone else. Everyone has sinned. No one measures up to God's glory. The free gift of God's grace makes all of us right with him. Christ Jesus paid the price to set us free. God gave him as a sacrifice to pay for sins. So he forgives the sins of those who have faith in his blood.^{Rom.3:21-25} Our **Robe of Righteousness will make us bold.** The righteous are as bold as a lion.^{Psm.28:1} Help us to be very bold when we speak your word. Stretch out your hand to heal. Do miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.^{Acts 4:29-30} **We will be bold in coming to God** - So let us boldly approach the throne of grace. Then we will receive mercy. We will find grace to help us when we need it.^{Heb.4:16}

We will be bold in proclaiming Jesus "You can't be saved by believing in anyone else. God has given us no other name under heaven that will save us." The leaders saw how bold Peter and John were. They also realized that Peter and John were ordinary men with no training. This surprised the leaders. They realized that these men had been with Jesus.^{Acts4:12-13} **And we will be bold in prayer** (which will be effective): The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.^{Jas.5:16} For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.^{1Pet.3:12} **So let's wear our Robes of Righteous with pride because they honour our Lord and they also become our breastplate for protection.** Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place.^{Eph.6:13-14}

God's Dress Code: Garment of Praise. To proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a **garment of praise** instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.^{Is.61:2-3} The way we come to God is with praise: Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.^{Ps.100:4-5} **Our songs, prayers and even our conversation should be full of praise to God:** I will thank the LORD at all times. My lips will always praise him. I will honour the LORD. Let those who are hurting hear and be joyful. Join me in giving glory to the LORD. Let us honour him together. I looked to the LORD, and he answered me. He saved me from everything I was afraid of. Those who look to him beam with joy. They are never put to shame.^{Ps.34:1-5} **Because praise is a choice, we can either dress appropriately or inappropriately** so let's dress with the best and most beautiful of "**praise clothes**" and never come to God with anything but praise (saying good words about Him)! Our **Garment of Praise will keep us happy.** Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.^{Jas.5:13}

If we don't keep to God's etiquette of His dress code we not only dishonour God but may well be refused entry! The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his

son... But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'^{Mat.22:1-13}

During WW2 after one heavy air-raid, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were standing among the smouldering rubble talking to the bombed-out people, rescue crew and wardens. The King was in army uniform and the Queen was smartly dressed (as always) when she was asked if she worried that such conditions would soil and damage her clothing. She replied: "If you were to visit me at Buckingham Palace, you would put on your best clothes. I am only doing the same when I visit you."

Our **best clothes** are **Salvation, Righteousness** (which are provided by God) and **Praise** (which is our contribution – **we put on** our garment of praise). So let's keep to **God's Dress Code** and wear our clothes of **Salvation Righteousness and Praise**.

Sunday 11th October 2015. Ps.40:1-10. John 6

Who do you think you are? A mere mortal or more than a mortal?

Life is spiritual. Your physical existence doesn't contribute to that life. The words that I have spoken to you are spiritual. They are life.^{Jn.6:63}

Some people may be called *sons of the Most High* but the Bible says that they *will die like mere mortals!*^{Ps.82:6-7} Each of us will lose loved ones in the next 10 years and some of us will even face death ourselves. If we live *like mere mortals* we will die *like mere mortals* but if we live like *sons of the Most High* we will die like *sons of the Most High*! Because Believers are "sons of God" we can live spiritually healthy lives that are blessed and full of hope. When Jesus quoted from Psalm 82, He confirmed the validity of all Scripture as well as these verses: *Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken— what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?*^{Jn.10:35-36} In the NLT the word "god" is translated "judge" which is helpful: *God presides over heaven's court; he pronounces judgment on the judges.*^{Ps.82:1} We must make decisions like God - sound godly judgments - if we are to live like "gods" and "sons of the Most High."

Although God's blessings makes us rich in contentment and joy, we are not guaranteed a pain-free or a sadness-free life. But **Faith** elevates us from a **mere mortal** to **more than a mortal** and makes us overcomers. *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 the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{Jn.5:4-5} However some of God's children are still living as slaves – they are spiritually hungry and tired, and controlled by their flesh (natural things like food, feelings and their own frailty) This is because they don't really believe that God keeps His word: *As long as your own children are young, they are no different from slaves in your house. They are no different, even though they own all of the property... When we were children, we were slaves to the basic things the people of the world believe... Because you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. He is the Holy Spirit... So you aren't slaves any longer. You are God's children. Because you are his children, he gives you what he promised to give his people.*^{Gal.4:1-7}

If we are to live as *sons of the Most High*, we must grow up in our faith (mature). The Church at Corinth appeared "spiritual" because they seemed to have many of the "gifts" of the Spirit evidenced in their meetings but in reality they were very far from being spiritual. *Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?*^{1Cor.3:1-3} Paul's letter to

Corinth is not really about the *gifts of the Spirit* but rather about **being spiritual**. Many translations have added the word “*gifts*” (*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire [gifts] of the Spirit, especially prophecy.*^{1Cor.14:1}) whereas Paul was actually saying “*eagerly desire spirituality*” or “*yearn to be spiritual.*” **Being spiritual is behaving like God** and there is no competition or disagreement within the Trinity: *I and the Father are one.*^{Jn.10:30} Then God said, “*Let us make man in our likeness...*” So God created man in his own likeness. He created him in the likeness of God. He created them as male and female. God blessed them.^{Gen.1:26-28} To live as sons of the Most High is to make decisions and judgements like God. God hates sin, but Jesus showed us what God was really like. *Jesus Christ has given us grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. But God, the one and only Son, is at the Father's side. He has shown us what God is like.*^{Jn.1:14} *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you?*^{Jn.14:9} God has always been the *compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*^{Ex.34:6-7} This is also the description of those who fear God: *Blessed are those who fear the LORD, who find great delight in his commands... Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous.*^{Ps.112:1-4} Although God is gracious and compassionate, He is not sentimental or weak: *The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.*^{Ps.9:7-9} And God expects us to be the same: “*How long will you stand up for those who aren't fair to others? How long will you show favour to sinful people? Stand up for those who are weak and for those whose fathers have died. See to it that those who are poor and those who are beaten down are treated fairly. Save the weak and those who are in need. Save them from the power of sinful people.*”^{Ps.82:2-4} Let's return to the simple Gospel of *peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.5:1} But we can only do this if we live as *sons of the Most High* and not as *mere mortals*. We are spirit, have a soul and live in a body and so our life is dependent on God's Word not “*things*” or “*stuff*” for our physical existence: *Life is spiritual. Your physical existence doesn't contribute to that life. The words that I have spoken to you are spiritual. They are life.*^{Jn.6:63} Beware! *Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.*^{Lk.12:15} Paul criticised people for living as *mere mortals*. He said: *For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?*^{1Cor.3:3} Note that Paul did not say that they were not Believers, only that they were **acting as mere men**. There will always be differences amongst us because we each see life through our own personal experiences and even prejudices **BUT** we can be **different without being divisive**: *I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.*^{1Cor.11:18-19} We are not **mere mortals** anymore but **more than mortals** because we are God's Temple (dwelling place) *Don't you know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?*^{1Cor.3:16} We can make sound judgements because we have the mind of Christ. *Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly.*^{Jn.7:24} *The Spirit understands all things. He understands even the deep things of God. Who can know the thoughts of another person? Only a person's own spirit can know them. In the same way, only the Spirit of God knows God's thoughts. We have not received the spirit of the world. We have received the Spirit who is from God. The Spirit helps us understand what God has freely given us. That is what we speak about. We don't use words taught to us by people. We use words taught to us by the Holy Spirit. We use the words of the Spirit to teach the truths of the Spirit. Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help. Everyone who has the Spirit can judge all things. But no one can judge those who have the Spirit. It is written, “Who can ever know what is in the Lord's mind? Can anyone ever teach him?” But we have the mind of Christ.*^{1Cor.2:10-16} But the LORD said to

Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."^{1Sam.16:7} But if we ever do start to be controlled by our flesh (our natural ability and feelings), we should praise God and say good things about Him. We should never let our soul dominate our spirit but make our born-again spirit dominate our soul (our personality): *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*^{Ps.42:5} By acting as 'gods' we can live as *sons of the Most High* and then we can end our earthly life as a *son of the Most High* rather than a *mere mortal*. This will bring honour to God and hope to the world: *The Spirit of the LORD speaks through me; his words are upon my tongue. The God of Israel spoke. The Rock of Israel said to me: The one who rules righteously, who rules in the fear of God, is like the light of morning at sunrise, like a morning without clouds, like the gleaming of the sun on new grass after rain.*^{2Sam.23:2-4} **Yes, we are sons of the Most High, so let's live like sons (not slaves) and then we will die like sons too!**

Sunday 18th October 2015. Ps.24

My King

The Bible says my King is the King of the Jews.
He's the King of Israel. He's the King of Righteousness.
He's the King of the Ages. He's the King of Heaven.
He's the King of Glory. He's the King of kings, and
He's the Lord of lords. That's my King.

I wonder, do you know Him?

My King is a sovereign King.
No means of measure can define His limitless love.
He's enduringly strong. He's entirely sincere.
He's eternally steadfast. He's immortally graceful.
He's imperially powerful. He's impartially merciful.

Do you know Him?

He's the greatest phenomenon
that has ever crossed the horizon of this world.
He's God's Son. He's the sinner's Saviour.
He's the centrepiece of civilization.
He's unparalleled. He's unprecedented.
He is the loftiest idea in literature.
He's the highest personality in philosophy.
He's the fundamental doctrine of true theology.
He's the only one qualified to be an all sufficient Saviour.

I wonder if you know Him today?

He supplies strength for the weak.
He's available for the tempted and the tried.
He sympathizes and He saves. He strengthens and sustains.
He guards and He guides. He heals the sick.
He cleansed the lepers. He forgives sinners.
He discharges debtors. He delivers the captive.
He defends the feeble. He blesses the young.

He serves the unfortunate. He regards the aged.
He rewards the diligent. And He beautifies the meek.

I wonder if you know Him?

He's the key to knowledge. He's the wellspring of wisdom.
He's the doorway of deliverance. He's the pathway of peace.

He's the roadway of righteousness.

He's the highway of holiness. He's the gateway of glory.

Do you know Him? Well...

His life is matchless. His goodness is limitless.
His mercy is everlasting. His love never changes.
His Word is enough. His grace is sufficient.
His reign is righteous. And His yoke is easy.
And His burden is light.

I wish I could describe Him to you. Yes...

He's indescribable! He's incomprehensible.

He's invincible. He's irresistible.

You can't get Him out of your mind.

You can't get Him off of your hand.

You can't outlive Him, and you can't live without Him.

Well, the Pharisees couldn't stand Him,

but they found out they couldn't stop Him.

Pilate couldn't find any fault in Him. Herod couldn't kill Him.

Death couldn't handle Him and the grave couldn't hold Him.

Yes! That's my King, that's my King!

Shadrach Meshach Lockridge (March 7, 1913 – April 4, 2000)

S. M. Lockridge was the Pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, a prominent African-American congregation in San Diego, California, from 1953 to 1993. He was known for his preaching across the United States and around the world.

Sunday 25th October 2015. Ps.42. John 7

The Jews were amazed and asked, "How did this man get such learning without having studied?"^{Jn.7:15}

Wisdom and Understanding: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.^{Prov.9:10}*

Wisdom and understanding are not the same as intelligence (high IQ) or academia. There are many intelligent people who are fools. In fact, the Bible describes a "fool" as someone who ignores God: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."^{Ps.14:1} But God said to him, 'You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?' Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.^{Lk.12:20-21} But anyone who hears my teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.^{Matt.7:26-27} A wise person is someone who listens to Jesus' teaching and then puts it into practice: *Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock.^{Matt.7:24-25} Don't just listen to the word. You fool yourselves if you do that. You must do what it says. Suppose you listen to the word but don't do what it says. Then you are like a man who looks at his face in a mirror. After looking at himself, he leaves. Right away he forgets what he looks like. But suppose you take a good look at the perfect law that gives freedom. You**

keep looking at it. You don't forget what you've heard, but you do what the law says. Then you will be blessed in what you do.^{Jas.1:22-25} God's Word is Jesus^{Jn.1:1-2} and He is true Wisdom: *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*^{1Cor.1:30}

Jesus confounded the people of His day because He had great wisdom and understanding without attending their universities or studying under their professors: *“Where does he get this wisdom and the power to do miracles?” Then they scoffed, “He's just the carpenter's son, and we know Mary, his mother, and his brothers—James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. All his sisters live right here among us. Where did he learn all these things?” And they were deeply offended and refused to believe in him. Then Jesus told them, “A prophet is honoured everywhere except in his own hometown and among his own family.” And so he did only a few miracles there because of their unbelief.*^{Matt.13:54-58} However, Jesus' wisdom was not from this world but from heaven. *The One who comes from above is above everything. The one who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks like someone from the earth. The One who comes from heaven is above everything.*^{Jn.3:31} So it should be expected that Jesus' followers also have the same heavenly wisdom because we have the same Holy Spirit. *When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into the full truth. He won't speak on his own. He will speak what he hears and will tell you about things to come. He will give me glory, because he will tell you what I say.*^{Jn.16:13-14} *The leaders saw that Peter and John were not afraid to speak, and they understood that these men had no special training or education. So they were amazed. Then they realized that Peter and John had been with Jesus.*^{Acts.4:13} (This does not mean Peter and John were illiterate – they both wrote part of the Scriptures - but rather that they had no formal rabbinic training and so were not deemed qualified to expound the law or teach publicly. Actually as the result of synagogue schools, there was almost universal literacy among Jews in NT times!)

True wisdom (what God calls wisdom) is **applying** the knowledge of God i.e. putting into practice the teachings of Jesus (as recorded in the OT as well as the NT). *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*^{Jas.3:13-18} Someone once said that it takes a theologian to make the Bible complicated but the **Gospel is Simple, Settled and Spiritual!** So Believers can (and should) be wise because it does not depend on their natural ability but rather their spiritual ability. *We worship God by the power of his Spirit. We boast about what Christ Jesus has done. We don't put our trust in our weak human nature. I have many reasons to trust in my human nature. Others may think they have reasons to trust in theirs. But I have even more. I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am part of the people of Israel. I am from the tribe of Benjamin. I am a pure Hebrew. As far as the law is concerned, I am a Pharisee. As far as being committed is concerned, I opposed and attacked the church. As far as keeping the Law is concerned, I kept it perfectly. **I thought things like that were for my benefit. But now I consider them to be nothing because of Christ.** Even more, I consider everything to be nothing compared to knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. To know him is the best thing of all. Because of him I have lost everything. But I consider all of it to be garbage so I can get to know Christ. I want to be joined to him. For me, being right with God does not come from the law. It comes because I believe in Christ. It comes from God. It is received by faith.*^{Phil.3:3-9}

This spiritual wisdom affects our whole life and often puts us into conflict with the world's values but spiritual wisdom has eternal consequences both for those who are

wise and for those who are foolish: *The message of the cross seems foolish to those who are lost and dying. But it is God's power to us who are being saved. It is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of those who are wise. I will do away with the cleverness of those who think they are so smart." Where is the wise person? Where is the educated person? Where are the great thinkers of this world? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? God wisely planned that the world would not know him through its own wisdom. It pleased God to use the foolish things we preach to save those who believe. Jews require miraculous signs. Greeks look for wisdom. But we preach about Christ and his death on the cross. That is very hard for Jews to accept. And everyone else thinks it's foolish... But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. He chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the things of this world that are common and looked down on. He chose what is not considered to be important to do away with what is considered to be important. So no one can boast to God. Because of what God has done, you belong to Christ Jesus. He has become God's wisdom for us. He makes us right with God. He makes us holy and sets us free. It is written, "The one who boasts should boast about what the Lord has done."*^{1Cor.1:18-31}

We must prioritise our values and the way we think by focussing on God and His Kingdom – after all God has given us a “*saved mind*”: *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline (literally: sound or saved mind).*^{2Tim.1:7} This means that we are not intimidated by the world’s values or priorities (but that doesn’t mean we should be weird). *Train me in good common sense; I'm thoroughly committed to living your way.*^{Ps.119:66} *Brothers and sisters, when I came to you I didn't come with fancy words or great wisdom. I preached to you the truth about God's love. I made up my mind to pay attention to only one thing while I was with you. That one thing was Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. When I came to you, I was weak and afraid and trembling all over. I didn't preach my message with clever and compelling words. As I preached, the Holy Spirit showed his power. That was so you would believe not because of human wisdom but because of God's power. Yet when I am among mature believers, I do speak with words of wisdom, but not the kind of wisdom that belongs to this world or to the rulers of this world, who are soon forgotten. No, the wisdom we speak of is the mystery of God—his plan that was previously hidden, even though he made it for our ultimate glory before the world began. But the rulers of this world have not understood it; if they had, they would not have crucified our glorious Lord.*^{1Cor.2:1-8}

The wisdom we have is God’s wisdom so let’s use it and display its beauty with pride! *By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures.*^{Pron.24:3-4}

November: I am Strong in Christ even if I feel weak

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2Cor.12:10

Sunday 1st November 2015. Ps.43.

Why we do what we do at Church.

The word **Church** is from the Greek *Ekklesia* meaning **a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place for the purpose of deliberating** (*deliberating* means *discourse or debate with action taken after careful consideration*).

Gathering: Church is always a gathering of people never just 1 or 2 people in their home.

Citizens: Christians are citizens of heaven. This has nothing to do with our natural or first birth but solely to do with our second birth from above: *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.*^{Eph.2:19} *But our citizenship is in heaven.*^{Phil.3:20}

Called: We have responded to God's call and are doing something about it. Church is when we leave our home thinking - lunch, business, family, friends, leisure etc. - to worship God with a single mind: *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.*^{2Pet.1:3}

Public: Church meets in public not in private. We are not a secret society or cult. We are transparent and accountable. *Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and integrity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.*^{2Cor.1:12-13} *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.*^{2Cor.2:17}

Purpose: Our meetings are deliberate; we intend to take action after hearing the facts: *they received the message with great eagerness and studied the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*^{Acts.17:11} Church is always an activity with purpose. We don't come together casually but determine to give our best to God because He deserves it.

We are Church when we come together in public (i.e. others are welcome to join us) to make quality decisions to change after spending time in God's presence.

Why we do what we do at Church.

Purpose: Church is for Believers. Although we welcome anyone and everyone, our worship service is for Believers. It is a hallowed time that we have dedicated to honouring God and His Son Jesus Christ through our singing of praise, saying of prayers and sharing His Word through preaching. "Church for the unchurched" is like meat for vegans! We have other activities for the unchurched but that is not Church!

Praise: The main Greek word for **Praise** is **Eulogy** – literally **good word**. We each come from different situations and with different needs when we come to our Services on Sunday mornings. By reading the Scriptures together and saying good words about God we take our attention off our situations and needs and focus on God, His honour and glory. Our praise songs are deliberately chosen to express good words about God and His Son Jesus, rather than about how we feel or about what we want to do. ***If we can't hear ourselves sing, it's not worship and if we can't sing along, it's not worship either!*** Christian worship is not a concert. There's nothing wrong with concerts - it's just that Christian worship is not a concert. Christian worship is a collective, communal, congregational practice--and the gathered sound and harmony of a congregation singing *as one* is **integral to the practice of worship**. It is a way of "performing" the reality that, in Christ, we are one body. But that requires that we actually

be able to hear ourselves, and hear our brothers and sisters singing alongside us. If the sound of the praise band overwhelms congregational voices, we can't hear ourselves sing and we lose that communal aspect of the congregation. And if musicians and bands try to "be creative" by exhibiting their virtuosity with all sorts of different trills and pauses, it means that we can't sing along. We then become private, passive worshippers instead of public, passionate worshippers.

Passion: We believe that everything we do should be an offering to God (an offering is our gift to God from our heart). **Worship means worth-ship** - what God is worth to me. *Let Christ's word with all its wisdom and richness live in you. Use psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to teach and instruct yourselves about God's kindness. Sing to God in your hearts. Everything you say or do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* ^{Col.3:16-17}

Prayer: Our prayers should be from our heart but also sensible. What is the point of praying prayers that God can't answer, won't answer, or has already answered? Most of our prayer should be thanking Him for what He has already done and for what He has promised to do. **Remember, God's Word is His Bond**, so we can trust Him to keep His Word! Prayer is communion with our Father the Lord God Almighty. It is harmonizing our plans with His. It is pondering His words and His ideas and tuning our spirits and our emotions to His Holy Spirit and to His Word. It is aligning our spirituality, our meditations and our concepts with the facts of His redemption and with who and what He has made us to be.

Preach: We preach Jesus not philosophy or mythology. *We do not preach about ourselves. We preach about Jesus Christ. We say that he is Lord. And we serve you because of him.* ^{2Cor.4:5} *Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ.* ^{Col.2:8}

Participation: We give opportunity for everyone to participate both publically and privately. Each of us should bring something to share when we come to our Services - especially an expression of love for God and His people! *Brothers and sisters, what should we say then? When you come together, every one of you brings something.* ^{1Cor.14:26} We do not have an Episcopalian structure where the Pastor is a Priest who mediates between man and God - that is OT and obsolete. ^{Heb.8:13} In the NT every Believer has a full and immediate access to God. ^{Heb.10:19-25}

Parameter: We need a structure but not a straight-jacket. We need to be able to follow the Holy Spirit's leading but still have order and decorum.

Practice: We should always encourage one another to put God's Word into practice. *But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says.* ^{Jas.1:22}

The Church Leadership is committed to setting an example to serve and care for each of us here - Members and non-members alike: *If you have come to me in peace, to help me, I am ready to have you unite with me. But if you have come to betray me to my enemies when my hands are free from violence, may the God of our fathers see it and judge you.* ^{1Chron.12:17} But if people don't want help we are not under an obligation to care for them. *If you're not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.* ^{Mk.6:11}

The early Church expected David's Tent to be restored: *The prophets' words agree with that. They say: After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. I will rebuild what was destroyed. I will make it what it used to be.* ^{Acts.15:15-16} David's Tent was for **Praise, Payer and Prophecy:** *The ark of God was ...put in the tent David had set up for it... David wanted them to pray, give thanks and praise the LORD.* ^{1Chron.16:14} *David ...set them apart to serve the LORD by prophesying while harps, lyres and cymbals were being played.* ^{1Chron.25:1} So let's keep our Church focused on NT **Praise, Payer and**

Prophecy (remember that true prophecy is giving a clear witness to Jesus: *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.* ^{Rev.19:10})

Remembrance Sunday 8th November 2015. Ps.44:1-8.

More thoughts on Worship

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi - *That which is prayed is that which is believed.*

Our worship music should articulate what we believe. We should be intentional about our songs and so all of the Church Service is every bit as truth-filled as the sermon. **If we are praying or singing things together as a congregation that are shallow or disconnected, we are not succeeding in forming Christians to be the people of God.** Worship should be less about making us feel good and more about fundamentally changing who we are as the people of God. Our “*singing time*” and “*sermon time*,” should both be seen as worship. We should use songs that are focused simply on who God is. There are a lot of songs about our response to God in worship, but songs that focus on Him should be our bread and butter. So much worship music is focused, not on God, but on our experience of God. If a whole service is comprised of those types of songs, it will not transform. Ultimately, we need to turn our eyes to God and away from ourselves. We change if we gaze on God’s glory, not if we focus on ourselves. *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* ^{2Cor.3:18}

Fundamental to any discussion of worship is the question of its intended role in the Christian life. The practice of worship music in the church is inextricably tied to our understanding of what we are there to do when we gather as God’s people. *In the East, corporate worship is a window so that we can see what’s happening in heaven. In the West, worship is seen more as a hammer. It does something.* In our Western evangelical context, worship often seems to be largely about cause and effect — getting people in the door so that they might get saved. Within this utilitarian framework, our styles of worship often veer toward elaborate production, performance spectacle, and highly emotional experiences that are audience-friendly and, yes, “*seeker-sensitive*.” But worship should be about shaping the congregation’s practical view of who God is not a marketing tool to get people in the door or to appeal to a certain particular sector of the community. It should emphasise who God is and what we believe He did and does.

Because so much of contemporary worship has been of the audience-friendly, “*hammer*” variety, it’s only natural that it has taken on a strong individualistic bent. It makes sense that “*worship wars*” are rampant in churches, as we argue over our own particular tastes and the way we think worship ought to be. But should worship really be about “*me and my individual encounter with God*,” or are we missing a crucial community component?

If we move away from the “*me*” mentality, worship music can become a great source of unity in the church. One of the factors contributing to evangelical worship’s “*me-centric*” disposition has been its tendency to frame the activity in terms of performance and musical excellence. Though the emphasis on “*excellence*” of craft and musicianship is understandable, excessive excellence draws attention to the music and the individual performance of it, which can distract us from the actual experience of worship. While excellence is good, its importance is sometimes overrated. Walt Harrah likes to tell the story of being at Mariner’s Church in Irvine, Calif., 20 years ago and watching in embarrassment and horror as a woman sang the words of John 3:16 to the tune of “*The House of the Rising Sun*.” A few years later at a Christmas party he met a lady and asked her how she met the Lord, and she said, “*Well, I was at Mariner’s Church one morning and*

heard someone sing John 3:16 to 'House of the Rising Sun' and I committed my life to Christ." He says "This is not an excuse to be sloppy in our quality, but I think excellence gets overrated."

A recent *Worship Leader* magazine article, "Return of the Folk," calls for a shift from the performance-driven "program worship" to a more "participatory worship," which is less about whether I am pleased and more about whether God is pleased. Participatory worship is about "experiencing the presence of the risen Christ in the fellowship of community." Worship music has become the new focal point of the contemporary Christian music industry and more worship songs are making the rounds to churches adding up to an increasingly flooded market of worship music. Coupled with the fact that audiences have shorter attention spans and (presumably) demand new content more regularly, the shelf life of any given worship song is shorter than ever, and there is often the pressure to play the latest song. Wherever you worship, you're bound to sing a song you've never heard before. There are a lot of really bad songs out there that shouldn't be sung. Though the temptations of trendiness and the notion of worship as performance/attraction will probably not go away, we should remember that, at the end of the day, worship should be all about God. Worship is about the created ascribing worth to the Creator. Worship music is an incredible gift that God has given us and should bring us together as a community to ascribe worth to our Creator.

Interesting facts: **Isaac Watts** (1674 – 1748) wrote over 750 hymns. **Charles Wesley** (1707 – 1788) wrote over 8,000 hymns. **Fanny Crosby** (1820 – 1915) although went blind shortly after birth wrote over 9,000 hymns and over 1,000 secular poems. Fanny Crosby was a preacher, teacher and lecturer as well as a hymn writer, harpist and organist. She was called the "*Mother of modern congregational singing in America.*" Because some publishers were hesitant to have so many hymns by one person in their hymnals, she used nearly 200 different pseudonyms! Fanny memorized much of the Bible and wrote her first poem: at the age of eight:

*Oh what a happy soul am I!
Although I cannot see,
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.*

*How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't;
To weep and sigh because I'm blind
I cannot nor I won't.*

Fanny entered the Institute for the Blind in New York City when she was fifteen and studied the alphabet for the blind as well as the usual arithmetic, of which she wrote: "*I loathe, abhor, it makes me sick, to hear the word Arithmetic*". She frequently met with presidents, generals and other dignitaries and was asked to play at President Grant's Funeral.

Sunday 15th November 2015. Ps.45:1-8. Jn.8.

If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.^{Jn.8:24}

The events of this weekend in Paris raise the question again of **Why?** Why do bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people? There is no satisfactory answer except perhaps Solomon's reflection: *but time and chance happen to them all.*^{Ecc.9:11} Jesus was asked why bad things happen and He replied: "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?" Jesus asked. "Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. And

what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too.”^{Lk.13:1-5} **But the Christian message is LOVE!** To love God is the first and greatest of His Commandments “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?” Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”^{Matt.22:36-40} This means that if we don’t love God intentionally, deliberately, passionately and continually, with our heart, soul and mind, then everything else we do is of little value – including our praying and evangelism!

These verses about loving God were also quoted in a different context when Jesus told the parable about the Good Samaritan: “Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?” The man answered, “ ‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ ” “Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!”^{Lk.10:25-28}

Here, Jesus explains that to inherit eternal life we must love the neighbour who found us dying and who helped us, treated our wounds, put us in a place of safety, paid for us and will return for us – JESUS. Being kind to people will not give us eternal life – **only knowing and loving God AND knowing and loving Jesus Christ, gives us eternal life.** This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent.^{Jn.17:3}

Although helping others is a command, it is also the consequence of inheriting eternal life but **helping others is never a means to inheriting eternal life!**

Our good works can never out-weigh our bad works because we were born separated from God and spiritually dead, so nothing that we do can be ever good enough to meet God’s standards. We can only receive God’s provision of Jesus - the atoning sacrifice of His death on the cross. Then when we love others it is proof that we love God and also that God loves us! *We love because he loved us first. Anyone who says he loves God but in fact hates his brother or sister is a liar. He doesn't love his brother or sister, whom he has seen. So he can't love God, whom he has not seen. Here is the command God has given us. Anyone who loves God must also love his brothers and sisters.*^{1Jn.4:19-21} *I am writing to remind you, dear friends, that we should love one another. This is not a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning. Love means doing what God has commanded us, and he has commanded us to love one another, just as you heard from the beginning.*^{2Jn.1:5-6}

Whilst our love is important, **it is God’s love for us** that really matters: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*^{1Jn.4:10}

True love (the love God expects from us) is described by Paul the Apostle: *Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.*^{1Cor.13:4-7} **This love** is modelled on **God - who is love.**^{1Jn.4:16} **God loves the**

world: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*^{Jn.3:16} **God loves the Church:** *Husbands, love your wives, just as 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.5:25-27} **God loves me:** *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*^{Gal.2:20} **God’s love is wonderful and**

extreme: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{Rom.8:38-39} This love is sound but

not sentimental and God does not respond to emotion or sensation or even “prayers”. It is the prayer of a righteous person is powerful^{Jas.5:16} not when we pray long or emotional prayers.^{Matt.6:7} God answers prayer but responds to faith not prayer!^{Heb.11:6} *God is kind, but he's not soft. In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life-change. You're not getting by with anything. Every refusal and avoidance of God adds fuel to the fire. The day is coming when it's going to blaze hot and high, God's fiery and righteous judgment. Make no mistake: In the end you get what's coming to you—Real Life for those who work on God's side, but to those who insist on getting their own way and take the path of least resistance, Fire.*^{Rom.2:4-8} God does freely forgive but He does not leave the guilty unpunished: *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.*^{Ex.34:6-7} Actually the only sin God can't forgive is unbelief, because as soon as we believe God (trust Him) nothing is impossible: *Jesus said to him, “As far as possibilities go, everything is possible for the person who believes.”*^{Mk.9:23} All sin starts in our heart with unbelief (not trusting God or His Word – who He is and what He has said). *God is impervious to evil, and puts evil in no one's way. The temptation to give in to evil comes from us and only us. We have no one to blame but the leering, seducing flare-up of our own lust. Lust gets pregnant, and has a baby: sin! Sin grows up to adulthood, and becomes a real killer.*^{Jas.1:13-15}

God's remedy for sin is for us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God: *The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”*^{Jn.4:25-26} “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”^{Matt.16:15-16} But if we don't believe Jesus is God's Son and the Christ (Messiah) we remain unforgiven. *If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.*^{Jn.8:24} *The high priest said to him, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied. “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has spoken blasphemy!”*^{Matt.26:63-65}

There is plenty of **historical evidence** that Jesus from Nazareth was a real person who actually lived. Reporting on Emperor Nero's decision to blame the Christians for the fire that had destroyed Rome in A.D. 64, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote: *Nero fastened the guilt ... on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of ... Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome. Pliny was the Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor and in A.D.112 he asks Emperor Trajan's advice about the appropriate way to conduct legal proceedings against those accused of being Christians. *They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food – but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.**

However faith is not just an acknowledgement of the historical facts about Jesus **but a personal trust in who He is and what He did** – the righteous dying for the unrighteous: *For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.*^{1Pet.3:18} If we place our trust in Jesus, the result is just what He says – **eternal life**. If we don't place our trust in Jesus, the result is just what He says – **we will die in our sins! The choice is ours!**

Sunday 22nd November 2015. Ps.46 Jn.8:31-58

The Jews replied to Jesus, "Abraham is our father." Jesus told them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did."^{Jn.8:39}

Father Abraham had many sons!

This song is actually about Abraham Lincoln who was called "Father Abraham" by the slaves who were emancipated after the American Civil War (1861-1865), but the Biblical Abraham also had many sons. In fact, the three main mono-theistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) are called "*Abrahamic religions*" because they trace their history back to Abraham. Abraham, who was originally called Abram, was brought up in Ur (in present day Iraq) which was a civilized city whose houses were made of kiln-dried clay. It was from Ur that God called Abraham from his pagan life and family and where Abraham became a Believer. *The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others."*^{Gen.21:1-2} Abraham was the first Hebrew^{Gen.14:13} (meaning: *from the other side*) because he had come from the other side of the River Euphrates. Sometime later, God changed Abram's name from **Exalted Father** to **Father of Many**. *So your name will no longer be Abram [Exalted Father], but Abraham [Father of Many] because I have made you a father of many nations. I will give you many descendants. Many nations and kings will come from you. I will make my promise to you and your descendants [lit. seed] for generations to come as an everlasting promise. I will be your God and the God of your descendants.*^{Gen.17:5-7} Although Abraham believed God (in fact he is called the Father of Faith), he had no Bible or family tradition of trusting God to help him and so it is not surprising that he made some big mistakes. But it was but Abraham's faith that made him right with God, not what he did: *If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*^{Rom.4:1-3} And so Abraham's faith established the principle by which we all must live: **we get right with God by faith – by trusting Him**. *For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*^{Rom.1:17} Listen to me, you people who pursue what is right and seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham, your ancestor, and to Sarah, from whom you are descended.^{Is.51:1-2}

Like Abraham, we should not be intimidated by natural events or circumstances when we believe God. The God who created the universe can easily interrupt the natural laws that He introduced – in fact a miracle is when God does something for us that we can't do for ourselves! The miracles recorded in the Bible are not impossible because **God is the self-existent One** - the "**I am who I am.**"^{Ex.3:14} He is **Omnipresent** (all present), **Omniscient** (all knowing), **Omnipotent** (all powerful) and **Omnibenevolent** (perfectly good and all love). *You are good, and what you do is good. Teach me your orders.*^{Ps.119:68} There is nothing that God cannot do (except sin or act against His character or Word): *Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.*^{Jer.32:17} Jesus looked at them and said, *"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*^{Matt.19:26} And the interventions by God (miracles) that we need today are not impossible either, because: *You are the God who performs miracles; You display Your power among the peoples.*^{Ps.77:14}

But as we said last week, *God is kind, but He's not soft.*^{Rom.2:4} We can't bargain or negotiate with God and He is always right. He doesn't even respond to "prayers" (just saying things to Him). **God does answer prayer** (that is when we call on Him from our heart and in truth: *GOD's there, listening for all who pray, for all who pray and mean it.*^{Ps.145:18}) but **God**

always responds to faith.^{Heb.11:6} Thus true prayer is when we call on God and believe Him too: *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.*^{1Jn.5:14} And we don't need a lot of faith either – just **living faith!** Faith the size of a mustard seed is big enough! *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."*^{Lk.17:5-6} When the father exclaimed: *I believe; Help me overcome my unbelief!*^{Mk.9:24} it was an expression of his intention to start living in the Kingdom theology of believing God and his cry for help to “*un-believe*” the world's philosophy of “*I'll get through this, I'll manage, I'll cope*”. We need to be like that father who wanted Jesus to help him stop beholding his own ability (or inability!) and circumstances and start believing God.

But because **Faith** is living it needs feeding and exercising and we do this by **prayer** (which is fellowshiping with God): *But you, dear friends, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit, staying right at the centre of God's love.*^{Jude.1:20-21} *The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (or, When a believing person prays, great things happen).*^{Jas.5:16} Adverse or difficult circumstances should build our faith, never break our faith because we know that God will keep His promises including those promises of provision, protection and blessing. Because **God is Emmanuel** - He is always with us. - we never have to face life alone. In all of life's hurts and hardships, God is with us to comfort and encourage us. In fact, **faith** is the simple yet settled **trust in God**. When God's promises seemed impossible, Abraham decided trust God on the basis of what God said He would do: *We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody. Isn't that what we've always read in Scripture, God saying to Abraham, "I set you up as father of many peoples"? Abraham was first named "father" and then became a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing. 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. And so he was made father of a multitude of peoples. God himself said to him, "You're going to have a big family, Abraham!"*^{Rom.4:17-18} *Abraham never wavered in believing God's promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God. He was fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises.*^{Rom.4:20-21}

God's promise to Abraham was also God's promise to Abraham's descendants. However, the Bible explains that Abraham's descendants are not physical descendants but spiritual descendants. *Think about Abraham. Scripture says, "Abraham believed God. God accepted Abraham because he believed. So his faith made him right with God." So you see, those who have faith are children of Abraham. Long ago, Scripture knew that God would make non-Jews right with himself by believing in him. He announced the good news ahead of time to Abraham. He said, "All nations will be blessed because of you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham. He was the man of faith.*^{Gal.3:6-9} Actually the original promise was to **Abraham's seed (Jesus)** not Isaac or Ishmael. *Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith... God gave the promises to Abraham and his child. And notice that the Scripture doesn't say "to his children," as if it meant many descendants. Rather, it says "to his child"—and that, of course, means **Christ**... But the Scriptures declare that we are all prisoners of sin, so we receive God's promise of freedom only by believing in Jesus Christ... And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.*^{Gal.3:14-29} **Let's live as true sons of Abraham with the same faith as Abraham and then we will share the same blessings as Abraham:** *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*^{Rom.4:1-3}

Sunday 29th November 2015. Ps.47 Jn.9

Teacher, whose sin caused this man to be born blind—his own sin or his parents sin?^{2Jn.9:1}

Are you reaping what you sowed?

Gardens don't just happen – they have to be prepared, planted, pruned and protected. Even the Garden of Eden needed someone to tend it: *The LORD God took the man and placed him in the orchard in Eden to care for it and to maintain it.*^{Gen.1:15} So God established the principle that we reap what we sow: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*^{Gal.6:7-10} And the way we sow is the way we will reap: *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*^{2Cor.9:6} *Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.*^{Lk.6:38}

We should care for others and be nice to people, not only because we can expect a reciprocation, but also because it is the right thing to do: *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.*^{Matt.7:12} And we should especially care for our heart – our soul (the natural-aware part of us - our personality) and our spirit (the God-aware part of us): *Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.*^{Pron.4:23} But life isn't fair and bad things happen to good people. This is not God's fault and we should never even think about blaming God who is **Omnibenevolent** - perfectly good and all love. *You are good, and what you do is good. Teach me your orders.*^{Ps.119:68} When Job's life hit rock-bottom, he never blamed God: *In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.*^{Job.1:22} Evil things come from the evil one, satan, who is the devil and the deceiver. 'Sir, didn't you plant good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?' 'He told them, 'An enemy did this.'^{Matt.13:27-28} *We must not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and killed his brother. And why did he kill him? Because Cain had been doing what was evil, and his brother had been doing what was righteous.*^{1Jn.3:12} Jesus promised us a cheerful life and a conquering life but not a comfortable life – even roses have thorns! *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*^{Jn.16:33} Obviously actions have consequences but not all our difficulties are the result of our deeds. Job is a prime example and when Eliphaz said Job's trouble was his own fault, God said that was wrong: *Doesn't your reverence for God give you confidence? Doesn't your life of integrity give you hope? "Stop and think! Do the innocent die? When have the upright been destroyed? My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same.*^{Job.4:6-8} *the LORD said to Eliphaz, "I'm very angry with you and your two friends because you didn't speak what is right about me as my servant Job has done.*^{Job.42:7} Sometimes things just happen: *Time and chance happen to everyone.*^{Ecc.9:11}

Suffering is part of life's curriculum that we have to graduate through and all the spiritual heroes of God's Kingdom have had to endure suffering.

Jesus our Master and Model suffered more than anyone. *He was despised and rejected by people. He was a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. He was despised like one from whom people turn their faces, and we didn't consider him to be worth anything. He certainly has taken upon himself our suffering and carried our sorrows, but we thought that God had wounded him, beat him, and punished him. He was wounded for our rebellious acts. He was crushed for our sins. He was punished so that we could have peace, and we received healing from his wounds.*^{1s.53:3-5} *Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.*^{Heb.5:8}

Job is cited as an example of how to handle suffering: *Brothers and sisters, think about the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. They are an example of how to be patient when you suffer. As you know, we think that people who don't give up are blessed. You have heard that Job was patient. And you have seen what the Lord finally did for him. The Lord is full of tender mercy and loving concern.*^{Jas.5:10-11}

Paul looked on suffering as an identification with Jesus that assures us of the future resurrection: *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. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. [This is the approval that comes from God and is based on faith that knows Christ. Faith knows the power that his coming back to life gives and what it means to share his suffering. In this way I'm becoming like him in his death, with the confidence that I'll come back to life from the dead. It's not that I've already reached the goal or have already completed the course. But I run to win that which Jesus Christ has already won for me.]*^{Phil.3:10-12}

John looked on suffering as part of “belonging” to Jesus: *I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*^{Rev.1:9}

Peter spoke of suffering as a common factor for all Believers and so we must trust God to give us the grace we need: *Stand firm in what you believe. All over the world you know that your brothers and sisters are going through the same kind of suffering. God always gives you all the grace you need. So you will only have to suffer for a little while. Then God himself will build you up again. He will make you strong and steady. And he has chosen you to share in his eternal glory because you belong to Christ.*^{1Pet.5:9-10}

Suffering is character-building and should cause us to rely totally on God. *And that's not all. We are full of joy even when we suffer. We know that our suffering gives us the strength to go on. The strength to go on produces character. Character produces hope. And hope will never let us down. God has poured his love into our hearts. He did it through the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us.*^{Rom.5:3-5}

Suffering is temporary for Believers but is nothing compared to the glory we will receive later: *What we are suffering now is nothing compared with the glory that will be shown in us. Everything God created looks forward to the time when his children will appear in their full and final glory.*^{Rom.8:18-19}

Suffering gives us an opportunity to make God proud of us. *God is pleased if a person is aware of him while enduring the pains of unjust suffering. What credit do you deserve if you endure a beating for doing something wrong? But if you endure suffering for doing something good, God is pleased with you.*^{1Pet.2:19-20}

Suffering should cause us to do a faith “safety-check” to confirm that we are in fellowship with God, His Word and His people. *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*^{2Cor.13:5}

Suffering should help us keep focused on Jesus: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*^{Heb.12:1-3}

Suffering will come so let's not worry too much why we suffer but let's make sure that the work of God is done: *“Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?” Jesus said, “You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over.”*^{Jn.9:2-4} **Remember, God's work is to believe in the One He has sent.**^{Jn.6:29}

December: I am Blessed with every Spiritual Blessing in Christ

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Eph.1:3

Sunday 6th December 2015. Ps.48

The Lord's Prayer

What is prayer? Prayer is communicating with God. This is as important to our spiritual life as breathing is to our natural life - which is why the Bible says that we should always pray: *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. Lk.18:1 pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1Thes.5:17-18 Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. Col.4:2* But prayer is not a liturgical ritual of reciting religious words – prayer is a loving relationship with Almighty God whom we can call our Father. When Jesus' Disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, Jesus explained that merely repeating words is not prayer: *When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don't be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! Pray like this... Matt.6:7-9* Then Jesus gave them the "Lord's Prayer" *Our Father in heaven, may Your holy Name be honoured; May Your Kingdom come; may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need. Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the evil one. For Yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, forever. Amen. Matt.6:9-13* Actually this is not the Lord's Prayer but the Disciples' Prayer – the Lord's Prayer is: *Father, the time is here. Give your Son glory so that your Son can give you glory. After all, you've given him authority over all humanity so that he can give eternal life to all those you gave to him. This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent. On earth I have given you glory by finishing the work you gave me to do. Now, Father, give me glory in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world existed. Jn.17:1f* The Disciples' Prayer that Jesus taught them is a "Model Prayer" rather than a formula to recite and includes the basic ingredients of a loving relationship with God: *Appreciate; Ask; Acknowledge.*

Appreciate: *Our Praise and Worship*

Our Father in heaven; Prayer is communicating with God as our Father. If He is not our Father, then we can't pray to Him – only talk to him. This is a good start but talking is not praying. Praying is that loving relationship with God where we know that He hears and answers our prayers. *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 1Jn.5:14*

May Your holy Name be honoured; To honour God is the very basics of Christianity, but we also want God's Name to be honoured and His reputation respected. God's Name is as exalted as His Word: *I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. Ps.138:2* Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. *Phil.2:9-11*

May Your Kingdom come; may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven; The Kingdom of God is a spiritual Kingdom because it is the rule of Christ in our hearts: *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Matt.7:21* Now listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds: *The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts. Matt.13:18-19* God's desire is that all people are saved: *I urge, then, first of all, that*

petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.^{2Tim.2:1-4} We too want others to become Believers but we also want God's will to be done in our own lives as well. And who wouldn't want God's Kingdom and Will done here on earth? *God's kingdom consists of God's approval and peace, as well as the joy that the Holy Spirit gives. The person who serves Christ with this in mind is pleasing to God and respected by people.*^{Rom.14:17-18}

Ask: *Our Prayers and requests.* Prayer does include asking and sometimes we miss out by not asking: *You don't have what you want, because you don't ask God. When you do ask for something, you don't receive it. Why? Because you ask for the wrong reason. You want to spend your money on your sinful pleasures.*^{Jas.4:2-3}

Give us today the food we need. Jesus was teaching us not to worry about the future but trust God a day at a time. *Don't ever worry and say, 'What are we going to eat?' or 'What are we going to drink?' or 'What are we going to wear?' Everyone is concerned about these things, and your heavenly Father certainly knows you need all of them. But first, be concerned about his kingdom and what has his approval. Then all these things will be provided for you. So don't ever worry about tomorrow. After all, tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*^{Matt.6:31-34}

Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. This is a dangerous prayer to pray because we are asking God **not** to forgive us **if** we hold grudges against others! *If you forgive the failures of others, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failures.*^{Matt.6:14-15}

Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the evil one. The NIV puts it this way: *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted.* God won't tempt us but He does test us: *We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts.*^{1Thess.2:4} Testings mature us so we shouldn't be afraid of them but we should take every action to make them help us and not harm us! *My brothers and sisters, be very happy when you are tested in different ways. You know that such testing of your faith produces endurance. Endure until your testing is over. Then you will be mature and complete, and you won't need anything.*^{Jas.1:2-4}

Acknowledge: *Honouring Jesus as Lord (as our Master who is in control of everything).*

For Yours is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory, forever. Amen.

We are saved by confessing Jesus as Lord and believing that God has raised Him from the dead.^{Rom.10:9-10} These two simple yet profound acts of confessing and believing have saved us. So now our Christian life is based on these two principles: acknowledging that Jesus is Lord and accepting that Jesus is alive. Our prayers are also based on these two principles. Because God can do anything (accept deny His Name and Word), why should we become anxious about anything. Christians submit to God and His Will especially in prayer.

Let's keep our prayers simple and keep our prayers spiritual - then we will keep our faith simple and spiritual which in turn will keep our prayers effective.

So, this Lord's Prayer is not a prayer just to memorize and recite back to God. It is an example of how we should be praying. When we pray the Lord's Prayer as a principle rather than a ritual it says just about everything that we need to say!

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.^{Phil.4:6-7}

Sunday 13th December 2015. Ps.49 Lk.2

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people... A Saviour has been born to you who is Christ the Lord. Lk.2:10-11

The word *Christmas* originates from "*Christ's Mass*" meaning "*a service in honour of Christ*" and the first recorded use of the Old English *Cristes mæsse* was in 1038. Today the Christ of Christmas has been replaced by a nice, imaginary person called *Santa Claus* who is brought out at Christmas and then forgotten for the rest of the year! The word "*Christ*" is Greek for *Anointed One*, the *Messiah*, who is God's Answer to the world's needs. Sadly, the world has replaced the true Christ with a false *christ* who is the cause of a lot of the world's problems. The "*christ*" of the world's Christmas promotes greed and selfishness and is often the cause of debt, division and despair because these are the values of this world. The Christ of God's Christmas promotes *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* because He is the Saviour and the King of God's domain

The name "*Saviour*" or "*Deliverer*"^{Is.62:11} was given to Jesus not because He would be a political saviour or a military saviour to deliver from Rome, but because He would save "*His people from their sins*".^{Matt.1:21} Jesus was "*Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth.*" We all need a little help (and most of us a lot of help), to save us from perils that abound around us, many of which are our own making. We have all thought "*if only...*" and wished that we had done something differently or had made different choices. History is of the past and no-one can undo what has been done but we can deal with the guilt of bad choices and we can stop the past from dominating our present or our future. Self-help has some value but rarely gets us out of our difficulties – we need someone to help us. Christianity is about acknowledging that Jesus Christ is our Saviour and the One Person who can really help us, who can save us and deliver us from the greatest peril – our own sin. Sin is not just doing wrong or bad things – they are just symptoms. Sin is *falling short of God's glory*^{Rom.3:23} and until our hearts are re-created and we are born from above, we will always be in a perilous situation where we need help. Laws are useful but never the answer to our problems. Likewise, penalties for doing wrong are also useful, but they will never be the answer to the world's problems either. God created this world to function according to His rules and until we live by His rules, we will always need help and need saving. And ever since Adam first sinned, no-one has ever managed to live by God's rules – except Jesus.

The good news that the angels gave to the Shepherds was that Jesus was **born a Saviour** and would deliver them from their sin. Sometimes we have to live with the consequences of sin but the penalty – the guilt, the condemnation and the dominion of sin - has been dealt with and removed. Now it is up to us to believe what God has said about us and our problems, rather than believe what we feel or what other people say. To trust God and know that Jesus was born our Saviour is *good news and great joy*.

Jesus is no ordinary Person or even just an extra-ordinary Person – He is Christ the Lord. Jesus was born our Saviour because He is Christ the Lord. Everything that God had promised mankind was included in the promised Christ and so when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, "*The hopes and fears of all the years were met in thee tonight.*" From *Eve's Seed crushing the devil's head*,^{Gen.3:15} to the *Sun of Righteousness rising with healing in its rays*,^{Mal.4:2} the Christ promised in the OT was revealed in the NT as Jesus. The Christ would be a firstborn son;^{Ex.13:2} be born as a child;^{Is.9:6} be born of a virgin;^{Is.7:13-14} He would be of the seed of Abraham;^{Gen.17:7} be of the seed of Isaac;^{Gen.17:19} be of the seed of Jacob;^{Gen.28:13} born of the tribe of Judah;^{Gen.49:8-10} born a king of the line of David;^{Is.9:7} and born in the town of Bethlehem of Judea (Judah).^{Mic.5:2} Kings would bring Him gifts and bow down to Him.^{Ps.72:10-11} All nations will be blessed through Him as Abraham's Seed.^{Gal.3:16} In fact,

all of the Scriptures point to Jesus because, not only is He the Christ, but He is also the very Word of God.^{Jn.1:1} The historical accounts, the Law, the Poetry and the Prophecy of the OT were written to illustrate aspects of the coming Christ. Even many of the people included in the OT have spiritual significance when seen in the light of Jesus Christ, Son of God. Adam is a picture of the Last Adam,^{1Cor.15:45} Abel's death is a type of Jesus' death,^{Heb.12:24} Noah saved people from destruction,^{1Pet.3:20} Melchizedek was a king-priest of a different order.^{Heb.7:11-17} Isaac was prepared to die on Mt Moriah,^{Heb.11:17-19} Joseph saved people from starvation, Moses led people out of slavery,^{Heb.11:23-28} Joshua led people into the Promised land,^{Heb.11:29-30} Solomon was the king's son^{Heb.1:5} and built the Temple.^{Eph.2:19-22} Although the accounts recorded in the Bible are real and factual, the reason they are included in the Scriptures is because they have spiritual significance and signpost Jesus. *You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.*^{Jn.5:39-40} If we don't understand the Scriptures we will be misled and end up in error. But we also need to know God's power as well as His purpose, otherwise our theology will just be theory. *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*^{Matt.22:29} The good news that the angels gave to the Shepherds is the same good news that we share today and is the power of God: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*^{Rom.1:16-17}

Yes! Jesus is the Christ and is God's Anointed One who has the **power** to save and as well as the **purpose** to save. He has the **ability** to save all who come to Him as well as the **intention** to save them. The only reason Jesus doesn't save people is because they don't come to Him: *How often I've longed to gather your children, gather your children like a hen, her brood safe under her wings—but you refused and turned away! And now it's too late.*^{Lk.13:34-35}

Let's show our great joy over God's good news of Jesus the Saviour as we celebrate Christmas with the true Christ. Remember He is also born the King of God's domain where righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit is the norm!

Sunday 20th December 2015. Lk.1:46-55. Matt.2

Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We... have come to worship him.^{Matt.2:2}

God created us to worship Him and expects everyone to do so – in fact to worship God is a command.^{Ex.23:25;Deut.6:13} So if we don't worship God, we “short-circuit” and blow spiritual, psychological and emotional “fuses” which will leave us wide-open to unnecessary problems including poor health. The Bible says: *My child, pay attention to what I say. Listen carefully to my words. Don't lose sight of them. Let them penetrate deep into your heart, for they bring life to those who find them, and healing to their whole body. Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.*^{Prom.4:21-23} When we obey God and truly worship Him: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we experience the blessings of God in every area of our life – even though we are not exempt from pain and suffering. (Remember the greatest blessing is to be counted right before God.^{Rom.4:5}) Our testimony is our **testament to the goodness of God in our life** (not a *moany* about our testing!) and it is a privilege to share who God is and what He has done for us. But if our testimony is not authentic, it is just theory and we become hypocrites, acting out our religion (hypocrite literally means “an actor” i.e. someone who recites words in a drama or play).

After the Jews returned from the Exile many of them had integrated into their host society (see Ezra 9-10). Later, some Jews campaigned for strict adherence to God's Laws and became the Pharisee party. As they tried to impose this strict adherence of the letter of the Mosaic Law they introduced even more rules on how to keep those laws! In

contrast, the Sadducees (who included the high priest Caiaphas and his family) were very liberal. *The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.*^{Acts 23:28} Jesus warned against both Pharisee and Sadducees because they were only “acting” their religion and had no relationship with God. *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!*^{Matt.23:23} “*But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*” *Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.*^{Matt.16:11-12}

Wise people actually do what God says whereas foolish people don't: *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven... So then, everyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like a wise man. He builds his house on the rock... But everyone who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man... The crowds were amazed at his teaching. He taught like one who had authority. He did not speak like their teachers of the law.*^{Matt.7:21-29} When the Magi (*wise -men*) came to Jerusalem to worship *he who has been born king of the Jews,*^{Matt.2:2} the chief priests and scribes (*foolish-men*) knew where the Christ was to be born but had no desire to worship Him – they had the theory of their theology but no testimony and no authenticity. Their religion was in their head but not in their heart – they said “*lord, lord*” but God never knew them because they weren't doing God's will.^{Matt.7:21}

It's easy to see the faults in others but we must ensure that our own religion and testimony keeps authentic and true to the Scriptures and to the Holy Spirit. *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*^{Matt.22:29} We need to be accurate in our beliefs without being clinical or we will become sterile! When we are intentional about what we do in our worship, and especially praying and singing together as a congregation profound and connected words, then we change from “*glory to glory*” and enjoy His great provisions and promises. We begin to live in our true rights, privileges and potential that are ours in Christ. Our corporate worship begins to be a window to see what's happening in heaven so that it shapes our practical view of who God is and what we believe He did and does. An example was last Sunday as we used our songs as an expression of our faith – of what we believe. In our Church we try to use songs that are true to the New Covenant which Jesus introduced when He died, but because songs are rhyming verse, sometimes there is a little poetic licence in them! For instance, we sing with gusto “*Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*” and yet nowhere in the Bible are people ever washed in blood – not even in the OT! Many of the Christmas carols include sentimental mythology rather than scriptural theology and that can easily distort our view of God and His promises if we are not careful. For instance, the Gospels don't mention a stable, there are no sheep, oxen or donkeys at Jesus' birth; and no kings, camels or ships visiting the new-born Baby (however, kings and ships are mentioned in Isaiah 60).

Luke records that a census was taken by Caesar Augustus around the time of the birth of Christ, and Joseph travelled with Mary from Nazareth to his home town of Bethlehem in order to register.^{Lk.2:1-5} Whilst there is no record of a census for taxation purposes in Judea around the time of the birth of Christ, Augustus did order that a census be taken of each province and that all men be enrolled. This was a census of allegiance to Caesar Augustus and occurred about one year before the death of Herod the Great – about the time of Jesus' birth. Although many translations say, *This census was first made when Quirinius was governor of Syria,*^{Lk.2:2} Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until AD 6. However, the Greek sentence construction of is unusual and an alternative translation is: *'This census took place before the one when Quirinius was governor of Syria'.* (This latter census in Quirinius' time can be dated to A.D.6, and Luke was well aware of it.^{Acts.5:37}) Censuses

were not held on a particular day but were spread over a period of time and it is likely that Joseph chose to visit Bethlehem for the census at the same time as Passover to save an extra journey. At Passover time all adult males were required to come to Jerusalem, hence Jerusalem and its neighbourhood, including nearby Bethlehem, were extremely crowded. Mary had been Joseph's wife for at least 6 months^{Mat.1:24} and it would have been unthinkable that someone from Joseph's close family who lived in Bethlehem would not have given them accommodation especially as it was so close to Mary's delivery (and Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, lived nearby too^{Lk.1:31}). So when Luke says that the guest-room (*kataluma*, mistakenly translated 'inn' in some translations) of the house was full,^{Lk.2:7} he implies that they gave them the next part of the upper guest-room which also served as a feed store. (Luke uses *kataluma* for "upper room,"^{Lk.22:10-12} but uses a completely different word for "inn"^{Lk.10:34} in the Good Samaritan story.) Also, as Herod died in 4B.C. Jesus was could not have been born A.D.0B.C but was probably born in the April of 5B.C.

Let's keep true to the Scriptures (even if we do indulge in a little in sentimental poetic licence sometimes!) but let's also keep true to the Spirit so that we have authentic religion that is our testimony rather than theory – accurate but not clinical and sterile. Although our faith may seem similar to the world's belief, actually we are fundamentally different – as different as wisdom is from folly. The world wants a comfortable religion that appeases the conscience rather than cleanses the conscience. God's way is the only way that works, which is why the early Church were called "Followers of the Way": *I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God... that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.*^{Acts.24:14-16}

So keep the faith, stay faith-full, (full of faith), faithful to the Scriptures and faithful to the Spirit, then we will hear God say to us: Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!^{Mat.25:21}

Sunday 27th December 2015. Ps.54. Lk.2.16-24

Monday 28th No Bible Study

Wednesday 30th No Bible Study

Sunday 3rd January 10.30am Service Ps.56 Followed by New Year's Lunch

What do you treasure and ponder in your heart?

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.^{Lk.2:19;51}

Mary's life had been turned upside-down over the previous 9 months. The Angel Gabriel had talked to her face to face and he gave her some startling news. *Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found grace with God. You will become pregnant, give birth to a son, and name him Jesus. He will be a great man and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. Your son will be king of Jacob's people forever, and his kingdom will never end.*^{Lk.1:30-33} Although this was very dramatic and unexpected, Mary's faith was strong enough to handle this announcement and she replied: *I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you've said happen to me.*^{Lk.2:38}

Angels are servants of God: *What are all the angels? They are spirits sent to serve those who are going to receive salvation.*^{Heb.1:14} However not all "angels" are true angels who come from God: *And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions*

deserve.^{2Cor.11:14-5} But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!^{Gal.1:8-9}

God does speak directly to us: For God speaks again and again, though people do not recognize it. He speaks in dreams, in visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they lie in their beds. He whispers in their ears and terrifies them with warnings. He makes them turn from doing wrong; he keeps them from pride. He protects them from the grave, from crossing over the river of death.^{Job.33:14-18} 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. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on those who serve me, both men and women. When I do, they will prophesy.^{Acts.2:17-18} However even accurate and sound "revelations" and "visitations" can be distorted through our memory or our own theology (our understanding of God). Now Jesus the Word of God has come in human form, God has spoken through Him and we don't need to rely on "revelations" and "visitations" anymore: In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.^{Heb.1:1-2} Although Peter heard God speak directly from heaven, he wrote that we should pay more attention to the Scriptures than experiences, however wonderful and miraculous they may be: And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.^{2Pet.1:19-21}

Mary's experience has parallels with our conversion: The Holy Spirit will come to you. The power of the Most High God will cover you. So the holy one that is born will be called the Son of God.^{Lk.1:35} When we became a Christian, God said that we can find grace with Him. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.^{Heb.4:16} The Holy Spirit came to us and the power of the Most High covered us and we were born-again as a holy child of God. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.^{1Pet.1:23} But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.^{1Jn.1:12-13} You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.^{Col.2:13}

Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart,^{Lk.2:19;51} **but what about us? We should treasure our conversion and ponder it in our heart.** We should think about the wonder and marvel of new birth, savouring these wonderful truths. Some respond like Mary: *May it happen to me just as you said it would.*^{Lk.1:38} But some like Zechariah: *How can I be sure of this?*^{Lk.1:18} Mary was blessed for a lifetime: *You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.*^{Lk.1:45} but Zechariah was dumb for 9 months: *And now you will have to be silent. You will not be able to speak until after John is born. That's because you did not believe my words. They will come true when the time is right.*^{Lk.1:20}

Let's treat our New-Birth conversion as the priceless treasure that it is and ponder it often this coming year. Selah!

Bible Time Chart

Time Chart of OT

1270BC	Exodus under Ramesses 2 (<i>also called Ramesses the Great</i>)
1000BC	David
722BC	Israel's (<i>Northern Kingdom</i>) Exile 2Kings 17:6
597/6BC	Judah's (<i>Southern Kingdom</i>) 1 st Exile 2Kings24:10-17
586BC	Judah's (<i>Southern Kingdom</i>) 2 nd Exile 2Kings25:1-21
537BC	Judah's (<i>Southern Kingdom</i>) Return from Exile

Time Chart of NT

20/19BC	<i>Herod's Temple began</i>
18/17BC	<i>Herod's Temple in use</i>
c8BC	Zechariah in the Temple (Lk.1)
5BC April 5 th	Birth of Jesus
4BC	<i>Death of Herod the Great</i>
AD14 -37	<i>Reign of Tiberius Caesar</i>
AD29	Baptism of Jesus (<i>Lk.3:1 – 15th year of Tiberius reign hence AD 29</i>)**
AD33 April Wed. 1 st	Last Supper (see Colin Humphreys' " <i>The Mystery of the Last Supper</i> ")
AD33 April Fri. 3 rd	Crucifixion of Jesus
c AD35	Conversion of Paul <i>Acts 9</i>
<AD37	<i>Christianity came to Britain. ***</i>
AD37-41	<i>Reign of Caligula</i>
AD41-54	<i>Reign of Claudius</i>
c AD44	<i>Death of Herod Agrippa 1</i>
< AD50	Letter of James
AD48-49	Paul's 1 st missionary journey
AD49/50	Jerusalem Conference <i>Acts. 15</i>
AD50	Paul's 2 nd missionary journey
AD50-52	Paul at Corinth
AD51	1 & 2 Thessalonians from Corinth
AD52	Galatians from Corinth
AD54	Paul's 3 rd missionary journey
AD54 -68	<i>Reign of Nero</i>
AD54-57	Paul at Ephesus
AD57	1Corinthians from Ephesus
AD57	2Corinthians from Macedonia
AD57/58	Romans from Corinth
AD58-60	Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea
AD58	Paul's arrest at Jerusalem
AD60-61	Paul winters at Malta
AD61	Paul arrives at Rome
AD61-63	Paul's imprisonment at Rome
AD62	Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon from Rome
AD63	Philippians from Rome
AD63-65	Paul's release & further ministry
AD63	1Timothy & Titus
AD64	Hebrews
AD64	<i>Herod's Temple finished</i>
<AD65	Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts

<AD65	Revelation****
AD64-68	1 & 2 Peter from Rome
AD65	Peter's death in Rome
AD66	Paul's 2 nd imprisonment at Rome
AD66	2 Timothy from Rome
AD66/67	Paul's death at Rome
AD67/68	Jude
<i>AD68</i>	<i>Death of Nero</i>
<i>AD68-69</i>	<i>Reign of Galba</i>
<i>AD69</i>	<i>Reign of Otho</i>
<i>AD69</i>	<i>Reign of Vitellius</i>
<i>AD69-79</i>	<i>Reign of Vespasian</i>
<i>AD70</i>	<i>Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus</i>
<i>AD79-81</i>	<i>Reign of Titus</i>
<AD98	Gospel John, 1, 2, & 3 John
AD98/100	Death of John
<i>AD81-96</i>	<i>Reign of Domitian</i>

****** Besides the dating from Tiberius, Daniel had stated that it would be 69 “*weeks*” before Messiah would appear from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (Daniel 9:26). Accepting that a “*week*” represents seven years and the decree to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem was given around 455 BC (during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah), a specific period of 483 years (69 x 7) was to elapse before the Messiah would appear, dating Jesus’ Baptism at AD29 (*there is no date of 0BC or AD0*)

******* 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

****** Reasons for early date for Revelation:**

42 months = the period between 64AD and 66AD when Nero embarked on the most violent campaign against Christians martyring multitudes.

666 = six hundred and sixty six, not six, six, six. It is the numerical value of “*Caesar Nero*”

The “*temple*” in the “*holy city*” is still standing as John writes, though it is being threatened with devastation (Rev. 11: 1-2). We know as a matter of historical fact that the Jewish temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, and has never been rebuilt. (2) The sixth “*king*” is presently ruling from the “*seven mountains*” and will do so until a king comes who will reign a “*short time*” (Rev. 17:9-10). The preterist takes this to be a clear enough allusion to Nero Caesar. According to the enumeration found in Josephus' *Antiquities* (18:2:2,6, 10) and Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Nero is Rome's sixth emperor, following Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius.

“...the cryptic number 666 (Revelation 13:18) designates Nero. The number involves the use of gematria (assigning numerical values to letters of the alphabet and thus determining the numerical value of words). Nero Caesar written in Hebrew letters has the numerical value of 666. That explanation becomes all the more probable when you realize that in Hebrew, Nero can also be spelled Neron. With the second “*n*” the numerical value is 666. Without it, 616 (a well-attested reading in some New Testament manuscripts).” J. Stewart Russell, *The Parousia*

"It is with great satisfaction that he finds himself in substantial agreement with the distinguished ecclesiastical historian and theologian, Dr. Dollinger, of Munich, in his interpretation of St. Paul's prediction in 2 Thessalonians. (1) Dr. Dollinger distinctly identifies the "*Man of Sin*" with Nero, a conclusion now so generally accepted by the highest authorities, that it may be regarded as a settled point. (2) He clearly distinguishes between the "*Man of Sin*" and "*the Apostasy*," so frequently confounded by the mass of interpreters. Dollinger shows that the former is a person, the latter a heresy. (3) He recognizes "*the Beast*" of the Apocalypse as the Emperor, and therefore identical with the "*Man of Sin*." (4) The miracles wrought by the "*Second Beast*" (the Beast from the earth) he regards as a representation derived from our Lord's prophecy on the Mount of Olives." (*The Parousia, Afterword*.)

The seven seals are shown to have taken place during the reign of the Emperors Augustus to Vespasian. The seven trumpets during the time when Rome placed 4 battalions at the Euphrates River (Rev. 9:14). The seven bowls, when Nero was Emperor (Rev. 17:10). But Revelation 20 makes the point that there is a long time gap between Jerusalem being judged and the events described in verse 9 by its use of the term "thousand years".

A. Corbett: Revelation.

Memory Verses 2015 – I am in Christ

January: I am in Christ because of God

It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our Righteousness, Holiness and Redemption. 1Cor.1:30

February: I am Included in Christ

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. Eph.1:13

March: I am Forgiven in Christ

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Eph.4:32

April: I am Justified in Christ

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 1Cor.6:11

May: I am Righteous in Christ

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

June: I am Reconciled to God in Christ

But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation. Col.1:22

July: I am Sanctified in Christ

To the church of God... to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours: 1Cor.1:2

August: I am Standing Firm in Christ

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. 2Cor.1:21

September: I am Victorious in Christ

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him. 2Cor.2:14

October: I am Rich in Christ even if I feel poor

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. 2Cor.8:9

November: I am Strong in Christ even if I feel weak

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2Cor.12:10

December: I am Blessed with every Spiritual Blessing in Christ

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Eph.1:3

