

Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2017

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Prayer for 2017

For Government. Ruler of All, we ask that You guide those who govern us. Help our Queen, our Prime Minister, those in Church leadership and all other leaders to speak the truth, obey their conscience, and pay homage to King Jesus.

For Law. God of Justice, we ask for justice to be upheld in the courts. Please enable the judges to see the facts and make just judgments.

For Life. Lord of Life, on the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act, we pray for Your mercy on the unborn child. Please overturn Britain's culture of death and protect children and pregnant women. Awaken Your Church to this slaughter of the innocent and enable us to respond with courage and compassion.

For Marriage. Father of the Bridegroom, Your wonderful pattern for marriage and family is being systematically eroded in the Church and in the world. Please give our Church leaders boldness to uphold the Bible's teaching that marriage is between one man and one woman. May the beauty of the gospel shine brightly through our own marriages and families.

For Freedom. Lord, where Your Spirit is, there is freedom. Yet the freedom to proclaim Jesus is being taken away. Please preserve our freedom to speak about Jesus Christ in public life and to express the hope of the gospel in the workplace, schools and universities.

For the Church. Shepherd of the Flock, cause Your Church to rise up and be strong in confidently and uncompromisingly proclaiming the gospel to our nation. Enable Bible-teachers to preach the whole counsel of God. Grow churches where the Bible is taught faithfully and give them influence in their local communities.

For God's Glory. Eternal Father, thank You that You are working out Your plan to have all things put under Jesus' feet. Thank You that You delight in Your Son and that His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom that will never pass away. Thank You for giving us Your Spirit to

empower us to speak and act as Your kingdom people in the world. May You get all the glory in 2017 and beyond.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

January:

Songs for the Moment: Mary. My soul does magnify the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour... For He who is mighty has done great things and holy is His Name. *Lk.1:46-48*

Sunday 1st January 2017. Ps.105:1-9.

New Year Resolutions.

Most people who make New Year Resolutions do not manage to keep them for very long. However, New Year Resolutions (or *any-time-of-the-year-resolutions*) can help us to review our perspective and potential and think about what we would like to achieve during the coming year. Although “*the road to hell is paved with good intentions,*” the road to heaven is paved with good decisions – and our life this new year will be the result of the decisions we will make each day - or have already made! It is good to have goals and aspirations in our natural life – what we want to achieve in our work, our family, our finances, etc., but it is even better to have goals and aspirations in our spiritual life – what we want to achieve in our relationship with God.

So, what do you want to achieve in your relationship with God this year?

Cultural traditions like Christmas festivities or New Year resolutions can become superstitious acts but so can Christian traditions become superstitious acts – good traditions like faith, prayer, fasting, giving, or even worship - if we believe that when we do these things God **must** do something for us. Being a Christian means that we are redeemed, Holy Spirit regenerated people who are blessed and holy (dedicated to God’s service) and so our activities and the objects we use are also blessed and holy: *On that day even the harness bells of the horses will be inscribed with these words: HOLY TO THE LORD. In fact, every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD of Heaven's Armies.*^{Zech.14:20-21} But those activities and objects do not have any spiritual power over, or with, God or the enemy - that is superstition. All we receive from God is by His **grace**, which is His **sovereign free will**. Prayer is one of the greatest privileges of God's grace and we commune with God in prayer as we pour out our hearts, present our requests and still our spirits to hear His voice. Wesley said, *God can do nothing except in answer to prayer.* **He was wrong - very wrong. God does not need our permission to do anything!** Yet people teach that we must pray in order to get God to move on our behalf or even worse - to help God achieve His purpose in the earth today. Rather than telling God what He should do, we should be praying - *Not my will, but Yours be done.* Our praying is to commune with God not to coerce Him. We proclaim a Gospel that promotes the centrality of Christ and His finished work on the Cross-validated by His resurrection and sealed by Pentecost.

This year my New Year Resolution is **to know Christ better** and also for **you to know Christ better** too. *That I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. 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. 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.3:8-14} *I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. 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, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in*

the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.^{Eph.1:16-21}

How do we know Christ better? We have to work at knowing Christ better by Hearing and then **Obeying** the Word of Christ. Faith is a gift but knowledge is attained by work - through study, work and perseverance!

Hear the Word: People often say that difficult times strengthen their faith and for many they do. But faith does not come from difficult times – faith comes from hearing the word of Christ. *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} This faith does not come from just hearing about Christ but **hearing spiritually about Christ**. They Israelites heard physically about Christ through Moses but very few actually heard spiritually (in their spirits). The Israelites hardened their hearts when they heard God speak and said that it would be better to go back to Egypt. *Then the whole community began weeping aloud, and they cried all night. Their voices rose in a great chorus of protest against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!" they complained. "Why is the LORD taking us to this country only to have us die in battle?" ...Then they plotted among themselves, "Let's choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!"*^{Nu.14:1-4} If we start entertaining thoughts about whether our Christian life is worth the effort of resisting temptation, or of choosing right over wrong, or honouring God before ourselves, then we will very soon find our hearts hardened and succumb to lack of rest - which is physical and spiritual stress. *For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ. Remember what it says: "Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled." And who was it who rebelled against God, even though they heard his voice? Wasn't it the people Moses led out of Egypt? And who made God angry for forty years? Wasn't it the people who sinned, whose corpses lay in the wilderness? And to whom was God speaking when he took an oath that they would never enter his rest? Wasn't it the people who disobeyed him? So we see that because of their unbelief they were not able to enter his rest.*^{Heb.3:14-19} God rarely speaks directly to us in Person (as He did with Moses, Samuel and Paul) but He does speak directly to us through the Scriptures – which is the written record of 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.*^{Heb.1:1-2} *You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me.*^{Jn.5:39} We must stay sensitive to the Word of Christ and the Holy Spirit who speaks of Christ: *When the Counsellor 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.*^{Jn.15:26} Seven times, Jesus says: *Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.*^{Rev.2:17}

Obey the Word: Hearing about God is a good start for us but we must also **act on what we hear** or our theology will remain just theory. The message that Moses brought the Israelites had to be believed, spoken and obeyed. *This command I am giving you today is not too difficult for you to understand, and it is not beyond your reach. It is not kept in heaven, so distant that you must ask, 'Who will go up to heaven and bring it down so we can hear it and obey?' It is not kept beyond the sea, so far away that you must ask, 'Who will cross the sea to bring it to us so we can hear it and obey?' No, the message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart so that you can obey it.*^{Deut.30:11-14} Hearing alone is not believing. *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} We are foolish if we do not obey God but we are wise if we obey Him: *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*^{Matt.7:24} There is great blessing in believing and doing what God says: *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant*

is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.^{Jn.13:15-17}

New Year Resolutions do not have to be silly, spurious or superstitious but if we focus on the spiritual rather than the sensual, our whole life will be affected, for our own good and the good of those around us. I intend to keep my **New Year Resolution** all year long - my resolution of **knowing Christ better** and **helping you know Christ better**. **What's your New Year Resolution?**

Sunday 8th January 2017. Ps.106:1-5. Lk.2:41-3:20

God's Glorious Salvation

Last week we prayed about these seven topics: **Government, Law, Life, Marriage, Freedom, Church and God's Glory** and also suggested that we continued to pray about them throughout this coming year. Prayer is one of the greatest privileges of God's grace and in prayer we commune with God as we pour out our hearts and present our requests to Him as well as stilling our spirits to hear His voice. Praying is communing with God not trying to coerce Him. In prayer, we wonder and ponder at God's glory, splendour and holiness as we yield to His will. God is "awesome" (inducing awe) as well as "awful" (inspiring awe) and in prayer we catch a glimpse of who God really is. This awe is sometimes called fear: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*^{Pron.9:10} This fear is not the fear of being afraid though, but the fear of reverence and respect.

Interestingly, instead of asking God to change people, John the Baptist asked the people to change - he preached what we are praying for! But John was unique and his ministry was to prepare the way of the Lord, for people to receive God's glorious salvation through Jesus. Gabriel told Zechariah that he would have a son who *will prepare the way for the Lord. He will have the same spirit and power that Elijah had. He will teach parents how to love their children. He will also teach people who don't obey to be wise and do what is right. In this way, he will prepare a people who are ready for the Lord.*^{Lk.1:17} (Christianity is about being prepared for the Lord, being wise and doing what is right, as well as promoting harmonious family relationships.) A few months later, when John was born, Zechariah prophesied a similar same message over his son: *And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.*^{Lk.1:76-79}

Even though Jesus has already come, we still need to prepare the way of the Lord so people can receive God's glorious salvation through Jesus. John's ministry was to be a *messenger calling out in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord'*^{Lk.3:4} and his message included making the way to God easy by removing obstacles and helping people see God's salvation – Jesus: *Make straight paths for him. Every valley will be filled in. Every mountain and hill will be made level. The crooked roads will become straight. The rough ways will become smooth. And everyone will see God's salvation.*^{Lk.3:4-6} The original prophecy uses *glory* instead of *salvation*: *Then the glory of the LORD will appear. And everyone will see it. The LORD has spoken.*^{Is.40:5} But salvation and glory are linked: *Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.*^{2Tim.2:10} *Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.*^{Ps.85:9} *Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments.*^{Rev.19:1-2}

John was the greatest prophet under the Old Covenant (remember, prophecy is testifying about Jesus: *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10}). But Jesus said that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. *Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent*

people have been raiding it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. Whoever has ears, let them hear.^{Matt.11:11-15} The Kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven) is already here because the **kingdom** is the **King's domain** (rule) – the kingdom of God is the rule of Christ in our hearts. This kingdom is also *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.*^{Rom.14:17-18} Yes, as Gabriel told Zechariah, **Christianity is about being ready for the Lord, being wise and doing what is right as well as promoting harmonious family relationships**

Those of us who have received this glorious salvation are also called to proclaim the message of our glorious salvation to the rest of mankind: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*^{Mk.16:15} Although this glorious salvation is freely given by God, He does expect us to live a life that is compatible with His character and values. Living a holy life that honours God is important because: 1) we represent God who is holy and honourable; 2) it is the way we are meant to live; 3) it is the only way people will see what God is really like; 4) it is the only way people will see the benefits of living godly lives. If we do not live a holy life that honours God, our theology will just be a philosophy or an alternative lifestyle. The more we appreciate our glorious salvation, the more determined we will be to live a holy life that honours God. And there are great benefits (blessings) too – the benefit (blessing) of knowing that we please God; of knowing that we are at peace with God and ourselves ; of knowing that we reap eternal rewards; of knowing that our quality of life is better; of knowing that we are helping others to see God.

As we pray for these topics, let us endeavour to make our lifestyle match our prayer-style.

Government. *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— 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.*^{1Tim.2:1-3}

Law. *For the Lord's sake, respect all human authority—whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honour those who do right.*^{1Pet.2:13-14}

For Life. *And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*^{Matt.18:5-6}

For Marriage. *Give honour to marriage, and remain faithful to one another in marriage. God will surely judge people who are immoral and those who commit adultery.*^{Heb.13:4}

For Freedom. *It is God's will that your honourable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you. For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil. Respect everyone, and love your Christian brothers and sisters. Fear God, and respect the king.*^{1Pet.2:15-17}

For the Church. *Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you. Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.*^{Heb.13:17-19}

For God's Glory. *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*^{1Tim.1:17}

Yes, God's glorious salvation is much more than escaping the terrors of hell – it is entering the treasures of heaven and enjoying the journey too! So let's continue to pray, proclaim, practice and enjoy the way of the Lord – God's glorious salvation. Remember, that in God's kingdom (the reign of Christ in our hearts) the least of us is greater than any of the OT saints, including John the Baptist, because we have a greater Covenant with greater privileges and greater benefits (blessings) now that **God is with us – Emmanuel**

Sunday 15th January 2017. Ps.107:1-9. Lk.4:1-30

Repentance and Remission of Sins *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom (remission) for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release (remission) the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*^{Lk.4:28-19}

Remission in medicine means the subsiding of the symptoms of a disease but in theology it means release (as from a debt) or forgiveness. Jesus explained to His disciples that remission of sins was a biblical message that would continue to be preached across the world: *This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness (remission) of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*^{Lk.24:47-49}

The message of the Gospel is that our sins have been dismissed from us and we are no longer joined to them because we are dead to sin – **if we have repented** (which means a change of mind). **Repentance is the key to the remission of sin** because it unlocks the door of salvation and dismisses our sin – **sin is evicted**. We still have the capacity and capability to sin: *Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.*^{Ps.119:33} But sin is not part of our new nature after we are born-again because we are born again of an incorruptible seed.^{1Pet.1:23} *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ... For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. ... In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. ... For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. ... You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. ... But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{Rom.6:1-23}

The **scapegoat** in the OT illustrates **remission of sins** - that our sin was laid on Jesus and then sent away from us: *as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*^{Ps.103:12} (William Tyndale invented the word "scapegoat" when he translated his 1530 Bible rendering the Latin as "(e)scape goat".) Aaron took two goats: *Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the LORD... Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.*^{Lev.16:7-10} Each goat represented an aspect of our salvation: one goat represented Jesus who died and so it was killed as a sin offering (illustrating **Jesus our Sacrifice** who died as the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*^{n.1:29}); the other goat represented Jesus who is alive so it was released alive (escaped) into the wilderness (illustrating **Jesus our Intercessor** who is alive: *but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*^{Heb.7:24-25})

This **remission of sins** is the Good News that we believe and preach – that **we have been set free from every sin**: *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.*^{Acts.13:38-39} But facts alone are not enough. **Active theology, not academic theology is salvation** – we must **trust** (believe) God enough to **act** on what He says. The Bible doesn't call us to convert a culture of *atheists* into *theists* - it calls us **to abide in Christ**, to know Him, and to join Him in His mission to make God - Jesus' Father and our Father - known to the world. **Theology is important** because bad theology makes hard Christianity but **good theology makes easy Christianity**. Our God is the God of rest: *The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.*^{Lk.6:5} The OT Atonement was made on a day of rest when no work may be carried out: *you must deny yourselves and not do any work... because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will*

be clean from all your sins.^{Lev.16:29-30} George Canty wrote: No workaholics! Sweat is evidence of hard work and God doesn't want it to be hard work to come to Him. Strenuous effort and hard searching only give us something to boast about, and makes God look as if He is sullen and indifferent, or playing hide and seek with us, pretending that He doesn't want us to find Him. That is the God of the mystics - waiting and straining to hear Him – that is not the God of the Bible. The Lord did not say "Labour pleases me"; His favourites are not masochists wearing hair-shirts. The Word is "Call upon Him while He may be found". The Bible is the world's happiest book. Is God happy when we refuse His good things, and make righteousness unattractive? Eternal life means quality lifestyle, companionship with God, the source of all goodness.

God's Word returns to Him after it has done what He wants: *So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*^{Is.55:11} God speaks His Word through us - so when we have been *clothed with power from on high* by receiving the Holy Spirit, we are anointed (equipped and empowered) to present God's Good News about His glorious salvation, our past is irrelevant because we are a new creation.^{2Cor.5:17} *For no word from God will ever fail (void of power).*^{Lk.1:37} *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*^{Heb.4:12-13} God **speaks to us** so we can **speak to others** and comfort them: *The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.*^{Is.50:4} We pass on to others what we have received from God.^{1Cor.11:23;2Tim.2:2} God wants "partners" – people who will cooperate with Him. *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, 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.1:4-6} This "partnership" is actually "fellowship" and our fellowship is with God as well as one another: *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} God can use anyone including non-believers, but if there is no trust (faith), there is no **partnership** and no enjoyment or reward. Cyrus was called God's anointed but he was not God's partner: *This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut.*^{Is.45:1} Nero was another "servant" of God but he certainly was not a partner: *Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgement on themselves. ...For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.*^{Rom.13:1-6} Nebuchadnezzar was also a "servant" of God but he became a partner: *King Nebuchadnezzar, To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth: May you prosper greatly! It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. How mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation.*^{Dan.4:1-2}

But we are partners with God, so let's spread the good news of **repentance and remission of sins** – not the subsiding of the symptoms of sin but the **release and forgiveness of sins**: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.2:1-2}

Sunday 22nd January 2017. Ps.107:1-9. Lk.4

The God of Miracles *But because you say so, I will...* ^{Lk.5:5}

Science observes behaviour and when the same result occurs under similar circumstances, it is noted as a scientific fact – whether it is physics, chemistry or any other study. But spirituality is not science and we can do the same things week after week ...but one day we will get a different result because God has intervened. The God of the Bible is a God of miracles: *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.* ^{Ps.77:14} We do not have to be stupid, naïve, or deranged to believe that the God who created the world by saying: “*let there be...*” - the God whom we call “*our Father*” and who we worship - would not intervene in our life.

Christianity is miraculous (or super-natural) **from beginning to end because it is a trust in Jesus Christ** who is the Son of God. Jesus’ conception was miraculous – He had no human father; Jesus’ life was miraculous – He was perfect and without sin; Jesus’ death was miraculous – He became sin for us as He was punished for us; Jesus’ resurrection was miraculous – death could not hold Him and Jesus arose victorious and immortal; Jesus’ ascension was miraculous – He bodily ascended to heaven in full sight of His disciples. Jesus’ life today is still miraculous and He lives in us Believers through the abiding Presence of the Holy Spirit. **So there is little wonder that we believe in miracles!**

In today’s reading we see that Peter and the other disciples had fished all night without catching any fish. But when Jesus told them to cast their nets into the sea again, Peter said: *because you say so, I will...* ^{Lk.5:5} and the result was a very large catch of fish. A similar miracle happened after Jesus’ resurrection when they caught 153 large fish. ^{Jn.21:6-14} We can and should do what Jesus says, regardless of the immediate results because whatever He says is the right thing to do - and doing the right thing carries out God’s plan: *Let it be this way for now. It is right for us to do this. It carries out God's holy plan.* ^{Matt.3:15}

In any situation, the most important outcome is God’s plan and not what we would like to happen (sometimes they are the same thing, but not always!). God requires faithfulness above everything: *We serve Christ. We are trusted with God's secret truth. Those who have been given a trust must prove that they are faithful.* ^{1Cor.4:1-2} We have been entrusted with God’s glorious salvation – both for ourselves and also to share with others. *Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.* ^{2Tim.1:14} *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.* ^{2Ti.2:2} This is a great trust and we must prove that we are faithful. It is by “*standing in God's council*” and speaking worthy words, that we are able to honour God’s trust. *But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people.* ^{Jer.23:22} *Speak words that are worthy, not worthless. Then you will be speaking for me.* ^{Jer.15:19}

But, as Jeremiah discovered, doing the right things and saying the right things doesn’t mean that we will have a comfortable life. When Jeremiah spoke, his message came out as doom and destruction and he was criticised for it but if Jeremiah didn’t speak, it felt like there was a fire in his heart burning him up. *Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.* ^{Jer.20:8-9} Although it felt like a *lose-lose situation* for Jeremiah, it was actually a *win-win situation* for him because God desires faithfulness above all else. Paul the apostle reached a point in his life where he was willing to count every natural benefit as nothing for the sake being faithful – benefits such as personal comfort, social standing, financial wealth. *These things that I once considered valuable, I now consider worthless for Christ. It's far more than that! I consider everything else worthless because I'm much better off knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. It's because of him that I think of everything as worthless. I threw it all away in order to gain Christ and to have a relationship with him. This means that I didn't receive God's approval by obeying his laws. The opposite is true! I have God's approval through faith in Christ. 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.^{Phil.3:11} King David also realised the importance of staying true to God, regardless of social standing: *Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous.*^{Psa.37:16-17}

God can do absolutely anything (within His Character) but our desire should be to know Him personally not just know what He does. It is in true worship that we appreciate God for who He is, rather than for what He has done. No marriage would be viable if the relationship was based on what each partner can do – such as, how well they cook or clean, etc. People get married because they love each other for who they are, not for what they can do. Whilst we appreciate God's miraculous ability and His miraculous works, we worship Him for who He is – Almighty God. Praise is saying good words about God and in praise we describe what He has done for us: how He has saved us, healed us redeemed us, provided for us, comforted us, etc. But in worship we appreciate God for who He is. In worship, there is a sense of His holiness, majesty, awe, and glory. In true worship, we often don't need to speak because whatever we say would be inappropriate and detract from our appreciation of God. In heaven, the angels and the redeemed are bowing down before God the Father and before Jesus.^{Rev.4-5}

When Peter saw the miraculous catch of fish, he immediately recognised Jesus' holiness, majesty, awe, and glory: *When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken.*^{Lk.5:8-}

⁹ Isaiah also recognised God's holiness, majesty, awe, and glory: *I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple... "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."*^{Is.6:1-5} This revelation of God's holiness, majesty, awe, and glory was part of God's preparation for both Isaiah and Peter to proclaim God's glorious salvation. *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 and tell this people:^{Is.6:6-9} Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.^{Lk.5:10-11}*

How should we respond to God's miracles? We shouldn't just take the goods and leave the God, like some of the people Jesus helped: *Jesus answered, "You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs—and for free. Don't waste your energy striving for perishable food like that. Work for the food that sticks with you, food that nourishes your lasting life, food the Son of Man provides. He and what he does are guaranteed by God the Father to last."*^{Jn.6:26-27} 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?" And Jesus said to the man, "Stand up and go. Your faith has healed you."*^{Lk.17:17-19}

But neither should we take the God and leave the goods! God has graciously and freely given us everything we need for life and godliness.^{2Pet.1:3} *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*^{Rom.8:32} Miracles are not a sign of our spirituality or of God's favouritism but they are a token of God's love. However, the greatest miracle is the New Creation - Conversion - where God breathes His Holy Spirit into us and we are spiritually re-created. Wesley describes this beautifully in his well-loved hymn, **Love Divine:** *Finish, then, Thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be. Let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee. Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

Yes, God is the God of Miracles and we can have confidence that He will finish the New Creation that He has started in us so that we will personally see that great and glorious salvation – and it will happen when we are lost in wonder love and praise in heaven so let's start practising now! – **Amen – let it be so!**

Sunday 29th January 2017. Ps.110 Lk.6

Social Gospel vs Spiritual Gospel. *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*^{Lk.6:20}

Social justice should be the concern of every human being and injustice (especially injustice for the vulnerable) is contrary to all of our natural human values. People have always grouped together around a common value including work and whilst Guilds were common in Medieval times, it was not until the 19th Century that workers of different occupations were organised into Unions. It is not surprising that many of the early Trade Union founders were devout Christians because Trade Unions were originally formed to stand up for the rights of the people who had no rights and for those who could get no justice. The first Trade Union was founded in 1818 in Manchester and known as the Philanthropic Society (later called the General Union of Trades). Unfortunately, today the phrase “Trade Union” has become a by-word for dissents and disputes, mainly because some are dominated by left-wing militants (although they are not as militant as they were in the 1970’s when their goal was to bring down the Government - both Labour and Conservative!).

Christians are followers of Christ and Jesus Christ showed more compassion for the poor than anyone but caring for justice is not just Christian – it is basic to humanity: *And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*^{Mic.6:8} In fact, God pronounces judgement on those who despise the poor or treat them badly. *Don't take advantage of any hired worker who is poor and needy. That applies to your own people. It also applies to outsiders who are living in one of your towns. Give them their pay every day. They are poor and are counting on it. If you don't pay them, they might cry out to the LORD against you. Then you will be guilty of committing a sin.*^{Deut.24:14-15} *The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This treasure you have accumulated will stand as evidence against you on the day of judgement. For listen! Hear the cries of the field workers whom you have cheated of their pay. The wages you held back cry out against you. The cries of those who harvest your fields have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.*^{Jas.5:3-4} The weak and vulnerable are to be especially our concern: *Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.*^{Is.1:16-17} Our guiding rule is that we should treat others as we would have them treat us! *Do to others as you would like them to do to you.*^{Lk.6:31}

Today, the world’s perception of Christianity is usually based on the “**Golden Rule**” of “*love thy neighbour as thyself*”^{Matt.22:29} which has come to mean “*social justice*” (i.e. concern for the poor and the outcast) and “*tolerance*” (i.e. accepting all but judging none). This **Social Gospel** is strong on: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*^{Lk.6:20} but weak on the following verse: *Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, **because of the Son of Man.***^{Lk.6:22} Matthew’s account explains more clearly that it is not the poor who are **blessed** but the **poor in spirit** - it is not the poverty stricken, but the **morally broken** who are commended: *Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*^{Matt.5:3}

But actually, proclaiming social justice was not Jesus’ mission. Jesus did not emphasise the **Social Gospel** in any of His major discourses - the Sermon on the Mount,^{Matt.5-7} the Bread of Life Discourse,^{Jn.6} the Olivet Discourse,^{Matt.24;Lk.21;Mk.13} or the Upper Room Discourse.^{Jn.13-17} Occasionally there is a mention of the poor, but almost always when Jesus is making a point about something else—hypocrisy,^{Matt.6:2-3} a widow’s generosity,^{Lk.21:2-3} Zaccheus’ repentance,^{Lk.19:8} or a lesson about the afterlife.^{Lk.16:20-22} Jesus’ discourses focus on something else. The Gospels focus on something else. The Epistles focus on something else. They all focus on the **work of Christ** not on the **works of Christians**. The **Spiritual Gospel** does not distinguish between **the poor and the rich**, but between **the proud and the repentant**. *The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*^{Matt.20:28} *I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*^{Lk.6:32} *The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.*^{Lk.19:10} *For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.*^{Jn.3:17} The **Spiritual Gospel** does not negate our Christian, and indeed human, obligation to the poor

and vulnerable **but we must emphasise the centrality of the Christ**. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.^{2Tim.2:8} Jesus cared about the poor and downtrodden but He also cared about the rich and powerful. Jesus helped everyone and anyone who came to Him—poor beggar or prostitute, wealthy tax collector or Pharisee. “Social justice”—a.k.a. the “social gospel”—**is not the Gospel**. It was not Jesus’ message and it is not why He came. Jesus’ real message was much more radical. Jesus’ teaching focuses on something else - not on the works of **Christians** but rather on the work of **Christ**, not on the social but on the spiritual. **Jesus means Saviour** and He saves us from our sins not our social plight. *She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*^{Matt.1:21} We started this year by saying that our goal for 2017 was **to know Christ better**. *That I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. 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. 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.3:8-14} We know Christ better by **Hearing** and **Obeing** the **Word of Christ**. Although faith is a gift, knowledge is attained by work - through study and perseverance! God speaks directly to us through the Scriptures – which is the written record of 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.*^{Heb.1:1-2} *You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me.*^{Jn.5:39} After hearing or reading the Word, we still have to **obey the Word** by **acting on what we hear**. **Hearing alone is not believing!** *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}

The parable of the Good Samaritan is not about helping the poor and needy but about **loving Jesus** – the One who found us dying, poured in the oil and wine, took us to a place of safety, paid for us, and will return for us.^{Lk.10:25-37} By loving Jesus we inherit eternal life,^{Lk.10:25} but after we have received eternal life, we must: *Go and do likewise.*^{Lk.6:37} God wants us to be children of the Most High in name and also in practice. *If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*^{Lk.6:32-36}

The Gospel is Spiritual so let's keep Christ and salvation from our sins central whilst still showing the compassion of Christ: *Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.*^{Jas.1:27}

February

Songs for the Moment: Zechariah Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and has redeemed His people. *Lk.1:68*

Sunday 5th February 2017. Ps.111 Family Service followed by shared lunch

It is time for your Spiritual MOT (Ministry of Theology) Test

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? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.^{2Cor.13:5-6}

The government requires that each year all cars over 3 years old undergo an MOT (Ministry of Transport) Test. This is to ensure that our cars are road-worthy and as safe as possible, however it is still the driver's responsibility for the road-worthiness of their vehicle. The MOT test covers: Lighting and signalling equipment; Steering (including suspension); Brakes; Tyres and wheels; Seat belts; Body, structure and general items; Exhaust, fuel and emissions; Driver's view of the road; Number plate and VIN. As we test our own spiritual "road-worthiness" I trust that we will discover that we have not "failed" our Spiritual MOT but I am sure that there will be some "advisory" notes for us to heed and hopefully we will make some adjustments!

Lighting and signalling equipment: We need to see and be seen. Jesus said that we are the light of the world.^{Matt.5:14} Our testimony is more than talking about Jesus – it is also representing Jesus by living according to His values: *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.*^{Eph.5:8-13}

Steering (including suspension): We must be able to keep to the right road and not have an unintended collision. We have a good Guide who is always up-to-date and accurate but it is still up to us to follow His instructions. *He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*^{Ps.23:3} *I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.*^{Is.42:16}

Brakes: We must be able to stop safely or we will end up hurt. We need to be able to say "No" at the right time. When did you last test your brakes? *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 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 glorious appearing 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.2:11-13}

Tyres and wheels: We need to be able to keep going and finish the "race" not just start it! *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} *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.4:7-8} A bald tyre has no grip and will prevent us from stopping quickly. A flat tyre will hinder us and may even stop us altogether. We need to have a "grip" on our faith (a good understanding of what we believe) so that *we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.*^{Eph.4:14}

Seat belts: We need to be able to travel in safety so when the unexpected happens we are not harmed. It is God who keeps us safe and faith is about trusting Him. *The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*^{Deut.33:27} *In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD,*

make me dwell in safety.^{Ps.4:8} The Lord will rescue me from all harm and will take me safely to his heavenly kingdom. Glory belongs to him forever! Amen.^{2Tim.4:18}

Body, structure and general items: We need to keep ourselves clean and tidy – both physically and spiritually – with no loose parts or bits falling off! Our body is God's temple – the place where He has made His home – so we have a duty of care to look after our body but we must take even more care of our spirit and soul. *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{1Thess.5:23}

Exhaust, fuel and emissions: We need to watch what comes out of our mouth because we can easily pollute ourselves and other around us too if we say bad or ugly things. *But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart. Those are the things that make you 'unclean.' Evil thoughts come out of the heart. So do murder, adultery, and other sexual sins. And so do stealing, false witness, and telling lies about others.*^{Matt.15:18-19} *Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.*^{Ps.51:15} *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}

Driver's view of the road: We need to keep our vision clear and not get distracted. Unexpected circumstances, poor health, pain, loneliness etc. can distract us so we take our eyes off the spiritual road. We must keep focussed on Jesus who is the Way^{Jn.14:6} so that we reach our final destination. *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*^{2Cor.4:18} *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.*^{Heb.12:2} *The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble. 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. Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.*^{Prov.4:18-27}

Number plate and VIN: We need to know who we are and we also need to be identified. We each have our own personal identification name from God: *The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.*^{Rev.3:12} We are Disciples of Jesus Christ so we should not only follow Him but also let other know that we follow Him too! *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*^{1Cor.11:1}

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? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.^{2Cor.13:5-6} I am sure that none of us has actually failed the MOT test because Christ Jesus resides within us - but there will always be advisory information for us to heed. So let's use this **Ministry of Theology Test** to see our weaknesses and then act on the **advisory information** so we have a successful spiritual journey and reach our destination in safety. **Safe Driving!**

I am a Disciple of Jesus Christ

I identify with the blood of Jesus Christ, the Word of God and the Anointing of the Holy Spirit. I'm a part of the Fellowship of the Unashamed; I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast, I have stepped over the line; the love of God controls me. I won't look back, let up, slow down or back away. The decision has been made,

I am a Disciple of Jesus Christ.

My past is redeemed, my present makes sense and my future is secure. I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, colourless dreams, tame visions, mundane

talking, cheap giving and dwarf goals. I no longer need pre-eminence, position, promotion, plaudits or popularity. I don't have to be recognised, regarded, rewarded or considered right. I now live by faith and walk with patience. I live by prayer and labour with power. My face is set, my pace is fast and my goal is the Kingdom of God. My road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few, my Guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will not flinch in face of sacrifices, hesitate in the presence of adversaries, negotiate at the pool of popularity or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up or let up until I have stood up, prayed up and spoken up for the cause of Jesus Christ. I must go until He comes, give until I drop, teach until all know and work until He stops me.

I am a Disciple of Jesus Christ!

Sunday 12th February 2017. Ps.112 Lk.7:1-35

What do you deserve? *This man deserves to have you do this, because...* ^{Lk.7:4}

The Jews told Jesus that the Centurion deserved His help because he was a philanthropist and had helped so many people – if he was alive today they would probably call him *Righteous Among the Nations*. When something good happens to a good person, we often say cheerfully that they deserved it and if something bad happens to someone who has done bad things we often say that they “*got what they deserved*” – either way it is a sort of “*karma*”. “*Karma*” is a Hinduism and Buddhism concept where good intent and good deeds contribute to good karma and future happiness, while bad intent and bad deeds contribute to bad karma and future suffering. This is similar to Newton’s principle that every action produces an equal and opposite reaction. Every time we think or do something, we create a cause, which in time will bear its corresponding effects - “*what goes around, comes around*” or “*you reap what you sow*”. Although the concept of “*karma*” is linked to the idea of “*re-incarnation*”, the principle of “*you reap what you sow*” is actually Biblical: *Whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment. Whoever digs a hole and scoops it outfalls into the pit they have made. The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads.* ^{Ps.7:14-16} *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.* ^{Gal.6:7-8} *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* ^{2Cor.9:6}

However, the principle of cause and effect – reaping what you sow - is not the whole story because there are other factors involved in life. We live in a sinful world amongst sinful people who are under the influence of a sinful ruler – the devil! *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.* ^{1Jn.5:19} *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.* ^{Eph.2:1-2} Eliphaz told Job that his troubles were “*karma*” and so he was getting what he deserved: *Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope? ...As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it.* ^{Job.4:6-8} But not all bad people have bad things happen to them and neither do all good people have good things happen to them. *I have observed something else under the sun. The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. The wise sometimes go hungry, and the skilful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don't always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time. People can never predict when hard times might come. Like fish in a net or birds in a trap, people are caught by sudden tragedy.* ^{Ecc.9:11-12} God’s explanation of Job’s trouble was very different from Eliphaz’s: *Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.* ^{Job.1:8} The Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “*I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.*” ^{Job.42:7} We dare not put our trust in “*karma*” or even our own piety - **our**

confidence is in God alone and in and His grace: *For you have been my hope, Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you.*^{Ps.71:5-6}

Jesus said that being good and doing good is nothing to boast about because after doing everything God expects us to do, we have only done our duty: *So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'*^{Lk.17:10} We cannot buy God's favour or demand that God helps us because we are good or even because we are "religious" *"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*^{Rom.11:34-36} *The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*^{Lk.18:11-14} However, we should not make the mistake of trying to be humble and refuse God's love and especially His fellowship. The Centurion told Jesus that he didn't deserve to have Him come under his roof! *Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.*^{Lk.7:6-7} Whilst it is true that we don't deserve to have Jesus come to us, this is only part of the truth - **Jesus wants to come under our roof**—and Jesus wants to make His home with us: *"Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay at your house today."* So Zacchaeus came down at once and welcomed him gladly.^{Lk.19:5-6} *Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*^{Jn.14:23}

God is the **self-existent One** - the **"I am who I am."**^{Ex.3:14} He is **Omnipresent** (all present), *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*^{Ps.139:7-8} **Omniscient** (all knowing) *Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.*^{Jn.16:30} **Omnipotent** (all powerful) *I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?*^{Jer.32:27} and **Omnibenevolent** (perfectly good and all love) *You are good, and what you do is good.*^{Ps.119:68} God owes us nothing and we owe God everything **YET** God is **Gracious** – He is full of **Grace:** *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*^{Ps.103:8} And in Jesus we have received an abundance of **Grace:** *Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*^{Jn.1:16-17} *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} The Centurion had faith – great faith: *'But say the word, and my servant will be healed...'* *When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."*^{Lk.7:7-9} But the Centurion did not understand grace as Paul understood grace: *For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.*^{1Cor.15:9-10} *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.*^{2Tim.1:9-11} **Grace** is **not getting what we do deserve AND Grace** is also **getting what we do not deserve.** *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{Rom.6:23} **Grace** means that we **do not** receive the **death** that we **do deserve**, but **Grace** also means that we **do** receive the **life** that we **do not deserve**

So, stay humble, acknowledging that God is Almighty God - He alone is worthy and we are unworthy – but also stay rejoicing in **God's Grace**, recognising that God wants to stay with us

forever! Let's **respect God's Grace** but never **pervert God's Grace**: *For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.*^{Jude.1:4} **And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.**^{Acts.20:32}

Sunday 19th February 2017. 10.30am Ps.113 Lk.8:1-25

Where is your faith?^{Lk.8:25}

Last week we saw that the Centurion had **great faith** – he recognised that Jesus had the **ability** and **authority** to help - even though he didn't understand grace. Grace is God's "good will"- He **does not give us what we do deserve** (eternal death) **BUT** He **does give us what we do not deserve** (eternal life). *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{Rom.6:23} Paul however, did understand grace: *For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.*^{1Cor.15:9-10} This week we see that Jesus' Disciples had **little faith!** – they did not recognise that Jesus had the **ability** and **authority** to help. When the circumstances looked difficult, *they woke Jesus up and said, "Master! Master! We're going to drown!"*^{Lk.8:24} After Jesus calmed the storm He asked His Disciples: *Where is your faith?*

A similar event greatly affected John Wesley. In early 1736, John and Charles Wesley were sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to America when a severe storm burst just as some Moravians began their evening service. The sea raged, splitting the mainsail in shreds; the water covered the ship and poured in between the decks as if the great deep was about to swallow them up. The English travellers began to scream with terror, but the Moravians calmly sang on. Wesley asked one of them afterward: *"Were you not afraid?"* "I thank God, no," was the reply. *"But were not your women and children afraid?"* "No, our women and children are not afraid to die," he replied. At the close of the day's Journal, Wesley wrote, *"This was the most glorious day which I have hitherto seen."* On landing in Georgia, Spangenberg, a Moravian pastor asked Wesley: *"Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God witness with your spirit that you are a child of God? Do you know Jesus Christ?"* Wesley responded "I know he is the Saviour of the world." "True, but do you know he has saved you?" Wesley answered, "I hope he has died to save me." Spangenberg added, "Do you know yourself?" Wesley replied "I do!" But in his Journal, Wesley wrote, *"I fear they were vain words."* Two years later, Wesley returned to England and wrote: *"I went to America to convert the Indians, but, Oh! who shall convert me... But in a storm I think, What if the Gospel be not true... Oh who will deliver me from this fear of death... Where shall I fly from it"* Later that year, on May 24th, 1738 Wesley reluctantly attended a meeting in Aldersgate and later he wrote: *"I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."* Wesley was converted!

Study alone does not produce faith – in fact sometimes study can produce ignorance: *The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.*^{Lk.8:10} Faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ: *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} Wesley had studied Christianity and was an ordained Clergyman - but he had no faith because faith is a personal trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

Faith is initially a gift: *Keep in mind the amount of faith God has given you.*^{Rom.12:3} *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*^{Eph.2:8} But once we have received God's gift of faith, we are responsible for growing and nurturing our faith. In other words, after conversion, **we** are responsible for our own faith! Jesus said that the secrets (or, principles) of the Kingdom (i.e. our faith) is dependent on our response to the Word of God: *This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God.*^{Lk.8:10-11}

The Word of God and Scripture are connected but they are not the same. Ultimately Jesus is the Word of God,^{Jn.1:1} and the Scriptures are the written record of God's Word (Jesus). We can (and should) study the Scriptures and have the written record of God's Word **in our head** - studying the Scriptures is important if we are to know what God really says. *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*^{2Tim2:15} But we must have the **Word of God living in our heart** too! We must believe (i.e. trust) Jesus implicitly and explicitly because **He has the ability and authority to help**: *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.5:37-40} **Poor theology makes hard Christianity and good theology makes easy Christianity.** If we don't know what God says that we should do, ought to do and must do, we will end up spending our time and energy in activities that don't produce the results that God wants. For instance, some of the OT prayers are now obsolete because Jesus the Messiah has already come, He has already died for our sins, He has already returned to the Father and He has already sent the Holy Spirit! To ask God to do these things is not just a poor use of our time but an act of unbelief!

Although miracles, signs and wonders are dramatic, they won't sustain us in times of trouble. What will sustain us, is God's Word because it is our spiritual food, or "*daily bread*".^{Matt.4:4} Peter said that Scripture is more reliable than his experience of hearing God speak from heaven! *We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*^{2Pet.1:18-21}

The heart is the place where we believe: *"The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*^{Rom.10:8-10} **God's Word must be in our heart** not just our head, if it is to be effective: *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*^{Ps.119:11} But the devil will still try to snatch God's Word from our heart. *Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.*^{Lk.8:12} However, we can resist the devil by drawing near to God and standing firm in our faith: *Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.*^{Jas.4:7-8} *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*^{1Pet.5:8-9} We can stop the devil snatching away God's Word by protecting it, like a lion protecting its prey: *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.*^{Is.5:29} Praise (saying good words about God confidently and out of conviction) will protect God's Word from thieves!

We also need to be rooted (established) in our faith if we are to stay the course. *Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.*^{Lk.8:13} We must be able to stand firm in our faith because it is in our faith that we stand or fall: *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.*^{Eph.6:13-14} *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*^{2Cor.1:24} *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9} We must protect our faith at all costs because faith is the only thing that pleases God,^{Heb.11:6} and all that is not of faith is sin.^{Rom.14:23}

Life's worries, pleasures and riches can also kill our faith by strangling it (sapping the life out of our faith). *The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.*^{Lk.8:14} Worry is a "vote of no-confidence" in God! *If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength!*^{Prov.24:10}

For faith to grow into maturity we must **hear God's Word, retain it and persevere**: *But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*^{Lk.8:15} Difficult circumstances actually made Abraham's faith grow stronger. *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.*^{Rom.4:20-22} Anyone, regardless of their faith, can do good-works but only Believers trust God (have faith). Augustine said: "*The good works of an unregenerate man are in God's sight only so many splendid sins?*" Good works are a **consequence** of faith not the **evidence** of faith. **Faith in Action is believing God. So let's learn from Scripture and nurture our faith carefully so that it produces a good crop – a harvest of righteousness!**

Sunday 26th February 2017. 10.30am Ps.114 Lk.8:26-56

Jesus is Lord!

Christianity is not just an alternative culture or even another religion – Christianity is a commitment to Jesus Christ Himself. All other religions depend on conforming to a set of rules or values and they are usually hereditary with a national or cultural bias, mostly with some sort of initiation ceremony. But Christianity starts with repentance (literally, *changing our mind*) – repentance from sin and repentance unto God – we need to change our minds about sin and about God. *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,*^{Acts.3:19} *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death.)*^{2Cor.7:10} Sin is missing God's standard of total trust (faith): *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*^{Rom.3:23} *everything that does not come from faith is sin.*^{Rom.14:23} The Holy Spirit proves the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment so we no longer have any excuse about not believing God: *let me say it again, this truth: It's better for you that I leave. If I don't leave, the Friend won't come. But if I go, I'll send him to you. When he comes, he'll expose the error of the godless world's view of sin, righteousness, and judgment: He'll show them that their refusal to believe in me is their basic sin; that righteousness comes from above, where I am with the Father, out of their sight and control; that judgment takes place as the ruler of this godless world is brought to trial and convicted.*^{Jn.16:7-11}

Although Christianity begins with repentance from sin, it is much more than having our sins forgiven – Christianity is our commitment to Jesus Christ and how we relate to Him in our daily lives. *And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*^{Mk.1:4} *'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.'* On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. *When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.*^{Acts.19:4-6} Jesus Christ was much more than just a good person or powerful prophet, He is God's Son, who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, are the One True and Living God, the Eternal, Self-Existent "I AM" – **Jesus Christ is Lord**. Our salvation is about honouring **Jesus as Lord** in every part of our life and on every day of our life. Jesus declared Himself to be **Lord**: *You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.*^{Jn.13:13} God the Father exalted Jesus to the highest place – **Lord!** *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} To confess means to admit, profess or express agreement with. One Version puts it this way: *call out in praise that Jesus*

is Lord. We can never make Jesus Lord because **Jesus is already Lord** and His resurrection proved it: *For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.*^{Rom.14:9} All we can do is **confess**, admit, express agreement with, and call out in praise that, **Jesus is Lord**.

Under the OT people had to confess their sin before coming to God because sin was between them and God, but under the NT we **confess Jesus**: *“The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*^{Rom.10:8-10} This is because it is Jesus who is between us and God now - not our sin: *For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.*^{1Tim.2:5-6} The **New Covenant** is far, far better than the Old Covenant: *But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.*^{Heb.8:6} But people still prefer the old to the new! *No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better.’*^{Lk.5:36-39}

Confessing that **Jesus is Lord** saves us in any and every situation: **Jesus is Lord** of disasters,^{Lk.8:22f} **Jesus is Lord** of demons,^{Lk.8:26f} **Jesus is Lord** of diseases;^{Lk.8:40} and **Jesus is Lord** of death.^{Lk.8:49} Although we are not guaranteed immediate release or relief from our difficulties, we are guaranteed immediate support and strength in all our difficulties because **Jesus is Lord** of all and Jesus is with us, now and for ever - **Emmanuel**. *“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.*^{2Cor.12:9} When we recognise that **Jesus is Lord** – that He is in control of every situation and cares for us we can – and we must – rest in certainty of His love: *In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.*^{Is.30:15} *What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? ... Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{Rom.8:31-39}

Let’s keep focused on Jesus as Lord and see life through the prism of Jesus’ Lordship.

Comparison of Old Covenant and New Covenant:

Old Covenant	New Covenant
Man’s Responsibility	God’s Responsibility – <i>Heb.8:8-10; Eph.3:10</i>
Man failed to be righteous	Jesus is our Righteousness - <i>1Cor.1:30; 2Cor.5:21; Rom.3:21-22</i>
Man provided animals for sacrifices	God provides His Son as the Sacrifice – <i>Jn.1:29; 1Cor.5:7; 1Jn.2:2</i>
Man strove for victory	God gives the victory – <i>1Cor.15:57; 2Cor.2:14</i>
Bondage and slavery	Freedom – <i>2Cor.3:17; Gal.4:26/31; Gal.5:1</i>
Priest was a man	Priest is Jesus – <i>Heb.6:20; 8:1; 10:19-22</i>
Priest ministry was limited by his life	Jesus ministry is unlimited by His Resurrection – <i>Heb.7:26f</i>
God dwells in a place	God dwells in people – <i>Eph.2:22; 1Jn.4:12</i>
Veil separated man from God	Nothing separating man from God – <i>Rom.8:39; Eph.2:7</i>
Sacrifices repeated	Christ died once for all – <i>1Pet.3:18; Heb.7:27; 9:26; 10:12</i>

Sin covered over temporarily	Sin taken away permanently – <i>Rom.11:27; 1Jn.3:5</i>
People worshiped at Jerusalem	We worship in spirit and truth – <i>Jn.4:23; Phil.3:3</i>
Law of sin and death	Law of Spirit and Life – <i>Rom.8:2; 2Cor.3:6</i>
10 Commandments summarized as 2	1 New Commandment – <i>Jn.13:34-35; Gal.5:14</i>
God's law written on stone	God's law written in our hearts – <i>Heb.8:10; 10:16; 1Jn.5:10</i>
Law made man conscious of sin	Conscience is clean - <i>1Tim.1:5/19; Acts 23:1; Heb.9:14; 10:22; 13:18</i>
Set aside and now obsolete	Established and better than the 1 st - <i>Heb.8:6/13; 10:9</i>
Shadow and type	Substance and reality - <i>Col.2:14-17; Heb.10:1</i>
They were servants	We are sons (albeit still servants and friends) - <i>2Cor.6:18; Rom.1:1; John 15:12-15; Gal.3:26; 4:6/7</i>

March

Songs for the Moment: Zechariah. For you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him, to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. *Lk.1:76-77*

Sunday 5th March 2017. Ps.115

How Firm is your Faith? If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all. *Is.7:9*

Our Sunday School children have been looking at “*going against the flow*” this past month. It is often easier to “*go with the flow*” than to stand out in the crowd especially if others are ridiculing or bullying you. But it is only healthy and strong fish that can swim against the tide – the dead fish just *go with the flow*! It takes life and health and stamina and courage to be different particularly when your stand means that you are financially or socially worse off afterwards.

King David questioned whether it was worth obeying God when those who disobeyed seem to have a successful life but after talking it over with God, he decided that it was always good to do what is right. David concluded that those who disobey God will eventually slide down a slippery slope all the way into hell itself! *Ps.73* It takes **FAITH** – trust in God – to do what is right when others are doing what is wrong but there is great benefit in standing firm in our faith - an eternal salvation! As parents, we should always try to protect our children against suffering but we should not protect them against hardship. Neither should we be afraid of hardships or difficulties because they produce endurance and stamina in us. *My brothers and sisters, you will face all kinds of trouble. When you do, think of it as pure joy. Your faith will be put to the test. You know that when that happens it will produce in you the strength to continue. The strength to keep going must be allowed to finish its work. Then you will be all you should be. You will have everything you need.* *Jas.1:2-4* When we stand our ground, over small things, we will find it easier to stand against harder things. David fought the lion and bear before he fought Goliath. *1Sam.17:34-51* David’s mighty men *2Sam.23:8-23* did great exploits because they had learned to take their stand. Daniel took his stand against the ungodly laws by doing what he usually did - pray. *Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.* *Dan.6:10*

So how can we prepare for hardships and “going against the flow”? We need to eat good food, take exercise, put some effort into our work and to rest if going to stand firm.

Food: not all food is healthy and not all healthy food will provide the same results of strength or stamina. Our spiritual food is God’s Word *Mat.4:4* – who is Jesus – this the best of all foods and will make us strong. We receive this food predominately from the Bible, which we call “*God’s Word*”. That is why we must *read and inwardly digest* the Scriptures and there is a blessing in enjoying God’s Word: *Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.* *Ps.1:1-3*

Exercise: The words in the Bible are only truly effective when they are in our heart and then lived out in our daily lives – we must put God’s Word into practice. Jesus said: *My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.* *Lk.8:21* If we don’t do what God says we are hypocrites who recite their script word-perfect but that is all it is – a script for a show but not lines for their life: *My people come to you, just as they usually do. They sit in front of you. They listen to what you say. But they do not put it into practice. With their mouths they claim to be faithful to me. But in their hearts they want what belongs to others. They try to get rich by cheating them. You are nothing more to them than someone who sings love songs. They say you have a beautiful voice. They think you play an instrument well. They listen to what you say. But they do not put it into practice.* *Ex.33:31-32* We should follow David’s example: *This has been my practice: I obey your precepts.* *Ps.119:56*

Effort: To build up strength and stamina we must exert ourselves – we must make some effort. The **Fruit of the Spirit** is our spiritual character which comes from the Holy Spirit's life within us – BUT the **Fruit of the Spirit** is not like wild blackberry that grows anyhow and anywhere. No! The **Fruit of the Spirit** develops from our faith (which is a gift from God) and needs careful tending; it is the visible part (evidence) of our spiritual life - it is our spiritual character and we are responsible for taking care of it. If we don't **add to our faith** we have forgotten the very basics of our Christian faith – that all our sins have been forgiven: *For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is near-sighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.*^{2Pet.1:5-9}

Rest: If we are to stay the course and finish the race we must have our proper rest. This does not mean that we have “days off” from our faith – a holiday from God occasionally. No! Our rest is not a vacation but a cessation from work – the work of earning God's favour. *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.*^{Heb.4:9-11} Jesus renewed His strength and recovered from His tiredness by talking about God's business: *Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well... Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?” “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.*^{1Jn.4:6-34}

Our salvation is contrary to this world's philosophy and expectations and we will always be at odds with society at large but actually they are looking for what we have already found – peace with God. Whatever the hardships we face, God has guaranteed an eternal salvation: *Give praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us a new birth and a hope that is alive. It is alive because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He has given us new birth so that we might share in what belongs to him. It is a gift that can never be destroyed. It can never spoil or even fade away. It is kept in heaven for you. Through faith you are kept safe by God's power. Your salvation is going to be completed.*^{1Pet.1:3-5}

W.F.P. Burton (1886-1971) wrote a book **Safe Eternally** ([available to download from our Church website](#)) where he asks the question: What use is a **SALVATION** which does not make me **SAFE**, or an **ASSURANCE** of which I cannot be **SURE**? He then recalled this story as an illustration:

We used to hold meetings in the cottage of old Mrs. B. Over her fireplace was a picture entitled ‘Rock of Ages’ representing a white-robed girl with hair hanging down her back. She was soaked with water, and clinging to a rock in the shape of a cross, while her feet still dangled beneath her in the wild waves. There was a threatening background of rough sea and stormy sky. The old lady was very proud of this picture and would refer to it as she exhorted her hearers to cling to the Cross. Much of her Christian life was directed to keeping herself saved – “*hanging on*” – as she expressed it. One evening, we went for the weekly cottage meeting in her house and found the picture gone. The faded wall-paper round the spot from which it had been taken showed that something was missing. “*What has happened to your picture, Mrs. B?*” we asked. “*I’ve smashed it!*” she said most emphatically. “*Many’s the time I’ve looked at that poor girl hanging on, till it fairly made my arms ache for her. One slip and she would have been back beneath the waves, worse off than when she first fell into the sea. I’ve often wished there were something more secure than this ‘hanging on’ business. It seemed so risky with all those rocks, slippery with sea-weed. I’d like to have got the girl home, and given her a change of clothes and a good hot cup o’ tea. Today I was reading in First Peter chapter one, and when I came to the fifth verse: ‘Kept by the power of God, through faith’ I thought to myself, ‘The Lord Jesus is the Author and Finisher of my faith.*”^{Heb.12:2} *Even the believing is ‘Not for yourselves, lest any man should boast.*”^{Eph.2:8} It’s

the gift of God. I felt so safe with those Everlasting Arms underneath me, that when I looked up at the poor girl clinging there, it dawned on me suddenly— That picture is untrue. I'm not half in and half out. I'm saved with an everlasting salvation - saved from head to foot, seven days a week, from now on and for evermore. I'm not hanging to slippery rocks. I'm TWENTY MILES INLAND! So I pulled down the old picture, smashed it over my knee and shouted: Hallelujah!" I trust that you too, will end with a grateful recognition that you are as safe as your glorious Surety, there upon your Father's throne. I am sure that you too will send up a **Hallelujah!** to the Saviour, Who has not only lifted you from the waves, but Who has carried you TWENTY MILES INLAND!

Fate just "goes with the flow" and says "**What will be, will be!**" but **Faith** "goes against the flow" and says: "**God's Will, will be!**". Don't be dragged into this world's pattern of doubt and unbelief but by perseverance keep the faith and finish the race: *Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*^{2Pet.1:10-11}

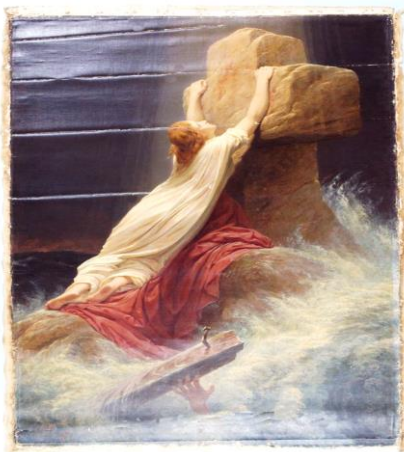


Figure Rock of Ages

Sunday 12th March 2017. Ps.24. Lk.9:1-36

Jesus is still Lord – and He's the Lord of Glory!

Last month we saw that **Jesus is Lord** and that He is Lord of all: **Jesus is Lord** of disasters;^{Lk.8:22f} **Jesus is Lord** of demons;^{Lk.8:26f} **Jesus is Lord** of diseases;^{Lk.8:40} and **Jesus is Lord** of death.^{Lk.8:49} This week we see that Jesus is the **Lord of Glory!**

Although these statements are all facts, just acknowledging them as being true is not faith. Faith is that complete trust in God and is seen in the quiet confidence brought about by God's peace in our heart (that innermost part of us that is our real "us"). *Only in returning to me and resting in me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength.*^{Is.30:15}

Faith is not just the ingredient to get us into heaven but the essential component of our daily life. After Jesus displayed His Lordship, He sent His Disciples out to preach and heal in His name and on their return they saw the power of Jesus again when the 5000 men (plus women and children^{Matt.14:21}) were fed from a boy's lunch. **Faith sees** beyond the power of Jesus to **the Person of Jesus** – the **Lord of Glory!** So when Peter declared: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,*^{Matt.16:16} Jesus affirmed that this was true faith and a revelation from God His Father. Until God removes the veil of unbelief from our eyes, we see dimly or not at all and we certainly don't see His glory. The removal of the veil of unbelief (revelation) is not difficult – we only have to call on the Name of Jesus: *But their minds were made stubborn. To this very day, the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. The veil has not been removed. Only faith in Christ can take it away. To this very day, when the Law of Moses is read, a veil covers the minds of those who hear it. But when anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*^{2Cor.3:14-16}

Although this removal of unbelief (revelation) occurs when we call on the Name of the Lord (conversion) we still have to overcome our prejudice and also our old way of thinking that was opposed to God. This takes work and effort but this is not sweat and tears work - *painful toil and sweat of his brow* was the result of Adam's sin ^{Gen.3:17-19} but Jesus has redeemed us from that curse when He died on the cross. ^{Gal.3:13} The work and effort needed to change is to contemplate (look intently) on God's glory: *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}

We see God's glory in Jesus and especially Jesus in the Scriptures: *So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.* ^{Jn.1:14} The work and effort of studying God's Word is a delight for Believers (God's Word is Jesus but especially Jesus in the Scriptures): *I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word... If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life.* ^{Ps.119:15-1;92-936} It is a delight because we have the Holy Spirit and so we can be spiritual: *The unspiritual self, just as it is by nature, can't receive the gifts of God's Spirit. There's no capacity for them. They seem like so much silliness. Spirit can be known only by spirit—God's Spirit and our spirits in open communion. Spiritually alive, we have access to everything God's Spirit is doing, and can't be judged by unspiritual critics. Isaiah's question, "Is there anyone around who knows God's Spirit, anyone who knows what he is doing?" has been answered: Christ knows, and we have Christ's Spirit.* ^{1Cor.3:14-16}

Jesus told Peter that he could allow what God allows: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; the things [and whatever] you don't allow on earth will be the things that God does not allow in heaven, and the things [whatever] you allow on earth will be the things that God allows in heaven.* ^{Matt.16:19} So if we have the same revelation as Peter, we too can allow what God allows. This revelation of Jesus being the Christ (that **Jesus is Lord**) gives us the privilege of becoming God's mouthpiece – His heralds and ambassadors.

Although the song "I did it my way" has been a popular hit for decades (especially at the funerals of unbelievers!), it is the opposite of God's plan for our life! Sadly, that mindset from pop-culture has crept into the Church so that some Christians think they should "have it their way." Some congregations have become a place where members demand their way instead of serving and self-sacrificing - more like country clubs than churches. (I am glad to say our Church is different!) Church is specifically for Christians – it is a time and place where we reverence, honour and worship our Lord Jesus Christ and a time and place to hear about God in a way makes us want to know Him more. The first and the greatest call on a Christian is to love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and Church is the place where we can do this together. For most non-Christians this is the last thing on their minds! Of course, we invite non-Christians to our Church activities and make them welcome but our Worship Services are not meant to attract unbelievers. Because Church is the place where we can learn about God and share His love, this is the obvious place for non-Christians to come if they want to know God. We should be (and hopefully are) a Great Commission church, inviting people and sharing the gospel but not at the expense of compromising our true values. Actually, biblical Churches are counter-cultural. The New Testament clearly teaches that members are to be sacrificial, giving, and serving, bringing glory to God by doing it **His way**. "I did it God's way" should be our theme!

Being a Christian means acknowledging that **Jesus is Lord** with our lips and our lives– that Jesus is important enough to follow and to honour. Jesus said that by just "going with the flow" we could forfeit our life! *If anyone wants to follow me, he must say no to himself. He must pick up his cross every day and follow me. If he wants to save his life, he will lose it. But if he loses his life for me, he will save it. What good is it if someone gains the whole world but loses or gives up his very self? Suppose you are ashamed of me and my words. The Son of Man will come in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels.*

Then he will be ashamed of you.^{Lk.9:23-26} (Our life is our soul – the personality part of us that we are responsible for. God is responsible for our spirit – He re-created our spirit at conversion^{1Pet.1:23;Ez.36:26} but our soul is our responsibility to sanctify.^{1Pet.1:9})

After Jesus spoke about His glory, He showed them a glimpse of His glory. *Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Then two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared and began talking with Jesus. They were glorious to see. And they were speaking about his exodus from this world, which was about to be fulfilled in Jerusalem. Peter and the others had fallen asleep. When they woke up, they saw Jesus' glory and the two men standing with him.*^{Lk.9:28-32} Heaven is filled God's glory: *Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*^{Acts.7:55} Jesus prayed that we might see God's glory: *Father, I want these whom you have given me to be with me where I am. Then they can see all the glory you gave me because you loved me even before the world began!*^{1n.17:24} We should be eager to experience this “glory” realm because that is where God's power is revealed, miracles become normal and the unexpected becomes expected. This “glory” of God is not spooky or weird (although some people purporting to experience God's glory are weird!). The glory of God is really “just” the presence of God - if you can describe God's presence as “just”! The glory of God will always be revealed when Jesus is honoured and listened to: *A voice came from the cloud. It said, “This is my Son, and I have chosen him. Listen to him.” When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone.*^{Lk.9:35-36} Mary found that place of glory at Jesus' feet, listening to Him: *Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*^{Lk.10:41-42}

Yes **Jesus is Lord** and He is the **Lord of Glory**, so let's seek His glory and honour - we will be amazed at what He does: *One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.*^{Ps.27:4}

Sunday 19th March 2017. Ps.116:1-7. Lk.9:37-62

God's DSO. The Distinguished Service Order (DSO) is a military decoration of the United Kingdom awarded for meritorious or distinguished service by officers of the armed forces during wartime, especially in actual combat. Most countries have an awards system that recognises bravery, or benevolent activity that is over and above the expected duty or behaviour of a person as a way of recognising greatness awards such as MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire), OBE (Officer), CBE (Commander), KBE (Knight), DBE (Dame).

God has an “awards system” that recognises the greatness of His citizens, but God's idea of greatness is not like this world's idea of greatness and neither is God's “award” a gold medal or some other social prestige. God's idea of greatness is to be the least and God's award is a crown of righteousness or life: *Whoever is the least among you is the greatest.*^{Lk.9:48} *As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his appearing.*^{2Tim.4:6-8} *Be faithful, even if it means you must die. Then I will give you a crown. The crown is life itself.*^{Rev.2:10}

We are considered great in God's Kingdom when we are lowly, humble and Christ-like – which is what God expects from all of us! *At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”*^{Matt.18:2-5} *You know that the rulers in this world lord*

it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.”^{Matt.20:25-28} We are expected to live by faith, not by our senses: *For we live by faith, not by sight.*^{2Cor.5:7} We are to live and make our decisions based on the values of God’s Kingdom - His Word, His Will, His Works - not based on our senses or our emotions – what we feel or what we prefer. *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*^{2Cor.4:18}

When we do something good, courageous or right, God doesn’t “mention us in dispatches” for all to read but He does keep a record of our behaviour and He will reward us for living by faith (being faithful). Doing good or making the right choice *per se* has no merit with God, we must do good and make the right choices **AND** trust God (i.e. have absolute confidence and assurance that we are serving God and that God accepts us). Abel and Cain are examples – they both brought a sacrifice to God but it was Able who believed God.^{Heb.11:4} Every time we trust God instead of worrying or being anxious, God makes a note of it and He will reward us. *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} Every time we honour God by saying the truth and living righteously, God records it and He will reward us: *Then those whose lives honoured GOD got together and talked it over. GOD saw what they were doing and listened in. A book was opened in God's presence and minutes were taken of the meeting, with the names of the GOD-fearers written down, all the names of those who honoured GOD's name. GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies said, “They're mine, all mine. They'll get special treatment when I go into action. I treat them with the same consideration and kindness that parents give the child who honours them. Once more you'll see the difference it makes between being a person who does the right thing and one who doesn't, between serving God and not serving him.*^{Mal.3:16-18}

We are expected to live differently from the world because we are different from the world and because we have a different Ruler than the world. The ruler of this world is the devil, but our Ruler is Jesus – He is Lord of lords and King of kings. *Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.*^{Jn.12:31} *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.*^{Eph.2:1-5}

To live honourably in God’s Kingdom requires determination, tenacity and courage as well as being born-again! We are in a battle and although this battle is for our spirit, the battle takes place in our minds. The devil can’t actually touch our spirit: *We know that God's children do not make a practice of sinning, for God's Son holds them securely, and the evil one cannot touch them. We know that we are children of God and that the world around us is under the control of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come, and he has given us understanding so that we can know the true God. And now we live in fellowship with the true God because we live in fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only true God, and he is eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:18-20} But the devil can touch our minds: *We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.*^{2Cor.10:3-5} *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} *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. 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—if you continue*

in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.^{Col.1:21-23} That is why we must protect our minds and transform them: *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} The way we transform our minds is to contemplate God's glory,^{2Cor.3:18} spiritual values and wholesome thinking: *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} *Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. 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. And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.*^{Phil.4:4-9}

To receive **God's DSO** we must live victoriously for Him – we must be overcomers.^{Rev.2-3} Then we will receive **God's Commendation**: *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!*^{Matt.25:21} (It will not be well done good leader, apostle or pastor!) We will also receive **God's DSO** - which is the crown of life, not a gold medal! *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*^{Jas.1:12} **So let's make every effort to receive that final DSO from God :** *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.9:24-27}

Sunday 26th March 2017. Ps.116:7-19. Lk.10:1-24

Are you an Overcomer? *I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*^{Lk.10:19-20}

With so many media reports of sportspeople taking performance-enhancing drugs it is easy to think that to succeed you must be super-human - or cheat! But to succeed in God's Kingdom we cannot cheat and we do not have to be super-human either! Whilst in sports or even business, success is measured by performance, in God's Kingdom success is measured by humility and faithfulness. As we saw last week: *You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.*^{Matt.20:25-28} Eight times in the book of Revelation, Jesus says that overcomers will be given a reward: *It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.*^{Rev.21:6-7} To overcome means to be victorious and to prevail, i.e. to persist against all opposition until you gain the victory. *To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations... He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{Rev.2:26-29}

Athletes need to overcome their fatigue and even pain in order to win their race. Soldiers need to overcome their enemy in order to win their battle. Christians need to overcome world and its influence in order to live in God's purposes. *Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—*

wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity.^{1Jn.2:15-17} God will fulfil His purposes for us, even though He may use people – even ungodly people: *The LORD will fulfil his purpose for me.*^{Ps.138:8} *Surely the wrath of man shall praise You,*^{Ps.76:8} *From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfil my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.*^{Is.46:11} However, we must co-operate with God and make sure that our purposes are the same as God's purposes: *With this in mind, we constantly 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.*^{2Thess.1:11-12} We certainly must never oppose God - to oppose God is not just human but satanic (the Hebrew word for “oppose” is actually “satan”). *Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey... But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose [Heb. satan] him.*^{Nu.22:21-22} When Peter opposed Jesus, He said: *Get behind me, satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.*^{Matt.16:23}

In order to co-operate with God, we must agree with Him and this requires a conscious decision from us. We make our decisions in our minds and our struggle is in our minds – that is where our battle-field is. **Spiritual warfare is about taking control of every thought and argument that opposes God:** *We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.*^{2Cor.10:3-7} The weapon God has given us is a Sword – the Word of God: *And take the sword of the Holy Spirit. The sword is God's word.*^{Eph.6:17} *Out of his mouth came a sharp sword that had two edges. His face was like the sun shining in all of its brightness.*^{Rev.1:16} And we wield that Sword by Faith – in fact everything we do that has any spiritual value must be energised by faith: *Without faith it isn't possible to please God.*^{Heb.11:6}

T.L.Osborn succinctly explains that spiritual warfare is not a militant conflict waged in prayer but the task of Christ's Witnesses in action, **winning the lost to Him**. It is the battle to get the attention of the unconverted and it is the struggle to overcome the negative concepts in people that oppose the Gospel so they can believe on Christ and in what He accomplished for them in His death on the cross. Spiritual warfare is successfully sowing the seed of the Gospel by the preaching of the Gospel and projecting the transforming power of God among people. Prayer and spiritual warfare are not the same and we must distinguish between them. Spiritual warfare is entering satan's turf with the Gospel, witnessing for Christ and bringing souls into God's Kingdom. Prayer is communion with the Father and so we must never contemplate that sacred season with demons on our mind. In prayer, we must never project a war with darkness or anticipate a battle with evil forces - Christ did all of that for us, in our name.^{Col.1:13;2:15} Our struggle is not waged on our knees, it is waged on our feet - in action out amidst the un-saved. As long as Christians stay on their knees instead of on their feet, witnessing among the lost, the enemy has prevailed. (**The Winning Secret** – available from our Church or download from our [Website](#))

But as well as the spiritual battle for Kingdom, there is also a real spiritual battle for us as individuals – for our minds, thoughts and emotions. The way we overcome our wrong thoughts and emotions is not by tackling satan or arguing with demons but by renewing our minds predominately through praise and prayer (prayer is communion with the Father and harmonizing with Him). *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.43:5} *After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendour of his holiness as they went out at the head of the*

army, saying: "Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever." As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against them... and they were defeated.^{2Chron.20:21-22}

And like prayer, faith is also harmonizing (agreeing) with God. No matter how powerful, prosperous or popular we are, it is only by faith that we will overcome. Overcomers continue to do God's will to the very end - they never give up but always trust God and so they prevail. Although the devil has already be defeated, disarmed and destroyed, he is still called the *prince of this world*^{n.12:3} and the *ruler of the kingdom of the air*.^{Eph.2:2} But to overcome we do not tackle the devil – only trample on him. *I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*^{Lk.10:19-20} *But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.*^{Mal.4:2-3} *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.*^{Rom.16:20} We do not wrestle the devil - only resist the him and he does not fight us but flees from us! *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.*^{Jas.4:7-8} *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. Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith. Remember that your Christian brothers and sisters all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering you are.*^{1Pet.5:6-9}

To overcome requires the Cross, Confession and Commitment: *They overcame him because the Lamb gave his life's blood for them. They overcame him by giving witness about Jesus to others. They were willing to risk their lives, even if it led to death.*^{Rev.12:11} **Jesus has already overcome the world:** *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}

And Jesus has given us authority to overcome too: *I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*^{Lk.9:19-20}

But we overcome by believing not battling: *This is love for God: to obey 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} **If we live as overcomers we will be able to claim our eternal reward of *our names are written in heaven.***^{Lk.9:19-20}

Mothering 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

April

Songs for the Moment: Simeon. Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all people. *Lk.2:29-31*

Sunday 2nd April 2017. Ps. 117.

Deal Pentecostal Church. Today is our AGM and what used to be a “*business meeting*” is now simply a “*presentation of reports*” where we present our accounts and give a brief report on the past year. We also take this opportunity to give thanks to God for the past year and ask His guidance for the coming year.

History can be gripping or griping—it all depends on whether you find it interesting or think that it has any relevance. History also repeats itself and so it can be very helpful to learn from our past so we don't make the same mistakes again. *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil [bad or worthless] things as they did... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us... So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ...And God is faithful; he will not let you be tested beyond what you can bear. But when you are tested, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* ^{1Cor.10:6-13}

Deal Pentecostal Church was formed in 1927 after a Campaign was held by Stephen Jeffreys in the Winter Gardens (now Astor Theatre) in Stanhope Road, Deal. Stephen Jeffreys was a coal miner from Maesteg, South Wales and was converted in 1904. This was during the Welsh Revival when more than 100,000 conversions were recorded in the first six months. Two years later in 1906 the Azusa Street Revival had started in Los Angeles and disseminated the Pentecostal doctrine across the world in just a few months. By 1907 Alexander Boddy's church at Sunderland had been impacted by this Pentecostal outpouring and news began to reach South Wales, where hungry hearts were stirred to seek God for similar manifestations. Before the end of 1907, Stephen and his brother George had experienced a mighty baptism of the Holy Spirit accompanied with speaking in other tongues. Stephen claimed that this experience added the power he needed in his witnessing for the Saviour. This is a report of one of his meetings: *I sat last night in his packed iron church and saw folk, their faces lit with ecstasy, swaying with emotion. "The spirit has come!" shouted one woman, sinking on her knees and bursting into prayer, and fervent ejaculations of contrition and devotion came from all around as, preaching in Welsh, Mr Jeffreys exhorted his hearers to repent. For hours it went on and so it will go on day after day and night after night. Remarkable cases of healing are reported.'* Here is another report: *Stephen called on a family of newly converted farmer friends, some of the family having been wonderfully healed in the Folkestone campaign. Their mother of seventy-nine years was dying of heart disease and gallstones. Stephen went in to pray for her. In his usual simple way he asked: "Mother, do you love Jesus?" "Yes. I accepted him when I was a little girl and have loved Him all my life." "Do you believe that if I pray for you Jesus will heal you?" "Yes." He laid his hands gently on her head and offered a simple prayer. A convulsive "Ooooooh" came from the old mother. "It's alright," Stephen reassured her, "God has given you a new heart." He had. She got up from her bed and later at the age of eighty-two years she was the first to be baptised on a winter's night in icy cold water and came out speaking in other tongues. She lived to the ripe age of ninety-three in perfect health.*

Stephen Jeffreys held campaigns and established Churches all across the country including East Kent—the Deal Campaign ran for two weeks from 19th May–3rd June 1927. For three weeks leading up to the Campaign, young men and women Crusaders canvassed the town with handbills and held open-air meetings in the town. The East Kent Mercury reported: *Evidently the Pastor believes in the maxim that the devil is mad when God's people are glad. His sermons are decidedly good.*

Redemption Tidings reported: *Altogether about 110 souls sought the pardon of their sins, the Lord also gave many Christians a new revelation of their inheritance in Christ. Many healings took place as the sick were ministered to in the Name of Jesus.* An Assemblies of God Church was formed after the campaign and an old organ factory in Nelson Street was leased, (this was actually a redundant

Baptist Chapel, that had been erected in 1814 and originally seated about 400). The building was completely refurnished and Mr. G. A. Hibbert of Grimsby, took over the Pastorate. The Church eventually bought a Hall in Albert Road/Western Road and in 1989 moved here in Mill Hill. This building was originally a “*Glynn Vivian Miners Mission*” which was established in 1927 to support the newly opened coal mines at Betteshanger and surrounding area.

In October 1927, the AoG magazine *Redemption Tidings* had this report: *Quite a transformation has taken place in what is now Glad Tidings Hall. Formerly the first Baptist Church in Deal, then an organ factory, it has now come into its first estate as a place where prayer is wont to be made, where a full and perfect salvation in Christ is preached, and baptism by immersion is practised. The pastor and his wife, are earnest and zealous, and there is a holy enthusiasm in the services, and quite a few have been won for Jesus. The attendances at the Assembly throughout the summer have been splendidly maintained, and the Friday evening Prayer Meeting has been the best attended Prayer Meeting in Deal - sometimes as many as 60 attending (a large number for this little town), and a spirit of fervent believing prayer has ascended up to the throne of grace. Of course, the enemy is at work, but, despite all, the work goes forward. Many can truly testify to a great spiritual longing satisfied, and there been have times when the “shout of a king has been among them”. My wife and myself can testify to a new spiritual impetus and joyousness in the Christian life through the meetings. On the last Sunday in July there was a Baptismal Service, when 15 were immersed, and we understand another baptismal service is being arranged for September 25th, when about 8 will obey the Lord's command. Last month a brother was poked in the eye with a cow's horn, causing the eye to swell as if a large rubber ball had been inserted, and great discolouration, but bless God, after prayers had been made according to James 5:14, the eye was all right and quite normal in 4 days, swelling, pain, and everything disappearing. Another Sister, who was staying at Deal, had been given 2 months to live and was very ill suffering from cancer, has also been healed, and put on 7lbs in a few weeks, and on going back to her home, the Doctor called her "The Resurrection."*

The Christian Church began at Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus was crucified. The Church was birthed in the supernatural with both spiritual and physical miracles abounding just as Jesus said it would. *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved... And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will... speak in new tongues... they will place their hands on sick people and they will get well.*^{Mk.16:15-18}

Over time the Church lost its first love and drifted into lethargy and legalism (although in every generation there was a remnant of true Believers). By the C16th the Church had become so far removed from its roots that the Reformation was inevitable. Most of the reformers discounted miracles as false because of the spurious ‘miracles’ associated with relics, superstition and unscriptural teaching of the Catholic Church. However, in the C18th opinions changed and there became an awareness of the Spirit’s operation. Wesley wrote: *I was fully convinced that the Montanists, in the second and third centuries, were real, scriptural Christians; and, that the grand reason why the miraculous gifts were so soon withdrawn, was not only that faith and holiness were well-nigh lost; but that dry, formal, orthodox men began even then to ridicule whatever gifts they had not themselves, and to decry them all as either madness or imposture.*

George Canty, a veteran Elim minister, commented: *Most people coming for healing and receiving cures simply expect it, get what they came for, and don't even come again... About 80% of people for whom we pray have no visible sickness and there is nothing dramatic to witness, or even report. Miracles occur, but only the patients know how real they were. In my Kings Cross campaign, a woman with chronic depression was immediately restored, so much so that her husband beat her up believing she was euphoric over meeting another man... The outsider often has more faith than those in the church. There is a remarkable public attitude towards the miraculous.*

So, where do we go from here? We go forward in the power and might of the Holy Spirit, expecting God to do more than we can ask think or imagine^{Eph.3:20} **and we keep to our values of love:** love for Jesus; love for God’s Word; love for God’s people; love for the people of the world; love for life—now and for ever. **How do we do this? We continue to praise, pray**

and prophesy. (Remember *the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10}) **We continue to delight in God's Word** as we study and encourage others to trust God. *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.*^{Is.8:20} **We continue to share what God has done for us** being active in sharing our faith.^{Phile.1:6} **We continue to live for God,** knowing that if we live as sons of God we shall (eventually) die as sons of God^{Ps.82:6-7} and be welcomed into our eternal Home: *Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*^{2Pet.1:10-11}

God is Good, His Word is True and it Works in my Life. Yes, we have a wonderful and glorious past—both locally and universally—and we have a wonderful and glorious future—so let's keep going!

Sunday 9th April 2017. Ps.118:19-29. Lk.19.

What will bring you peace? *If you had only known on this day what would bring you peace.*^{Lk.19:39-42}

The Nobel Peace Prize was created by the Swedish industrialist, inventor, and armaments manufacturer Alfred Nobel. Since December 1901, it has been awarded annually (with some exceptions) to those who have "*done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses*". Maybe this was Nobel's way to compensate his invention of dynamite and ballistite—both high explosives—which were used violently during his lifetime. Among those who have been awarded the NPP include: Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu. Incredibly Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler were nominated for the NPP but were not awarded it!

Ever since sin came into the world, God has promised a Messiah who would bring peace. **True peace however, is not an absence of war but reconciliation to God.** The OT prophecies were written to prepare people for the Messiah, including the time, place and context of His birth; the setting and nature of His ministry; the events surrounding His death and even after His death. The Jews knew the Messiah would be like Moses: *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, 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.*^{Dent.18:18-19} The Jews also expected the Messiah to re-enact the miracles of Moses during the Exodus. Thus, when Jesus came, He linked many of His miracles to the Exodus: Passover, Bread of Life, Living Water, etc. Indeed, when Jesus was transfigured, Moses spoke to Him about the Exodus: *Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure [exodus], which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem.*^{Lk.9:30-31} Some of the Messianic prophecies were fulfilled by the natural course of events—like Jesus' birth; some were fulfilled by the evil intent of men—like Jesus' death; but others were fulfilled by intentional and deliberate planning—like Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. *Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'"*^{Lk.19:29-31} The crowds recognised the significance of Jesus riding on the donkey by linking it to the Messianic prophecy: *Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*^{Zech.9:9} And they responded by calling Jesus the Messiah and singing: *Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*^{Matt.21:19}

Because the Messiah was going to usher in God's Kingdom, the Jews were expecting Him to release them from Roman rule (as Moses had released them from Egyptian rule). But the Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, not a physical kingdom—it is the domain of the King of kings not of Caesar or Herod or any other earthly king. Nevertheless, the links between Jesus

and the Messianic promises were clear and deliberate enough for Peter to say: *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”*^{Matt.16:16} And so when Jesus the Messiah (Christ) ushered in God’s Kingdom, He showed us God’s plan of Salvation—by precept and practice. *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*^{Lk.19:10} *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*^{Mk.10:45} But fact and faith are not the same and in order to have faith (trust) we need the Holy Spirit: *The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.*^{1Cor.2:14} *Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.*^{2Cor.4:4} By turning to the Lord, people can have faith (trust): *To this very day, the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. The veil has not been removed. Only faith in Christ can take it away. To this very day, when the Law of Moses is read, a veil covers the minds of those who hear it. But when anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*^{2Cor.3:14-16} Jesus explained that only He—the Prince of Peace,^{Is.9:6} the Messiah—can bring true peace. *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} But again the people refused to receive Him and so they had no peace: *Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”*^{Lk.19:39-42}

Peace is not the result of prayer and neither is it something we can achieve by doing good. Peace is the result of knowing God **and** Jesus—it is the result of righteousness and the fruit of the Holy Spirit: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace.*^{Gal.5:22} *The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Though hail flattens the forest and the city is levelled completely.*^{Is.32:17-19} *Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.*^{Ps.85:} *“There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”*^{Is.57:21} ¹⁰ (Righteousness is credited to us when we believe God: *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*^{Rom.3:22})

It is God who establishes peace for us: LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.^{Is.26:12} And His peace is extensive—like a river: *If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea.*^{Is.48:18} *For this is what the LORD says: “I will extend peace to her like a river.”*^{Is.66:12} God’s Peace is part of His Covenant (a covenant is a legally binding contract): *I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken. I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of savage beasts so that they may live in the wilderness and sleep in the forests in safety. I will make them and the places surrounding my hill a blessing.*^{Ez.34:22-26}

Only Jesus can bring us true peace because Jesus Himself is our peace and He brought us peace by dying on the Cross: *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*^{Eph.2:14-18} *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*^{Is.53:5} And so true peace comes through the Cross not through peaceful circumstances. *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} **True peace from God is**

eternal and dependant on Him (unlike the world's "peace" which is transitory and dependant on circumstances). *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*^{Jn.14:27} *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}

So God Himself is our peace^{Jdg.6:24} and His words bring peace: *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:165} As we ponder (absorb and savour—what the Psalmist calls "Selah") God's Word, we grow in our spiritual life: *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. [Every word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making.]*^{Jn.6:63} **So let's recognise what brings us true peace—then we will be spiritually and mentally stable and be good citizens in God's kingdom.** *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.*^{Is.26:3}

Easter Sunday 16th April 2017. Ps.24. Lk.24.

Christ is Risen! *Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!*^{Lk.24:5-6}

The resurrection of Jesus is basic to Christianity^{Heb.6:1-2} and yet some of the established Churches have been very weak in the proclamation of this essential tenet of our faith and some even tolerate Ministers who doubt Jesus' resurrection. In 2002, a poll of nearly 2,000 of the Church of England's 10,000 clergy found that one third doubted or disbelieved in the physical Resurrection and only half were convinced of the truth of the Virgin birth or believed that faith in Christ is the only route to salvation.^{Daily Telegraph July 2002} In 1997, a poll of American adults found that 35% of "Born-again Christians" believed that Jesus was crucified but **not** physically resurrected (they defined a "Born-again Christian" as an individual who has "made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who then indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their Saviour.")^{Barna Research} This year a BBC poll found that 23% of those calling themselves Christians "do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead" at all and among Christians who regularly go to church, only 57% believe completely in the resurrection, but 5% do not believe in it at all.^{Daily Telegraph April 2017} Contrast that with Paul's teaching: *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith doesn't mean anything. Your sins have not been forgiven. Those who have died believing in Christ are also lost. Do we have hope in Christ only for this life? Then people should pity us more than anyone else. But Christ really has been raised from the dead.*^{1Cor.15:14-20} **Yes, belief in the resurrection of Jesus is an essential requirement to being a Christian:** *if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*^{Rom.10:9-10}

When something unique happens, it takes everyone by surprise and so it is understandable that those first Disciples found it hard to believe in Jesus' resurrection: *He is not here; he has risen! ...But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.*^{Lk.24:6-11} Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.^{Mk.16:14} However, God had prepared them for Jesus' resurrection by the predictions in the OT Scriptures: *He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*^{Lk.24:25-27} But in any case it is not difficult for God to raise the dead: *Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?*^{2Acs.26:8} Today, as well as the predictions in the OT Scriptures and Jesus' preaching, we also have the irrefutable proof of Jesus' resurrection from the actual witnesses who saw Him, talked to Him and even touched Him: *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he*

appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.^{1Cor.15:3-8} Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.^{Lk.24:36-40}

So what difference does Jesus' resurrection make?

Jesus' resurrection proves that He is the Son of God: regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.^{Rom.1:3-4}

Jesus' resurrection assures us that our sins are forgiven: In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you.^{1Pet.1:3-4} This water [that saved Noah] symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.^{1Pet.3:21-22}

Jesus' resurrection enables us to live a new life: We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.^{Rom.6:4} Having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.^{Col.2:12}

Jesus' resurrection assures us that we will be raised from the dead: But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.^{1Cor.15:20-23}

The willingness of people to die for their belief in Jesus' resurrection (especially those who were sceptical or opposed Jesus and His Followers) shows that this is not just an historical event but this is also a life-changing event that has repercussions today. The power needed to raise Jesus from the dead is the same power that is available for Christians today. That is why Paul prayed that we might be enlightened in our "heart". *I pray also 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 the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.*^{Eph.1:18-21} Our "heart" is our mind or soul and is where God writes His laws: *This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*^{Heb.8:10} When our minds are opened to see Jesus in the Scriptures, our "hearts" are energised—we are spiritually nourished (there is also a "feel-good" factor as well!): *Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?*^{Lk.24:32} When our "hearts" are energised (empowered) we will talk about Jesus and His resurrection with conviction: *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.*^{2Cor.4:13-14} *My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.*^{Ps.39:3} *But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.*^{Jer.20:9} *"Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"*^{Jer.23:29}

Yes, Jesus' resurrection is our Gospel: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8} **We serve a Risen Saviour who lives within our hearts—Emmanuel!**

*I serve a risen Saviour, He's in the world today; I know that He is living, whatever men may say.
I see His hand of mercy, I hear His voice of cheer and, just the time I need Him, He's always near.
He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.
He lives, He lives salvation to impart! You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.*

Sunday 23rd April 2017. Ps.119:1-8. Jn.21.

Jesus' Resurrection brings Restoration.

Last week we saw that the resurrection is an essential tenet of Christianity and you cannot be a Christian without believing (trusting implicitly and explicitly) in Jesus' resurrection: *if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*^{Rom.10:9-10} This is because Jesus' resurrection is the basis of our salvation—our sins have not been forgiven if Jesus has not been raised from the dead: *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith doesn't mean anything. Your sins have not been forgiven. Those who have died believing in Christ are also lost. Do we have hope in Christ only for this life? Then people should pity us more than anyone else. But Christ really has been raised from the dead.*^{1Cor.15:14-20}

Resurrection is not the same as resuscitation or reincarnation. **Resuscitation** is the restoration to life after someone has died or their respirations have ceased. The person is just the same after they are resuscitated as before they died (albeit is little *worse-for-wear!*) and they live to finally die again because death is the inheritance of all of Adam's offspring! Jesus' death was too extreme to be resuscitated and besides, there was no-one available to resuscitate Jesus when he was locked in the tomb! **No! Jesus was not resuscitated.** **Reincarnation** (literally "*entering the flesh again*") is the [false] belief that after a person dies, they start a new life in a different physical body or form. Reincarnation (also known as "*re-birth*") is a central tenet of all major Indian religions and asserts that the nature of existence is a "*suffering-laden cycle of life, death, and rebirth, without beginning or end*"—a "*wheel of existence*". **No! Jesus was not reincarnated either!**

The resurrection of Jesus was unique because no-one had ever been resurrected before. In the OT there at least 3 people who were raised from the dead (*1Kng.17:17-23; 2Kng.4:32-37; 2Kng.13:21; and probably Jonah*). Jesus raised at least 3 people from the dead (*the widow's son: Lk.7:12-15; Jairus' daughter: Lk.8:49-55; Lazarus: Jn.11:43-44*). All these rose from the dead (not resuscitated or reincarnated in another body) only to die again—they still had a mortal body. After Jesus' resurrection there are records of 2 people in the NT who were raised from the dead (*Dorcas Acts.9:37-40 and Eutychus Acts.20:9-12*). All these were still mortal and had to die again! When Jesus died, He laid down His own life (i.e. He allowed the Jews and Romans to crucify Him): *The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.*^{Jn.10:17-18} So, Jesus died a Victor (not a victim) and He arose a Victor. *Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.*^{Rev.1:17-18} Death could not hold Jesus down. *But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*^{Acts.2:24} *For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.*^{Rom.6:9-10} Jesus rose from the dead with a body that would never perish or die; He could appear and disappear; pass through closed doors; eat or not eat—because His body had been

changed from mortal to immortal. *He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*^{2Tim.1:9-10}

We already **have eternal life** because our **spirit** was made alive at conversion: *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.*^{1Jn.5:11-12} And we **will have immortal life** at the final resurrection when our **body** will be made alive: *Adam, the first man, was made from the dust of the earth, while Christ, the second man, came from heaven. Earthly people are like the earthly man, and heavenly people are like the heavenly man. Just as we are now like the earthly man, we will someday be like the heavenly man. What I am saying, dear brothers and sisters, is that our physical bodies cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. These dying bodies cannot inherit what will last forever. But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies. Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*^{1Cor.15:47-55}

Although we have eternal life now and immortal life to come, like Peter, sometimes we relapse—do something wrong or even turn away from God. But like Peter, there is a restoration awaiting us. When we oppose God, we offend and grieve the God who is now our Father: *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.*^{Jn.1:12-13} However, the price for our sin—our rebellion or our relapse—has already been paid in full when Jesus died on the Cross and His resurrection proves it. The Bible says that, *without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*^{Heb.9:22} We 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. *If righteousness comes through the Law [good works], then Christ died needlessly.*^{Gal.2:21} No, it is by faith and by faith alone that we receive our forgiveness. No human additives—just confidence in what God has already done. *But Jesus gave one sacrifice for the sins of the people. He gave it once and for all time. He did it by offering himself.*^{1Heb.7:27} We should not sin but if we do sin, we must put it right with God as quickly as possible—but remember, the price, the penalty, has already been paid—in full: *My dear children, I'm writing this to you so that you will not sin. But suppose someone does sin. Then we have one who speaks to the Father for us. He stands up for us. He is Jesus Christ, the Blameless One. He gave his life to pay for our sins. But he not only paid for our sins. He also paid for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.2:1-2} So now when we pray, we pray to God as our Father: *The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this: Our Father in heaven...*^{Matt.6:7-9} In prayer, there is no attacking the devil or fighting demons for they are already defeated by Jesus on the cross. Some Christians emulate Don Quixote who fought windmills that he imagined were giants: *"Do you see over yonder, friend Sancho, thirty or forty hulking giants? I intend to do battle with them and slay them. With their spoils we shall begin to be rich for this is a righteous war and the removal of so foul a brood from off the face of the earth is a service God will bless."* "Take care, sir," cried Sancho. "Those over there are not giants but windmills." The strongholds we are to demolish are real but they are in people's minds (including our own)—they are arguments and pretensions against God. *I do live in the world. But I don't fight my battles the way the people of the world do. The weapons I fight with are not the weapons the world uses. In fact, it is just the opposite. My weapons have the power of God to destroy the camps of the enemy. I destroy every claim and*

every reason that keeps people from knowing God. I keep every thought under control in order to make it obey Christ.^{2Cor.10:4-5} T.L.Osborn wrote: Prayer is communion with the Father and so we must never contemplate that sacred season with demons on our mind. In prayer, we must never project a war with darkness or anticipate a battle with evil forces - Christ did all of that for us, in our name.^{Col.1:13;2:15}

If we do relapse, **Jesus' resurrection can bring restoration for us**—and His restoration is implemented by loving Jesus and loving His sheep: Again Jesus asked, “Simon, son of John, do you really love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”^{Jn.21:16}

How do we know that we love God's children? We know it when we love God and obey his commands. Here is what it means to love God. It means that we obey his commands.^{1Jn.5:2-3}

Sunday 30th April 2017. Ps.119:9-16. Lk.10:25-42

Don't get distracted!

The greatest accomplishment for anyone to achieve is to love God with their whole being—heart, soul and mind: “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 places the love of God above any social or financial activity—and it even places loving God above all spiritual activities, including helping the poor, evangelism and praying! But loving God is not an ethereal existence in exclusion from the world. No! **Loving God is expressed in the way we conduct our daily lives as well as the way we praise and pray:** The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.^{Gen.2:15} (This word “work” is also translated “serve” and “worship” in other places.) Christianity is whole-hearted and there is no place for half-heartedness when it comes to our faith. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.^{Col.3:17} Worship is the spiritual activity of submission to God and reverence of Him. Worship is not just doing the right thing—it is doing the right thing with the right attitude and for the right reason: God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.^{Jn.4:24} 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} **True worship is obedience (doing what God says):** Abraham said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”... “This is what the LORD says: Because you have obeyed me... I will certainly bless you.”^{Gen.22:5;16-17}

Both Mary and Martha both wanted to worship Jesus—Mary by sitting at Jesus' feet (the place of learning and submission) and Martha by serving (ensuring all the practical needs were met). Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”^{Lk.10:38-42} At first glance, it seems unfair that Martha was left to do all the work while Mary received all the spiritual benefit! But this was written to instruct us: For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.^{Rom.15:4} Jesus' response to Martha, makes it clear that she was doing the right thing but

with a wrong attitude—she was *distracted by all the preparations that had to be made*, and *worried and upset about many things*. Like Cain, she brought an offering to God but without faith (she was anxious and upset): *By an act of faith, Abel brought a better sacrifice to God than Cain. It was what he believed, not what he brought, that made the difference. That's what God noticed and approved as righteous. After all these centuries, that belief continues to catch our notice.*^{Heb.11:4}

Life has many distractions which can rob us of our fruit: *And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.*^{Lk.8:14-15} We should be careful that we don't get entrapped with the anxieties of life: *Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with... the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.*^{Lk.21:34-36} We should also be careful that we

don't get distracted by the essential things of life such as work that we have to do such as: preparations that have to be made, food to eat or clothes to wear. It not that these are wrong but they must not distract us from our priority of loving God with *all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind*: *That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food to eat or enough clothes to wear. For life is more than food, and your body more than clothing. Look at the ravens. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for God feeds them. And you are far more valuable to him than any birds! Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And if worry can't accomplish a little thing like that, what's the use of worrying over bigger things? Look at the lilies and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for flowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? And don't be concerned about what to eat and what to drink. Don't worry about such things. These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers all over the world, but your Father already knows your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need. So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom.*^{Lk.12:22-32}

Loving God means respecting what God respects and caring for what God cares for—including respecting and caring for our neighbours (the people who are near enough for us to help). But we must not make the mistake of thinking that helping others will help us get into heaven! In the story of the “*Good Samaritan*,” Jesus explains that to inherit eternal life, we must love God and love our Neighbour but this Neighbour is the One who found us dying, rescued us, healed us, paid for us and will return for us. “*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!*” The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, “*And who is my neighbor?*”^{Lk.10:25-29} We receive eternal life by believing in God's Son, not by helping others: *And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.*^{Jn.17:3} BUT Jesus expects us to do the same caring as He did: “*Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*” The expert in the law replied, “*The one who had mercy on him.*” Jesus told him, “*Go and do likewise.*”^{Lk.10:36-37} Loving other people and being good to them is right but not righteousness. Righteousness is literally *right-wiseness*—being right with God and being wise about it (knowing it)—and: *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*^{Rom.3:22} Eternal life comes from believing in God's Son (placing our explicit and implicit trust in Jesus to save us from our sins). *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.3:16} And so eternal life is only for the righteous (being right with God): *Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*^{Matt.25:46}

True worship (reverence and love for God) starts with loving God but our love is seen in the way we care for others—including those who are not yet Christians. Indeed, ministry is serving and caring for others—crying with them; laughing with them; feeding them; mowing their lawn; fixing their broken... etc. Ministry means doing whatever is necessary to help others overcome their problems and grow in confidence and holiness. We grow like plants. When we minister to someone we tend them like we tend a garden. The ministry of a servant has a lot more in common with the nurse-patient or parent-child relationship than it does with the social worker-client relationship that is so often the model for "ministry" in the church. The truth is that ministry is much more than wise counsel and inspired prayer. It includes these things, but most of the most important and necessary kinds of ministry are simple practical stuff. Listening. Babysitting. Driving people around town. **Ministry means taking care of people, putting them first.** Ministry is the work of a servant. **It's simple work but also hard work because it means putting yourself in the back-seat, and that is never easy.** (From *Kingdom Ministry* by John Wimber available from our website.)

Let's continue to worship God in spirit and truth without being distracted, so that whether we set meals or sit at Jesus' feet, our reward will not be taken away. *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*^{Col.3:17}

May

Songs for the Moment: Moses. The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise Him, my father's God, and I will exalt Him. *Ex.15:2*

Sunday 7th May 2017. Ps.119:17-24

God is Good; His Word is True; and it Works in my Life

Our Sunday School children have been learning about the Book of Daniel this past month and have learned about Daniel's stand for righteousness, his absolute confidence in God for safety and protection and his prophetic ministry. As well as learning about Daniel in the lions' den and his friends in the fiery furnace, our children also learned about Nebuchadnezzar's tree and discovered some more of Nebuchadnezzar's trees—vanitree and humilitree!

Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about a Statue made of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay and this really sets the scene for the Book of Daniel as well as reinforcing the theme of the Bible itself. Actually, the dream was not really about the statue itself but about the Stone that smashed the statue—and that Stone was Jesus and His Kingdom. *King Nebuchadnezzar, you looked up and saw a large statue standing in front of you. It was huge. It shone brightly. And it terrified you. The head of the statue was made out of pure gold. Its chest and arms were made of silver. Its stomach and thighs were bronze. Its legs were made out of iron. And its feet were partly iron and partly baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out. But human hands didn't do it. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay. It smashed them. Then the iron and clay were broken to pieces. So were the bronze, silver and gold. All of them were broken to pieces at the same time. They became like straw on a threshing floor at harvest time. The wind blew them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain. It filled the whole earth.*^{Dan.2:30-35}

Daniel explained the meaning of the Statue to Nebuchadnezzar: *Nebuchadnezzar, you are the greatest king of all... You are that head of gold. After you, another kingdom will take over. It won't be as powerful as yours. Next, a third kingdom will rule over the whole earth. The bronze part of the statue stands for that kingdom. Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom. It will be as strong as iron. Iron breaks and smashes everything to pieces... You saw that the feet and toes were made out of iron and baked clay... And the fourth kingdom will be partly strong and partly weak... In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever.*^{Dan.2:39-44} The Statue's head was the Babylonian kingdom which reached its zenith under Nebuchadnezzar (606-562 B.C.); its chest and arms represented the Medo-Persia kingdom (established by Cyrus in 539 B.C.); the stomach and thighs represented the Greek Empire (under Alexander about 331 B.C.); and its legs and feet represented the Roman Empire from 63 B.C. Then Jesus represented by the Stone who established His Kingdom which smashed the Statue (other kingdoms) to pieces: *From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*^{Matt.4:17} *The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst.*^{Lk.17:20-21} *Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*^{Matt.26:28}

Jesus' Kingdom is not a political or even a geographical kingdom—it is a spiritual Kingdom. God's Kingdom is the reign in people's hearts of Jesus the Messiah—the King's domain. *Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.*^{Matt.7:21} *Jesus answered, "My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world."*^{Jn.18:36} *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}

The Book of Daniel (like the rest of the Bible) is not about predicting the future but about King Jesus and His Kingdom—including how to be part of that Kingdom (the Saviour and how to be saved). There are no “*hidden codes*” in the Bible revealing tomorrow’s news! The same methods detecting such “*hidden codes*” that supposedly predicted Adolf Hitler in the Bible, can also predict Hitler in other literature such as Shakespeare or Moby Dick! If you look long enough, you can find any “*hidden message*” that you want in any sizeable book. **The only “*hidden code*” in the Bible is Jesus:** *This is the revelation of Jesus Christ. God gave it to him to show his servants the things that must happen soon. He sent this revelation through his angel to his servant John. John testified about what he saw: God's word and the testimony about Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads, as well as those who hear the words of this prophecy and pay attention to what is written in it because the time is near.*^{Rev.1:1-}

³ *However, their minds became closed. In fact, to this day the same veil is still there when they read the Old Testament. It isn't removed, because only Christ can remove it. Yet, even today, when they read the books of Moses, a veil covers their minds. But whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*^{2Cor.3:14-16} He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them *what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*^{Lk.24:25-27}

However, the Bible is uniquely prophetic. No other religious or holy book makes predictions of the future like the Bible does. This phenomenon has led some Bible teachers to over-emphasise the Bible's ability to predict the future. **But the Bible was written for us, not to us.** To interpret Bible Prophecy, we must use the same basic principles of Biblical interpretation that we interpret any other passage of Scripture. The writers of the Bible had a particular immediate audience in mind when God was inspiring their text. For example: *When you come, bring the warm coat I left with Carpus in the city of Troas. Also bring the scrolls and especially the parchments.*^{2Tim.4:13} It would be ludicrous to claim that Paul intended this to be an instruction for any other reader than the one his letter was addressed to—Timothy! Therefore, in many cases, what was future to the original audience is now past for us today.

Bible Interpretation is not speculation. When it comes to ‘*interpreting*’ Bible prophecy, some teachers only have one method: **speculation**. That is, they come up with a theory then ‘*massage*’ the message Scriptures to make them fit their guesswork. The Bible does not predict a one-world government in “*the last days*”—or any days!; nor a dictator who will rule the entire world; nor a cashless society; nor a super-computer with a database with the entire world's personal information records on it; nor...! No! The Bible is not tomorrow's newspaper and it has nothing to say about the destiny of the UK, the EU, the United States; nor what will happen to the global economy. **Instead, the Bible reveals that while we await the return of Christ we are to be busy about the Lord's work—the Great Commission. We should be sowing Gospel-seed** that can be harvested for generations to come. **We should be salt and light** to our communities. **We should be a prophetic light** exposing the darkness being promoted by the world's politicians and media outlets. Does the Bible prophesy that we will succeed at this? This is actually the wrong question! Scripture presents God's desire for all people to be saved; all nations to worship Him; and for the Gospel to be taken to every nation—but it also tells us, that not all people will choose to surrender to Christ, and that followers of Christ can expect tribulation as they take the Gospel to the world.

So what should our attitude be to the state of this world and what the future may hold? We must continue to confess that Jesus is Lord (*confess* = *homo-logos*: to agree; to say the same as God says). And God says that He has already set up a **Kingdom that will never be taken over by another kingdom:** *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever.*^{Dan.2:39-44}

Yes: God is Good; His Word is True; and it Works in my Life

God is Good: *You are good, and what you do is good.*^{Ps.119:68} *No one is good except God.*^{Mk.10:18}

His Word is True: *Use the truth to make them holy. Your word is truth.*^{Jn.17:17}

It Works in my Life: *thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn't think of our words as mere human ideas. 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}

So let's continue to pray that God's Kingdom comes and His will is done one earth as it is in heaven. *The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.*^{Ps.145:13} *The LORD will fulfil his purpose for me;*^{Ps.138:8} *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfils his purpose for me.*^{Ps.57:2}

Sunday 14th May 2017. Ps.119:25-32. Lk.11:1-28

Prayer

The Bible instructs us to “*pray without ceasing*”^{1Thes.5:17} but “prayer” *per se* is not just Christian activity—most religions “pray” to their so-called “*deities*” and the Old English word *prithēe* (*pray thee*) was used in everyday conversation and meant *I'm asking you* or *please* (in the sense of pleading). However, all Christian prayer addresses God as our Father through the mediation of Jesus Christ.

Christian prayer can take many forms: *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—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.*^{1Tim.2:1-3} But most of our praying should be that very personal and intimate fellowship with God that Jesus described as “*behind closed doors*” (no distractions, no one else to try to impress—just you and God): *But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.*^{Matt.6:6} As well as private prayer there is also public prayer, where we agree together before God (often in Church but it can be anywhere and with any one)—here it is important to let others know what you are praying: *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding... Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?*^{1Cor.14:14-16} Note, this sort of praying is linked to praise (thanksgiving) rather than pleading: *The Lord is near. 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.*^{Phil.4:5-7} *Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening.*^{Acts.16:25}

There is very little instruction about the **practice** of praying in the NT and I believe that this is because prayer is not a “*ministry gift*” given to the few but **a ministry for all!** (Prayer is not mentioned in any of the lists of “*spiritual gifts*” or “*ministries*” in the NT.) Prayer is not something that can be delegated to an “*expert*” who will pray for you (like voting by proxy). No! Prayer is the very life-breath of **every Christian**—it is our own personal communication with Almighty God. Prayer (whether private or public) is communion with the Father: *In prayer there is a connection between what God does and what you do. You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.*^{Matt.6:14-15} Prayer is so simple that even a child may participate: *This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven...*^{Matt.6:9} yet so profound that the academic cannot understand it: *But to those called by God to salvation Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*^{1Cor.1:24-25} “Have faith in God,” Jesus said. “What I'm about to tell you is true. Suppose one of you says to this mountain, ‘Go and throw yourself into the sea.’ You must not doubt in your heart. You must believe that what you say will happen. Then it will be done for you. So I tell you, when you pray for something, believe that you have already received it. Then it will be

yours. And when you stand praying, forgive anyone you have anything against. Then your Father in heaven will forgive your sins.”^{Mk.11:22-25} Tozer (1897 - 1963) prayed: *Lord make me childlike. Deliver me from the urge to compete with another for prestige or position. I would be simple and artless as a little child. Deliver me from pose and pretence. Forgive me for thinking of myself. Help me to forget myself and find my true peace in beholding Thee.*

Under the OT people could only approach God if they undertook various specific religious rituals and an appointed person (a priest) spoke to God on their behalf: *the priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven.*^{Lev.4:35} Under the NT we still need a priest but Jesus is our Priest: *For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*^{1Tim.2:5-6} Job prophetically spoke an Intercessor who was also a Friend: *My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend.*^{Job.16:20-21} Isaiah saw the Messiah as our Intercessor: *because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*^{Is.53:12} Sadly, there is still a legacy of the OT that pervades the Church today where people believe that a priest (or a pastor) can mediate between them and God! Some people want the dead to pray for them and others pray to angels. (Angels are known as ministering spirits who are sent by God to minister to His people and indeed they do perform mighty acts in the earth on His behalf under the direct rule of God. But we do not have the right to command or to use angels—or anything else—as intermediaries. We have no access to angelic powers who act solely on God’s instructions. Any spiritual technique that claims to utilise the agency of "good spirits" is a deception.) Whilst it is fundamental to the Church’s pastoral care to pray with and for people (especially in times of need such as sickness and death), the Church, (either as individuals or as a collective), cannot mediate between God and people—and neither do we believe in sacraments. (A sacrament is defined as a religious symbol or rite which conveys divine grace, blessing, or sanctity upon the believer who participates in it, or a tangible symbol which represents an intangible reality.) The Bible is clear that it is only faith that can convey an inward, spiritual grace. Unfortunately people still prefer the old to the new: *And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, ‘The old is better’.*^{Lk.5:37-39} But the old is obsolete—we are under the New Covenant now: *By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear... They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order... For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*^{Heb.8:13;9:10-15}

Because Jesus is our Mediator, any person who God counts as righteous can pray effectively—even with the character flaws of Elijah! *And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.*^{Jas.5:15-18} Yes, we can have confidence that God hears us when we pray: *Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*^{1Jn.3:21-23} *But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.*^{Jas.1:6-8}

In prayer we ask God as well as adore Him, but our attitude (or motivation) is paramount: *When you pray for things, you don't get them because you want them for the wrong reason—for your own pleasure.*^{Jas.4:3} And it is God's presence in our lives and meetings that must become our primary goal. We must cultivate a close relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit and then we will have the maturity to accept God's answers to our prayers. In prayer as in all areas of our Christian life, if God does not do it, we cannot! God will not perform to order, be manipulated or in any way bend to our wills—it is simply not His nature to do so and any formula, technique or methodology that promises to give special power with God leans dangerously toward the occult.

Yes, prayer is sweet and when we pray, we know that God not only hears us but He answers us too—so keep adoring and keep asking: *So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.*^{Matt.7:11}

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer! That calls me from a world of care,
And bids me at my Father's throne Make all my wants and wishes known.
In seasons of distress and grief, My soul has often found relief,
And oft escaped the tempter's snare, By thy return, sweet hour of prayer!

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer! The joys I feel, the bliss I share,
Of those whose anxious spirits burn With strong desires for thy return!
With such I hasten to the place Where God my Saviour shows His face,
And gladly take my station there, And wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer!

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer! Thy wings shall my petition bear
To Him whose truth and faithfulness Engage the waiting soul to bless.
And since He bids me seek His face, Believe His Word and trust His grace,
I'll cast on Him my every care, And wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer!

Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer! May I thy consolation share,
Till, from Mount Pisgah's lofty height, I view my home and take my flight.
This robe of flesh I'll drop, and rise To seize the everlasting prize,
And shout, while passing through the air, "Farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer!"

Sunday 21st May 2017. Ps.119:33-40. Lk.11: 29-54

Hypocrite.

The word *hypocrite* comes from the Greek and was used of an actor: *to answer on the stage or to play a part* and so meant "to feign or pretend." *Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.*^{Lk.20:20} Christians are sometimes accused of being hypocrites and unfortunately some people who call themselves Christians are hypocrites. Someone wrote: "I've got nothing against God: it's His fan club I can't stand." Author Brennan Manning (himself a believer) once put it this way: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable." Jesus taught that our attitude takes priority over our actions but actually both are important. *What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.*^{Mk.7:20-23} *You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from*

me. *They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.* ³Matt.15:7-9 Hypocrisy is contagious and affects everything around it. It spreads unseen like yeast but its effects are eventually seen by everyone including God: *Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees—their hypocrisy. The time is coming when everything that is covered up will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all. Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be shouted from the housetops for all to hear!* ¹Lk.12:1-3 *A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs never grow on thorn bushes, nor grapes on bramble bushes. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.* ¹Lk.6:43-45

Jesus lists some areas where hypocrisy is both common and caustic.

Religious Rituals. *But the Pharisee noticed that Jesus did not wash before the meal. “You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and evil. You foolish people! Didn't the one who made the outside make the inside also? Give to poor people what is inside the dish. Then everything will be clean for you.* ¹Lk.11:38-41 We are under the New Covenant today but we still need to be “clean” in order to approach God. Those rituals which were important under the OT, were illustrations pointing to the reality of Jesus. ^{Col.2:17} Now Jesus has come, those religious rituals are obsolete ^{Heb.8:13} because He has introduced a better way to make us “clean” before God—His own sacrifice. The physical does not give us access to the spiritual: *God is Spirit and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.* ¹Jn.4:24 *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 So although our behaviour is important, it must match our belief. Religious rituals must reflect our relationship with our Redeemer or they become “useless rituals” *Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from useless rituals.* ^{Heb.6:1}

Money Management. *What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore justice and the love of God. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.* ¹Lk.11:42 Money represents our labour and our energy—what we have done. Although money has an important role in our society, we must not let money dominate us and neither must we think that money influences God. *But remember the LORD your God. He gives you the ability to produce wealth. That shows he stands by the terms of his covenant. He promised it with an oath to your people long ago. And he's still faithful to his covenant today.* ^{Deut.8:18} God is more interested in our hearts than our herbs! **Giving is an act of worship** and so we give to God (albeit through human channels) generously, ²Cor.9:6-11 through the place that spiritually feeds us: *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.* ^{Mal.3:10} Because we are giving to God, it is God who rewards us—if we give to impress others, that will be the only reward we will receive: *Don't give to be seen by others. If you do, your Father in heaven will not reward you... Do not be like those who only pretend to be holy... They want to be honoured by others. They have received their complete reward... [When you give] secretly your Father will reward you.* ^{Matt.6:1-3}

Social Status. *What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you love to sit in the seats of honour in the synagogues and receive respectful greetings as you walk in the marketplaces. Yes, what sorrow awaits you! For you are like hidden graves in a field. People walk over them without knowing the corruption they are stepping on.* ¹Lk.11:43-44 Status seeking and snobbery have no part to play in God's kingdom where humility and compassion are the characteristics that God values. *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.* ^{Jas.4:6}

Oppression. *Yes, what sorrow also awaits you experts in religious law! For you crush people with impossible religious demands, and you never lift a finger to ease the burden.* ¹Lk.11:45 Jesus came to set us free from sin's oppression and yet [false] religion enslaves people. We must never oppress others nor let them oppress us—especially under the guise of “faith”: *Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand.* ¹2Cor.1:24

Genealogy. *What sorrow awaits you! For you build monuments for the prophets your own ancestors killed long ago. But in fact, you stand as witnesses who agree with what your ancestors did. They killed the prophets, and you join in their crime by building the monuments! This is what God in his wisdom said about you: 'I will send prophets and apostles to them, but they will kill some and persecute the others.'* As a result, this generation will be held responsible for the murder of all God's prophets from the creation of the world—from the murder of Abel to the murder of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, it will certainly be charged against this generation.^{Lk.11:47-51} It can be fascinating to discover who your ancestors were but genealogy has no spiritual value. God has no grandchildren and unless God is your Heavenly Father, you are not His child—whoever you can trace your physical ancestry back to. *Command them not to spend their time on stories that aren't completely true. They must not waste time on family histories that never end. Things like that cause people to argue instead of doing God's work. His work is done by faith. Love is the purpose of my command. Love comes from a pure heart. It comes from a good sense of what is right and wrong. It comes from faith that is honest and true.*^{1Tim.1:4-5} God makes no distinction between races: *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him,*^{Rom.10:12} and we all come from one human father—Adam: *From one man God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth.*^{Acts.17:26}

Dog-in-the-manger. *What sorrow awaits you experts in religious law! For you remove the key to knowledge from the people. You don't enter the Kingdom yourselves, and you prevent others from entering.*^{Lk.11:52} We are to seek God's kingdom above our own comfort or convenience and do all in our power to enable others to enter God's kingdom. Anything less is unworthy of our high-calling as “kings and priests” *To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*^{Rev.1:5-6}

Having looked at these areas where hypocrisy is common, it is obvious that none of us meets Jesus' standard because we all have areas in our lives where our belief is in conflict with our behaviour. But hypocrisy describes something more than occasional misbehaviour. **Hypocrisy** is when someone claims to **believe one thing, but continually and unapologetically practices another.** However **true Christ followers are not hypocrites.** Christians may fail on occasion, but those who continually and unapologetically deny the teaching of Jesus aren't really Christ followers, no matter what they may call themselves. There are millions of Christians who strive daily to be more like Jesus and each of us will fail on occasion, **but this does not mean we are hypocrites.** Like Paul, we press on to possess that perfection: *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it.*^{Phil.3:12}

So don't give up and don't despair because Christ is in us, the Hope of Glory: *but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*^{Phil.3:13-14}

Sunday 28th May 2017. Ps.2. Lk.12:1-34

Treasure Trove

Treasure-trove, literally means "treasure that has been found" and is usually defined as gold or silver which had been hidden and rediscovered, and which no person could prove he or she owned. After the treasure-trove is found, it is up to the Courts to decide whether the landowner/occupier or the finder has title to the treasure. In January this year, 913 gold coins were found in a school piano whilst it was being re-tuned and because the coins were declared treasure-trove, the piano-tuner and the school shared the find—worth around £200,000.00!

Under Roman law if treasure was found on a person's own land, he was entitled to keep all of it but if someone else found the treasure they could keep half of it. So, in Jesus' parable the finder bought the field so he could keep all of the treasure-trove: *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure that was hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again. He was very happy. So he went and*

sold everything he had. And he bought that field.^{Mat.13:44} By using the example of treasure-trove, Jesus explained that the Kingdom of Heaven is of greater value than all a person's earthly wealth and is a wise investment even if it is misunderstood by others at first. There is a treasure-trove available to us that is worth more than any amount of gold or silver—and that treasure is Jesus Christ who comes to reside within us: *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*^{Col.1:27} *The Good News [is] about Christ's glory... Our bodies are made of clay, yet we have the treasure of the Good News in them. This shows that the superior power of this treasure belongs to God and doesn't come from us.*^{2Cor.4:4-7} Yes, Jesus and His teachings are of greater value than anything this world can offer: *The decrees of the LORD are firm and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold.*^{Ps.19:9-10}

So how can we protect our treasure-trove—the treasure of God and His Word? Jesus said that if our treasure is in heaven it cannot be stolen or lose its value: *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. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*^{Lk.12:32-34} But Jesus also taught that what is in our heart can be snatched away by the evil one: *When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart.*^{Mat.13:19} *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*^{Jn.10:10} Our treasure is from God and too precious for us to allow thieves steal it. Like lions protecting their food, we should protect our treasure: *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} But if we are unprepared, we will be caught off guard and may suffer loss: *So you, too, must keep watch! For you don't know what day your Lord is coming. Understand this: If a homeowner knew exactly when a burglar was coming, he would keep watch and not permit his house to be broken into. You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected.*^{Mat.24:42-44} Esau was caught off guard when he was hungry and sold something very precious for a meagre meal: *Make sure that no one is immoral or godless like Esau, who traded his birth-right as the firstborn son for a single meal. You know that afterward, when he wanted his father's blessing, he was rejected. It was too late for repentance, even though he begged with bitter tears.*^{Heb.12:16-17} We need to be on our guard so we don't yield to temptation: *Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak.*^{Mat.26:41}

Jesus warned against hypocrisy (as we saw last week): *Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.*^{Lk.12:1} Jesus also warned against greed: *Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.*^{Lk.12:15} So we should be careful how we live and what we consider to be important. “*You must not covet*” is one of the 10 Commandments and Paul explains that true maturity is to be content because of Christ: *I have learned to be content no matter what happens to me. I know what it's like not to have what I need. I also know what it's like to have more than I need. I have learned the secret of being content no matter what happens. I am content whether I am well fed or hungry. I am content whether I have more than enough or not enough. I can do everything by the power of Christ. He gives me strength.*^{Phil.4:11-13} We Believers are different from unbelievers because we have been redeemed from a useless way of life: *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*^{1Pet.1:18-19} So we must never let the world's values influence our values. *Why do you have so little faith? And don't be concerned about what to eat and what to drink. Don't worry about such things. These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers all over the world, but your Father already knows your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need. So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom.*^{Lk.12:28-32} Success in the world is measured by personal status and by our cash flow, but success in God's Kingdom is measured by faithfulness and service—where the servant takes no credit for doing what is expected: *Does the servant get special thanks for doing what's expected of him? It's the same with you. When you've done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say, 'The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.'*^{Lk.17:9-10} Although we are to be friendly

towards unbelievers (we should love the world just as God loves the world^{Jn.3:16}) we should not be like them: *You are not faithful to God. 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.*^{Jas.4:4-5} Just living “nice” lives or even living godly lives is not enough—we must hold fast to the faith. What and how we believe is as important as how we live: *What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.*^{2Tim.1:13-14} That is why we should strive to be Bible-literate: *Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*^{1Tim.4:16}

Our treasure is from God and cannot be bought. Simon tried to buy the gifts of the Holy Spirit and this was Peter’s response: *May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.*^{Acts.8:20-23} No! Like our NHS, the Gospel is “free at the point of need” but also like our NHS, someone has to ultimately pay for it! Jesus paid the price for our salvation in full so we can access it without money: *Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good and let your soul delight itself in abundance.*^{Is.55:1-2}

So let’s make sure that we treasure what God’s treasures: *God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.*

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.^{Lk.12:34}

June

Songs for the Moment: Moses. Ascribe greatness to our God the Rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A God of faithfulness and without injustice, good and upright is He. *Deut.32:3-4*

Sunday 4th June 2017. Ps.2. Judges 6

Gideon: Our Church Children have been learning about Gideon this month. Many people know the story of Gideon putting out the fleece and winning the battle against all odds (after he reduced his army from 32,000 to 300 men) by surprising the enemy with the torches and trumpets. But there is also a great lesson for us when Gideon was changed from a “nobody” to a great Judge who gave deliverance to Israel. Israel was in a desperate condition and they were being oppressed—“*impoverished*”—by their enemy, but unlike society today, the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help: *Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.*^{Jdg.6:6} These last 2 weeks we have been setting time aside to ask God for help: help politically as we face the General Election and Brexit also help for our Church—nationally for the AoG Movement and locally here in Deal.

When Israel asked God for help, He sent them a prophet: *When the Israelites cried out to the LORD because of Midian, he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says... I told you, ‘I am the LORD your God. You must not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you now live.’ But you have not listened to me.”*^{Jdg.6:7-10} Prophets speak on behalf of God: *Then the LORD said to Moses, “I have made you like God to Pharaoh. And your brother Aaron will be like a prophet to you. You must say everything I command you to say. Then your brother Aaron must tell Pharaoh.”*^{Ex.7:1-2} NT Prophets not only speak on behalf of God but they give a clear testimony for Jesus: *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10} We need more NT Prophets in our Churches but also in Politics. Pray that God will raise up Christians who will give godly counsel to our political leaders and also pray that the newly elected MPs will be open to accept godly counsel.

Gideon asked a question that many people are asking today—**Why are we in this mess?** *Pardon me, my lord, but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’*^{Jdg.6:13} The simple answer to that simple question is **SIN**. Israel’s problems were a direct result of their own sin: *Once again the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. So for seven years he handed them over to the people of Midian. The Midianites treated the people of Israel very badly. That’s why they made hiding places for themselves. They hid in holes in the mountains. They also hid in caves and in other safe places.*^{Jdg.6:1-2}

Ultimately, every problem stems from sin and sin is missing God’s standard of glory (and holiness): *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness.*^{Rom.3:23-25} However, not all our problems are the result of our own personal sin (but some are!). Instead of realising that they had abandoned God, Gideon said that God had abandoned them! *But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.*^{Jdg.6:13} Instead of turning back to God and asking His forgiveness, most people today either ignore God or blame Him for their ills. Corrie ten-Boom thought that God had abandoned her when she was imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp during WW2, but her sister Betsie reminded sharply that God has never, and will never, abandon us. *God has said, “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 mere mortals do to me?”*^{Heb.13:5-6}

Instead of answering Gideon’s question, God told him to: *Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?*^{Jdg.6:14} Knowing all the answers to our questions rarely helps us in our distress, but knowing that God is with us and that He is sending us out in the strength that we have—His strength—will enable us to face any situation with confidence. As

soon as God tells us to do something, the excuses start flooding into our minds. Gideon's excuse was that he was insignificant and ill equipped: *Pardon me, my lord, but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family.*^{Jdg.6:15} Moses made 4 excuses for not obeying God and then said: *O Lord please send someone else to do it*^{Ex.4:13} but the next verse tells us God's response: *Then the LORD became angry with Moses.*^{Ex.4:14} "No" is not an acceptable answer to God because if God has asked us to do something then He will equip us to do it. *It is true that Christ was nailed to the cross because he was weak. But he lives by God's power. In the same way, I share his weakness. But by God's power I will live with him to serve you.*^{2Cor.13:4} *I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*^{Phil.4:13}

God then reaffirmed that He was with Gideon: *The LORD answered, "I will be with you."*^{Jdg.6:16} **And God is with us too**—He is with us now and He will be with us until the end: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*^{Matt.28:20} But God's promise was still not enough for Gideon: *If now I have found favour in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me.*^{Jdg.6:17} Although signs may help unbelievers believe they don't produce faith: *Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe.*^{Jn.4:48} *What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you?*^{Jn.6:30} *Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in front of them. But they still would not believe in him. This happened as Isaiah the prophet had said it would.*^{Jn.12:37-38} *Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers.*^{1Cor.14:22} God gave Gideon a spectacular sign of the food bursting into flames: *The angel of the LORD had a wooden staff in his hand. With the tip of his staff he touched the meat and the bread. Fire blazed out of the rock. It burned up the meat and the bread. Then the angel of the LORD disappeared.*^{Jdg.6:21} But Gideon still needed more signs later on: *Then Gideon said to God, "If you are truly going to use me to rescue Israel as you promised, prove it to me in this way. I will put a wool fleece on the threshing floor tonight. If the fleece is wet with dew in the morning but the ground is dry, then I will know that you are going to help me rescue Israel as you promised."*^{Jdg.6:36-37} **We ignore God's Word at our peril.** Gideon eventually believed God after he heard the dream of an unbelieving enemy^{Jdg.7!!!} But faith (trust in God) does not come from signs or even from prayer—**faith comes from hearing the Word of God** (according to the Bible!): *So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} The Bible is God's mind in a Book! God's Word is God's revelation to God's people: *To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.*^{Is.8:20} *If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead.*^{Lk.16:31}

Although Gideon was afraid of meeting God, He discovered that meeting God was the answer to all his needs. Gideon then had peace with God because **God is Peace**: *So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace. To this day it stands.*^{Jdg.6:24} **Jesus is our Peace**: *Christ himself is our peace. He has made us into one group of people. He has destroyed the hatred that was like a wall between us. Through his body on the cross, Christ put an end to the law with all its commands and rules... He came and preached peace to you who were far away. He also preached peace to those who were near. Through Christ we both come to the Father by the power of one Holy Spirit. So you are no longer strangers and outsiders. You are citizens together with God's people. You are members of God's family.*^{Eph.2:14-19}

As we rejoice and pray, God's peace will guard our hearts and minds: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, 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.*^{Phil.4:4-7}

So like Gideon, let's go in the strength we have—the presence and power of the Holy Spirit who is within us—and do what God tells us!

Sunday 11th June 2017. Ps.119:41-48. Luke 12:35-56

Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning.

Luke 12 (and Matthew 24) is specifically dealing with the events leading up to the destruction of the Temple in A.D.70 under Titus, when God would judge Israel for their apostacy and

especially in regard to their rejection of His Son Jesus Christ—the Messiah. However, it is also very relevant to today because Jesus is coming soon to judge the world: *“See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all of them of all the ungodly acts they have committed in their ungodliness, and of all the defiant words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”* These people are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage.^{Jude.14-16} God will call people to give an account of their life and will judge them against His perfection. By this standard we are all guilty and the only way to escape paying the penalty for our wrongs is to accept God’s forgiveness given through Jesus’ substitutionary death. *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*^{Heb.9:27-28} *Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.*^{1Jn.5:10-11} But for Believers, that judgment will hold no fear: *And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.*^{1Jn.4:16}

Jesus explained that judgement would come suddenly just as it did when the flood came thousands of years before. *As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man... Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.*^{Matt.24:37-42} So it behoves us to be prepared, then whether Jesus returns or we die, we are ready to meet Him: *It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes... It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak... You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*^{Lk.12:37-40}

Jesus said we will have trouble in this life^{Jn.16:33} and explained that although the bad will get worse, the good will get better—the weeds and wheat will grow together. *The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared... Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.*^{Matt.13:24-30}

Some countries have more weeds than wheat and others have more wheat than weeds! The fact is that we have **never had it so good!** There are more Christians alive now than ever before. There has never been a time when it was easier to access the Bible in a person’s native language. United Bible Societies reported that the Bible, in whole or part, has been translated in more than 2,530 languages, including complete Old or New Testaments in 1,715 languages, including 55 sign languages, and the complete text of the Bible in 531 languages, as of November 2014. There has never been a time when it was easier to share your faith than today especially with ease of travel and the world-wide communications or radio, TV and the Internet.

But we have **never had it so bad** either and there is more persecution today and more Christians being martyred today than ever before. *Open Doors* estimate that **each month** 322 Christians are killed for their faith, 214 Churches and Christian properties are destroyed and 722 forms of violence are committed against Christians. Korea had reasonable Christian freedom until the War divided the nation and now North Korea is the most persecuted country in the world. We like to think of our country as having a wonderful legacy of Christian freedom but a brief study of our history shows that we have never been a “*Christian country*” (actually there is no such place a “*Christian country*” because God’s Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom not a geographical or political kingdom). Christianity came to Britain within five years of Jesus’ crucifixion. The British historian Gildas (A.D. 516-570) writes: *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). Alfred the Great (A.D. 849-901) translated the 10 Commandments, into English and was translating Psalms when he died. Alfred prefixed the 10 Commandments to his legal code because he realised that it is our relationship with God that gives equal value and honour to the individual and allows justice to prevail. This understanding of the value of human beings made in the image of God was also shared by the architects of Magna Carta, which for the last 800 years has been the basis of democracy throughout the world and also our Christian freedom.

Although freedom in our country has sometimes been restricted and stifled, it has always eventually won through. William the Conqueror built 20 Cathedrals in England after he won the Battle of Hasting in 1066, but his “*faith*” seemed to be more political than religious. However he did invite a group of Jewish merchants from Normandy, to England in 1070, but they were not permitted to participate in trades (except for medicine) and were limited to money lending. In 1290 Edward I ordered the expulsion of all Jews from England and there is no official trace of Jews back in England until their formal return in 1655 under Oliver Cromwell. Our State religion (first Catholic and then Anglican after the Reformation) has been very dominant and was the cause of restrictions and even persecution of dissenters. Although he is often maligned as an oppressive dictator, it was Cromwell who gave our country the first religious freedom for many hundreds of years. However, after the Monarchy was restored in 1660, religious freedom was repressed again with the **Clarendon Code**. This was a series of four legal statutes passed between 1661-1665 to re-establish the supremacy of the Anglican Church and ended the religious toleration for dissenting religions. This Clarendon Code excluded non-Anglicans from public office and made the Book of Common Prayer compulsory in religious services. Upwards of 2000 clergy refused to comply and were forced to resign as Church Ministers. Meeting for conventicles (unauthorized worship) in groups of more than 5 people was banned and Nonconformist ministers were forbidden from coming within 5 miles of incorporated towns or to teach in schools. It was at this time that John Bunyan was imprisoned for preaching.

The opposition by the State and the established “*Church*” to genuine Christian faith is not new—it started at the beginning of the Church with the Jewish leaders and then by the Romans. Paul wrote that we should pray for them (not against them): *Pray for kings. Pray for all who are in authority. Pray that we will live peaceful and quiet lives. And pray that we will be godly and holy. That is good. It pleases God our Saviour. He wants everyone to be saved. He wants them to come to know the truth.*^{1Tim.2:2-4}

Although we have had a hundred years or more of relative freedom with practically no persecution in this country, other countries have not had it so easy. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity, estimates that from 2005-2015, 900,000 Christians were martyred—an average of 90,000 Christians each year! From Nov. 2015-Oct. 2016, Open Doors documented as many as 1,207 Christians who were killed for faith-related reasons (not including those killed in North Korea, Iraq or Syria). They also documented a total of 1,329 churches attacked for faith-related reasons during that same period (they were in in Muslim-dominated countries). The underlying cause for most persecution (apart from Communism) is Islamic extremism and in Iraq the Christian population has plummeted from 1.5 million in 2003 to around 275,000 today. In a few years that number could be zero. We are now living in an extremely secular society that is openly opposed to genuine Christianity. The overtly anti-Christian media dominates our culture and has unparalleled influence in Government and the Judiciary. Peter explains our situation well and gives some clear advice: *Prepare yourselves to think in the same way Christ did. Do it because those who have suffered in their bodies are finished with sin. As a result, they don't live the rest of their lives on earth controlled by evil human longings. Instead, they live to do what God wants. You have spent enough time in the past doing what ungodly people choose to do. You lived a wild life. You longed for evil things. You got drunk. You went to wild parties. You worshiped statues of gods. The Lord hates that.*

Ungodly people think that it's strange when you no longer join them in what they do. They want you to rush into the same flood of wasteful living. So they say bad things about you. But they will have to explain their actions to God. He is ready to judge the living and the dead. That's why the good news was preached even to people who are now dead. Human judges said they were guilty as far as their bodies were concerned. But God set their spirits free to live as he wanted them to. The end of all things is near. So keep a clear mind. Control yourselves. Then you can pray. Most of all, love one another deeply. Love erases many sins by forgiving them.^{1Pet.4:1-8}

Jesus said "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}

Yes, Jesus is our Saviour, Healer, Baptizer and Coming King. So let's stay dressed, ready for service and keep our lamps burning.

Sunday 18th June 2017. Ps.119:49-56. Luke 13

Are disasters judgement from God?

The question millions of people are asking today (as they have been asking for thousands of years) is: **Why has this happened to me?** *Pardon me, my lord, but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?'*^{Jdg.6:13} Newton's 3rd Laws of Motion states: *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.* This is true of life as well as physics—what we do has direct consequences. Poor diet leads to poor health; smoking leads to breathing and circulation problems; poor mental stimulation leads to poor mental health; taking excessive risks will lead to stress and its associated problems; etc. And the opposite is also true—good diet leads to good health; good mental stimulation leads to good mental health; etc. You reap what you sow: *Give freely and become more wealthy; be stingy and lose everything. The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.*^{Prov.11:24-25} *The righteous are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed.*^{Ps.37:26} *But a generous man devises generous things and by generosity he shall stand.*^{Is.32:8} But unlike Newton's Law, life is not "scientific" where the same results occur every time. Not everything that happens to us is the direct, or even indirect result, of our own actions—some of our health, wealth and wisdom conditions have nothing to do with us. Our family and gender and the culture we were born into are all factors that we had nothing to do with. Other factors such as disease, accidents, or even a good job sometime "come out of the blue"—you can call it "chance" or "luck" but things occasionally just happen! *I have observed something else under the sun. The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. The wise sometimes go hungry, and the skilful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don't always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time. People can never predict when hard times might come. Like fish in a net or birds in a trap, people are caught by sudden tragedy.*^{Ecc.9:11-12} But we know that there is a factor that is greater than "chance" or "luck"—God, who plans everything according to His good pleasure and so ultimately His will is always accomplished. *Then Job replied to the LORD: I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.*^{Job.42:1-2} Although **fatalism says:** *What will be, will be,* **faith says:** *God's will, will be!* God works out everything for His glory and the Believer's good.^{Rom.8:28}

We are living in a blame culture today where we are bombarded with adverts to claim compensation for anything and everything. The Daily Mail reported in 2012 that the NHS is paying £1.3billion a year in compensation fees. This blame culture has infused a "something for nothing" expectation (or rather a "something for me at someone else's expense" expectation) and whilst a little extra cash is always welcome, everything has to be paid for—eventually! But apportioning blame does little to alleviate the problem—we need to find resolution not receive recompensing and the resolution is **God working in the situation.** When the disciples saw Jesus notice a blind man and they asked the silly question of whether the man sinned before he was born: "Rabbi, who sinned? Was this man born blind because he sinned? Or did his parents sin?" "It isn't because

*this man sinned,” said Jesus. “It isn’t because his parents sinned.”^{Jn.9:2-3} Jesus did not say why the man was blind or even give an explanation because He did not come to discuss suffering or solve philosophical conundrums. Jesus came to suffer for us—to suffer redemptively! Sickness was once a mystery credited to the will of God but science has shown it never was God’s will. God doesn’t make people ill—if He did, nobody could cure them, but people are being cured and eventually most physical disorders will be treatable. Actually, the literal rendering of *It isn’t because his parents sinned. This happened so that God’s work could be shown in his life,*^{Jn.9:2-3} is: *neither this man sinned nor his parents; albeit let the works of God become evident.* Jesus was saying that the answer to the blindness (and any other problem) is *let the works of God become evident*; and those works of God are what Jesus did: *And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*^{Acts.10:38}*

In the OT, God judged nations and people groups. For instance: Egypt was judged for enslaving Israel;^{Ex.14-15} Israel was judged for rejecting God;^{2Chron.36:15-17} Assyria was judged for being brutal;^{Is.10} etc. The Israelite children had to wait 40 years before they could enter the Promised Land because of their parents’ sin of unbelief. But God declared that under the New Covenant we would no longer receive judgement for other people’s wrongs: *In those days people will no longer say, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes. But the children have a bitter taste in their mouths.’ Instead, everyone will die for his own sin. The one who eats sour grapes will taste how bitter they are. “A new day is coming,” announces the LORD. “I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel. I will also make it with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their people long ago. That was when I took them by the hand. I led them out of Egypt. But they broke my covenant. They did it even though I was like a husband to them,” announces the LORD “This is the covenant I will make with Israel after that time,” announces the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds. I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God. And they will be my people.”^{Jer.31:29-33}*

God is absolutely consistent^{Jas.1:17} *I the LORD do not change.*^{Mal.3:6} This does not mean that He will always enforce the consequences of our sin but rather that **God does not change His mind about blessing us**: *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? Listen, I received a command to bless; God has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.^{Nu.23:19-20} And so when God pronounces judgement on people and they repent, He will not carry that judgement out. This is not because God has changed His mind about judgement but because **God does not change His mind about blessing**. *On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: “Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!” The people of Nineveh believed God’s message... Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.” When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.^{Jon.3:4-10} This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the LORD about it: “Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, LORD! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”^{Jon.4:1-3} God would have saved Sodom if there were just 10 righteous people there: *Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right? ... God answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”^{Gen.18:25-32}***

Between 1857 and 1858 it is estimated that in America a million people were converted and another million re-dedicated their lives to Christ. Three years later the American Civil War broke out and the revival continued on both sides. In the winter of 1863/4, some 7,000 soldiers were converted among Robert E. Lee’s forces and also hundreds in the Union Army as well! (E.M.Bounds—author of the classic *Power through Prayer*—was a Chaplain in the Confederate

Army and D.L. Moody was a Chaplain in the Union Army.) Sometimes preaching and praying continued 24 hours a day and the chapels were unable to hold the soldiers who wanted to get inside. Over 300,000 soldiers from both sides were converted to Christ during the Civil War! It is estimated that up to 750,000 soldiers were killed during the Civil War and after emancipation, up to a million ex-slaves died of disease or starvation. That terrible massacre of human life was not the judgement of God on people who were living in such a great Revival that impacted so many people. No! That devastation was the consequence (Newton's 3rd Law) of (mostly other people's) poor choices, of sin, hardness of heart, and rebellion against God. We should not think of catastrophes as direct judgement from God but reminders that we are all destined to die and then after that we will face judgement.^{Heb.9:27} Jesus responded, "Do you think those murdered Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Not at all. Unless you turn to God, you too will die. And those eighteen in Jerusalem the other day, the ones crushed and killed when the Tower of Siloam collapsed and fell on them, do you think they were worse citizens than all other Jerusalemites? Not at all. Unless you turn to God, you too will die."^{Lk.13:2-5} We must be ready to meet our Master and then, whether we live in comfort or conflict, it will be good for us. *It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes.*^{Lk.12:37}

No! Disasters are not judgments from God but **they are warnings for us to be ready**: *Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, 'Sir, open the door for us.' But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'*^{Lk.13:24-25} **So let's stay ready—we do not know when our Master will return!**

Sunday 25th June 2017. Ps.119:57-64. Luke 14

How much "back pay" are you owed? *You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*^{Lk.14:14}

Life is fragile and if life only consists of the endless routine of work, play, eat and sleep then everything is meaningless. If our mortal existence is all there is to life then we have no purpose, no accountability, no restraint and no reason to be good or even nice. But deep down in their hearts, everyone believes that there is more to life than merely existing until we breath our last breath. Solomon reflected on this: *Again I saw something on earth that didn't mean anything. A man lived all by himself. He didn't have any sons or brothers. His hard work never ended. But he wasn't happy with what he had. "Who am I working so hard for?" he asked. "Why don't I get the things I enjoy?" That doesn't have any meaning either. In fact, it's a very bad deal.*^{Ecl.4:7-8} Nature is "cruel" with little or no regard for life, but in most cultures, human life is considered sacred, and regardless of how people behave, the Law usually protects human life at every stage of its existence. (Today this respect for human life is rapidly being eroded in the so called "Western Civilization" with abortion and euthanasia—but it hardly surprising that people behave like animals if they believe that they have evolved from animals!) Alfred Lord Tennyson tried to capture the paradox of the esteem of human life and the brutality of nature in his poem "In Memoriam A. H. H.": *Who trusted God was love indeed, And love Creation's final law, Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw, With ravine, shriek'd against his creed.* The value of human life—both as an entity (our person) and also as an existence (our purpose for living) is paramount. This is because we are distinct from the rest of Creation—we have the very breath of God within us.^{Gen.2:7} *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*^{Ecl.3:11} Human life can never be measured in monetary terms and no one can buy extra time from God. *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*^{Mk.8:36-37} *No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—that he should live on forever and not see decay. For all can see that wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others.*^{Ps.49:7-10} *You have decided the length*

of our lives. You know how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer.^{Job.14:5} Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?^{Matt.6:27}

But does it really matter how we live and what happens after we die? Most cultures have some concept of life after death but their ideas are usually based on mythology and are in conflict with what the Bible actually teaches. Communist China built a mausoleum to house the embalmed body of Mao Zedong; Communist USSR did the same for the bodies of Lenin and Stalin; the ancient Egyptians hid their Mummies in the pyramids—but these leaders are all dead and their bodies remain lifeless! Their teachings may have captivated some and motivated others but none of them knew what was going to happen when they died and none have returned to tell us. Even some of the beliefs held by Christians about life after death seem to be based more on mythology than theology because they differ from the Bible's clear teaching. God's Word is God's revelation to God's people: *To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.*^{Is.8:20} Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God."^{Matt.22:29} Jesus spoke about heaven from personal experience: *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.*^{Jn.3:31-34} Since Jesus is the only one to have come from heaven (and also to return there) He is the only one to speak with authority and credibility about life after death: *I am the living bread that came down from heaven.*^{Jn.6:51} "When he ascended to the heights, he led a crowd of captives and gave gifts to his people." Notice that it says "he ascended." This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world. And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that he might fill the entire universe with himself.^{Eph.4:8-10}

Although the Bible is marginalised (and even maligned) by many people, it is the beginning and end of the Bible that most people struggle with—including some in the Church! This is because Genesis and Revelation graphically describes the devil's beginning, demise and final destination. Everything that exists (except God Himself—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit), has been created by God. *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*^{Col.1:15-16} [The Word] was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.^{Jn.1:2-3} This means that even the devil was created by God and he was good when he was created: *For everything God created is good.*^{1Tim.4:4} Because the devil is a created being, he is not a deity and neither does he have the qualities of deity—qualities such as **Omnipresent** (all present), **Omniscient** (all knowing), **Omnipotent** (all powerful) and **Omnibenevolent** (perfectly good and all love). The devil was thrown out of heaven when he rebelled against God. *Jesus said: I saw satan fall like lightning from heaven.*^{Lk.10:18} After his downfall, satan deceived Mankind: *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.*^{2Cor.11:3} Now satan is destined for an eternity of torment in hell: *the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*^{Rev.20:10} Although hell was prepared for the devil and his angels, unbelievers will also be sent there too: *Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons.'*^{3Matt.25:41} *I saw the dead, both great and small, standing before God's throne. And the books were opened, including the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to what they had done, as recorded in the books. The sea gave up its dead, and death and the grave gave up their dead. And all were judged according to their deeds. Then death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire. This lake of fire is the second death. And anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire.*^{Rev.20:12-15} Although it is

clear that we will be judged for how we have lived, **the criteria for eternal life** (or eternal death) **is whether our name is in the Book of Life**, not how we have lived or what we have done: *May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.*^{Ps.69:28} *Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*^{Rev.21:27} *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.*^{Rev.3:5} *But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.*^{Dan.12:1-3} *Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*^{Phil.4:3}

We should make every effort to live for God's glory and do good, because it is the right way to live—it is also the best way to live as well! *I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.*^{Ecd.3:12-14} However, we should also remember that when we do good we are actually lending to God: *Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice.*^{Ps.112:5} *Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.*^{Prov.19:17} *Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him.*^{Ecd.8:12} Although helping others may inconvenience us or even temporally disadvantage us, **God will repay us**: *And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return. Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked.*^{Lk.6:34-35} **God is no man's debtor**: *God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.*^{Heb.6:10}

Salvation is by grace: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*^{Eph.2:8-10} But what we do and how we live is important. So, let's keep doing what is right and never give up—even if it is inconvenient or costly, because **we will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.**^{Lk.14:14}

July

Songs for the Moment: Deborah. When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves— praise the LORD. I will sing to the LORD, I will sing; I will make music to the LORD. Jdg.5:2-3

Sunday 2nd July 2017. Ps.119:65-72.

Jerub-Baal was the nick-name of Gideon and means “*let Baal fight!*” because Gideon had challenged Baal. In Gideon’s journey of challenging Baal and then the Midianites, he progressed from a “*nobody*” to a “*somebody*” because he put God’s Word into practice. *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*^{Lk.11:28}

There are some very practical lessons from Gideon as we learn to trust God throughout our journey through life. Gideon’s journey of learning to trust and obey God was arduous and tough, but Gideon made it to the “*Hall of Faith*” in Hebrews chapter 11, which should encourage each of us to keep going so we reach the end of our journey still honouring and trusting God. *But the godly will flourish like palm trees and grow strong like the cedars of Lebanon. For they are transplanted to the LORD’s own house. They flourish in the courts of our God. Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green. They will declare, “The LORD is just! He is my rock! There is no unrighteousness in him!”*^{Ps.92:12-15}

Like many of the OT heroes, Gideon had his flaws but his story was written to teach us about God’s plan of salvation: *Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us. The Scriptures give us strength to go on. They cheer us up and give us hope. Our God is a God who strengthens you and cheers you up. May he help you agree with each other as you follow Christ Jesus. Then you can give glory to God with one heart and voice.*^{Rom.15:4-6} The Bible (which is actually God’s plan of salvation in a Book) involves these main themes: **Beginning, Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Ending—God, Man, Jesus, Cross and (final) Resurrection.**

Gideon didn’t have the Bible to study, nor did he have a local Church to teach, encourage and support him. In fact Gideon was on his own because his nation had rebelled against God and so were overrun by the Midianites who “*impoverished*” them. But God has always a “*remnant*”—a few people who remain loyal to Him, even if they have lost their way a little and get side-tracked by their tradition or culture.

Lessons to learn from Gideon

God is with us: *Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?*^{Jdg.6:14} God has said, “*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 mere mortals do to me?*”^{Heb.13:5-6}

The Lord is Peace: *So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace.*^{Jdg.6:24} *But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ. For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.*^{Eph.2:13-18}

God is Able: *The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, ‘My own strength has saved me.’”*^{Jdg.7:2} *With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies.*^{Ps.108:13}

Jesus is Lord: *I will not rule over you. My son won’t rule over you either. The LORD will rule over you.*^{Jdg.8:23} *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. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.^{Rom.10:9-10}

But what if I am not quite good enough or fail? Gideon was better than some Judges but he certainly was not perfect. He failed in many ways—he did not trust God all the time and he allowed others to influence him so he took his eyes off God (Gideon made a monument to his victory and let people treat it as an idol—the focus of their worship). Gideon lived in the OT and did not have the Bible to study, nor did he have the support or encouragement from a good local Church. When we read about Gideon in the NT, it says that he acted “*by faith*”—there is no mention of his failings. *Gideon... who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised... whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. [Who was] commended for [his] faith, yet [did not receive] what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would [he] be made perfect.*^{Heb.11:32-40}

God never overlooks our faults or our sins but when He forgives us, He “*cleanses us from all sin*” and there is no remnant of sin left and no stain either. The OT rituals allowed people to be ceremoniously clean in order to come to God, but they did not “*work*” as they did not deal with the conscience but Jesus’ Sacrifice does deal with our conscience: *For the gifts and sacrifices that the priests offer are not able to cleanse the consciences of the people who bring them... Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a young cow could cleanse people's bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God.*^{Heb.9:9-14} Only in Jesus can we have our sins “taken away”: *Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*^{Jn.1:29}

The OT saints had to wait for us! *[Who was] commended for [his] faith, yet [did not receive] what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would [he] be made perfect.*^{Heb.11:32-40} Gideon is among those OT saints who are “*a cloud of witnesses*”. This should motivate us to live a life that always honours God by our attitudes and our actions but their lives also warn us to not make the same mistakes as they did: *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}

So, **Let us throw off every hindrance** and **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.**

Sunday 9th July 2017. Ps.119:73-80. Lk.15

Salvation: Our salvation is a great salvation,^{Heb.2:3} it is so rich and so free—it saves us for life in abundance as well as from sin and death! Each of the three stories in Luke 15 shows an aspect of this great salvation and a role that each Person of the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—has in our salvation.

God the Son is our Shepherd who seeks and saves us. *Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep. In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!*^{Lk.15:6-7} Each of us are important to God because we belong to Him—He created us (originally in His image) and He sustains us. Every human life is priceless and Jesus cares for each of us individually. Although God loves the everyone (**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}) He especially loves the Church (**Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her. He did it to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her with water and the word. He did it to bring her to himself as a brightly shining church. He wants a church that has no stain or wrinkle or any other flaw. He wants a church that is holy and without blame.**^{Eph.5:25-27}) But He specifically loves you and me as individuals (*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 wants all people to be saved: *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.*^{2Pet.3:9} And He went to the greatest extreme to save us: *Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost."*^{1Jk.19:9-10} As the Good Shepherd,^{1Jn.10:11} Jesus cares for His sheep by providing for us and protecting us. He never gives up on us and no-one is beyond His help, however much danger they have put themselves in. We must listen to His Voice^{1Jn.10:4-5} and keep to the tracks of Righteousness,^{Ps.23:3} but if we go astray, He will save us if we call on His Name.

Interestingly in the story of the Shepherd and the lost sheep there is no mention of the sheep wanting to be found or trying to return—the emphasis is on the Shepherd who rescued the lost sheep. Our salvation was **initiated by God and carried out by God** who is **Omnipresent** (all present), **Omniscient** (all knowing), **Omnipotent** (all powerful) and **Omnibenevolent** (perfectly good and all love). Jesus did it all and He did it because He loved us: *Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.*^{1Jn.13:1} *We were born separated from God but Jesus has reconciled us to God You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.*^{Eph.2:13} *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.*^{2Cor.5:17-18} *Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.*^{Col.1:22}

God the Holy Spirit shines His light of revelation into our hearts. *Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' I tell you, it is the same in heaven. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who turns away from sin.*^{1Jk.15:10}

We were once in darkness and living in the kingdom of darkness but God shone His light into our hearts: *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} God the Holy Spirit shines the light of His Truth into our hearts, challenging, convicting and converting us: *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.*^{1Jn.16:9-11} In God's light we see life and this is the best way to live.

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.^{Ps.36:9} So now that we belong to the Kingdom of light we must live as children of the light. *You are a people who belong to God. All of this is so that you can sing his praises. He brought you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*^{1Pet.2:9} Someone once said that people who say that they are saved and belong to Christ and are dirty, dishevelled and undisciplined, are a disgrace to the name of Christ, because this is contrary to decency. *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... But everything the light shines on can be seen. Light makes everything clear... So be very careful how you live. Do not live like people who aren't wise. Live like people who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity. The days are evil. So don't be foolish. Instead, understand what the Lord wants.*^{Eph.5:8-17} Job longed for that illumination and fellowship with God again:

Job continued to speak. He said, "How I long for the good old days! That's when God watched over me. The light of his lamp shone on me. I walked through darkness by his light. Those were the best days of my life. That's when God's friendship blessed my house."^{1Joh.29:1-4} We are NT Believers and although we may recall the "good old days", we are actually living in the "good new days" where God will never leave us.^{Heb.13:5-6} However, we should never be complacent and settle for mediocrity. Although God's friendship is unconditional, our fellowship with God is a daily walk with Him—a walk of communion which includes communication (prayer) and trust (faith). We must respond to God's illumination by agreeing with Him and re-align our mind, mouth and muscle (thoughts words and deeds) to His Will as revealed in the Scriptures. We must look after our minds by thinking on good and praiseworthy things: *And*

now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.^{Phil.4:8-9} And we must also make our lips to do their duty by only saying what God says about us.

God the Father is our heavenly Father who loves us unconditionally. *Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.*^{Lk.15:21} In the third story of our great Salvation, the lost son comes to his senses and returns home. In the other stories Jesus mentions repentance but the “lost” object (the sheep and silver coin) play no part in the re-uniting. But in this story, although there is no mention of repentance, it is the lost son who returns. Repentance means “to change your mind”—not just as a thought but as a decision that leads to action. The lost son decided that it was better to return as a servant in his father’s house than to stay away and die of hunger. The son had no expectation of being welcomed as a son and certainly hadn’t realised that his father longed for him to return. *Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish.*^{Joel.2:13} This story shows us how much God really loves us. *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*^{Jn.3:1} We are God’s children and we should address God as our Father.^{Matt.6:9} *Because you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. He is the Holy Spirit. By his power we call God “Abba.” Abba means Father. 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.4:6-7}

As we see how each Person of the Godhead is involved our great Salvation, let’s take time to appreciate how much God has done for us and then re-commit ourselves to live for His glory and honour. **God watches over me. The light of his lamp shines on me. I walk through darkness by his light. These are the best days of my life. God’s friendship blesses my house.**^{Joh.29:1-4}

Sunday 16th July 2017. Ps.119:781-88

Michael Fernandes (from Awake Ministries, Goa, India) is speaking today so here is Greg Koukle’s Solid Ground 2017 www.str.org

Seeing the Unseen: The Nature of Spiritual Warfare

Sometimes, if you know what to look for, you can “see” something that is invisible; you can see the unseen. It’s not a parlour trick, but a valuable spiritual skill. And it’s not that difficult if you know what clues to look for. I’d like to show you what those clues are.

First, though, a foundational matter. I am convinced that most Christians do not understand spiritual warfare. Either they are unaware of the unseen battle or, if they do recognize its importance, they do not focus on the central issue but instead are distracted by a secondary concern. In military terms, they have been taken in by a feint. Here is the feint.

Some Christians think of spiritual battle in terms of power encounters with the devil (or demons) where prayer of a certain sort is the principal weapon employed to defeat, or at least to neutralize (“bind”), the powers of darkness. Curiously, Jesus never taught this approach.¹ He never told us to pray to devils. Instead, He taught us to ask the Father to “deliver us from the evil one”.^{Matt.6:13} I certainly do not mean to minimize the importance of prayer in any area of our Christian lives, especially this one, but to invite you to see something you might not have noticed. When it comes to spiritual warfare, the New Testament emphasis is not on prayer-infused power encounters, but on something completely different, and if we miss that, then I think we miss the heart of it.

¹ Of course, when Jesus encountered demons directly, He dealt with them directly. Two qualifiers, though. First, rarely if ever do we encounter demons directly as Jesus did. A different dynamic is in play, day to day, for us. Second, when a demon-possessed fortune-teller harassed Paul, he ignored her for days before casting the demon out (Acts 16:16-18). Direct confrontation, it seems then, is the exception, not the rule.

The Invisible Battlefield

We live in a world made by an invisible Being and this world is thick with invisible things. They are all “*around us*,” in a sense, but not immediately obvious to many since the visible realm is so much more imposing.

In 2 Kings 6:15-17, the prophet Elisha’s attendant saw something in the visible realm that overwhelmed him—the Syrian army encircling their city with horses and chariots. “*Alas, my master!*” he said. “*What shall we do?*” Elisha, though, was not shaken. He saw a deeper reality in the unseen realm. “*Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them. Elisha then prayed and said, “O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” And the Lord opened the servant’s eyes and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.*” Elisha saw something his servant did not see: the enemies of God surrounding the city were themselves surrounded by a massive invisible force arrayed behind the scenes for Elisha’s protection. The prophet was able to see the unseen.

Of course, there was no non-miraculous way for Elisha’s servant to see into that realm. He needed help. In our case, though, there are passages in the New Testament that tip us off, giving us clues to help us detect details of a world Elisha had access to. There is an invisible army arrayed against us, too, and sometimes—if we are alert—we can track its manoeuvres. I want you to consider a familiar passage that contains an insight you may not have thought about before: *Put on the full armour of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armour of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.*^{Eph.6:11-13}

In this text, Paul tells us we are at war. He acknowledges the reality of opposition in the visible world (“*flesh and blood*”), but instructs us that the more fundamental conflict is at a deeper level in the invisible realm (“*the heavenly places*”). This you already know. Here is what you may not have seen before. Paul also tips us off that the enemy operates according to specific strategies he calls “*schemes*”—battle plans, of sorts, that inform the devil’s tactical manoeuvres. Being clothed with the proper armour allows us to “*stand firm*” against his schemes, resisting the devil’s subterfuge. Can we know anything about those schemes? I think we can.

I want you to consider a quartet of verses that add up to a sobering truth alerting us to the principal way Satan advances his army in the spiritual battle.

We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.^{1Jn.5:19}

And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world.^{Rev.12:9}

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.^{2Cor.4:3-4}

The Lord’s bondservant must not be quarrelsome, but...patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.^{2Tim.2:24-26}

It may not have occurred to you how complete the enemy’s penetration into the minds of men has been, but these passages make it unmistakable. According to the New Testament the entire world is in the devil’s deathly grip. He holds people captive to do his bidding by trickery and deceit, blinding the minds of those who are perishing, keeping them from coming to their senses and seeing the world the way it really is. Jesus warned that the devil “*is a liar and the father of lies*”,^{Jn.8:44} employing ruses even Christians are vulnerable to. When we come to Christ we have a new spirit, true enough, but our minds are still filled with satan’s foolishness, the lies we readily believed that “*deceived*” and “*enslaved*” us,^{Titus 3:3} as we walked “*according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air*”.^{Eph.2:2}

A key element of our own rescue, then, is reversing the process. We are to “*lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit,*” and “*be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self which...has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbour...*”¹*Eph.4:22-25* Do you see the emphasis?

Not surprisingly, then, the very first step in arming ourselves for battle against the devil is to gird our loins with truth.²*Eph.6:14* And when we engage the battle with God’s “*weapons of warfare [that] are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses,*” we attack those lies and lay waste to them, “*destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God...*”³*2Cor.10:3-5*

Note: nothing about binding and loosing here. No spiritual wrestling match hinted at in these verses. Rather, the bulk of the biblical testimony takes us in an entirely different direction. As I have written elsewhere: *[The devil] gains ground by craftiness and secrecy, and he destroys by lies, accusation, enticement, and subterfuge. If you doubt him, beware. Stealth is his weapon. Satan happily stays in the shadows where he can do his dark business undetected.*²

The principal weapon at the enemy’s disposal allowing him to gain ground in the spiritual conflict, then, is not power but **deception**. Thus, if the basic strategy for satan’s spiritual assault is spreading lies, then the most potent weapon we can wield in the battle against him is its opposite: spreading truth. The counter to lies—the answer to deception, the antidote to deceit—is truth. **I conclude, then, that spiritual warfare is much more about truth encounters than it is about power encounters.**³

Seeing the Unseen

So, we are at war. We battle otherworldly forces in the unseen realm with weapons that are effective to oppose the spiritual strategies and demonic plans in play against us. Our job is to resist those schemes by exposing them, doing everything we can to stand firm by opposing lies with truth.

There is another angle, though, another key insight you must not miss, a clue that allows us to unveil the unseen schemes.

A person who can see will not easily stumble into a ditch, even a small one. He’ll walk around it. A blind person, on the other hand, will walk right over a cliff because no matter how deep or wide the abyss, he does not know it is there. In the same way, satan can foist a very big lie on the world—one so obvious that thoughtful Christians easily see through it—yet the world at large will be oblivious to it because they cannot see it. They have been blinded.

And here is the clue, the “*tell,*” the giveaway that reveals the scheme and helps inform our own counteroffensive against it in the battle. Look for the big spiritual lie that seems completely transparent, the obvious ploy that appears ridiculously ham-handed, the massive ditch that can’t be missed but the world doesn’t seem to see, the abyss the blind masses fall into without giving it a second thought. Find that and you will find the scheme.

If you wonder why anyone would buy into such an obvious spiritual error, if the gullibility of the throng perplexes you, if you catch yourself saying, “*This makes no sense,*” then you have probably stumbled onto a scheme. You have identified a manoeuvre in the battle, since the only explanation for such lack of spiritual perception is spiritual blindness, and we now know who is responsible for that.

Let me give you a few examples.

Three “Schemes”

The first scheme is easily revealed by answering this question: What single religion in our culture has the suffix “*phobia*” attached to it to protect it from criticism? Is it “*Hindu-phobia*”? “*Jew-phobia*”? “*Buddha-phobia*”? “*Christian-phobia*”? Hardly. It’s “**Islamophobia.**” The word has

² Gregory Koukl, *The Story of Reality* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan: 2017), 85.

³ This is the reason why defence of the truth—apologetics—is a vital component of the church’s spiritual battle strategy.

become a fixture in the social lexicon, showing up not only in Wikipedia and the Urban Dictionary, but also in Merriam-Webster, the English Oxford Dictionary, and the Cambridge English Dictionary, to name just a few.

Why is this significant? Because Islam is currently the most dangerous religion in the world. On September 11, 2001, what Time magazine called the bloodiest day on American soil since the Civil War, 2,996 lives were snuffed out by Muslim terrorists. Yet within a few short months, Islam somehow achieved the most favoured religious status in the West. Over the last 16 years since then, Muslims—following a tradition clearly taught in the Koran and endorsed by hundreds of millions of Muslims and respected Muslim clerics—make headlines weekly with acts of murder, mayhem, and mutilation all over the globe, yet any public criticism of that faith is labelled bigotry.

Ironically, even New Atheist Sam Harris sees the problem (not every non-believer is blinded by every lie). He once tweeted, “*Islamophobia. A word created by fascists, & used by cowards, to manipulate morons.*”⁴

Not only is Islam the most dangerous religion in the world, it is also the mortal enemy of Judaism and Christianity. Hmmm! Maybe I have an overactive imagination, but does anyone else see a scheme slipping past the eyes of the spiritually blind?

The second scheme has been around for a long time, but people continue to be taken in by it, despite its obvious absurdity. This con has gone through a number of iterations over the years, but it still boils down the same simple notion: *There is no truth.*

Claiming there is no truth is a kind of “*end around*” the whole who-is-right-about-religion debate. If there is no truth to begin with, then feuds about what religion is true would be pointless. There’s no sense fighting about who has the right answer when there are no right answers to begin with.

This tack is appealing in part because it’s meant to engender a kind of tolerant peace and harmony between people. That is the point of the clever “*COEXIST*” bumper sticker—clever, but ultimately contradictory. Everyone is “*right*,” in a certain sense (“*true for you*”). In another sense, though, a whole bunch of religious people are wrong if they think their own view is true in any deep way.

When people say there is no truth, I often wonder how they want me to respond to their own statement. I think they want me to believe them, but the minute I’m tempted to think they might be on to something—in other words, the minute I start agreeing with them—I run into a problem. I cannot give the nod to their relativism, since that would be the same thing as saying their view were true, which is the one thing they will not allow me to say. You see the problem. You can also see how the idea that there is no truth cuts the legs right out from under the Great Commission.

Notice the pattern. Something of spiritual significance is going on in the visible realm that is obviously false, and the response of the rank and file is obviously wrong-headed, but they don’t see it. Why? Because there is a ploy, a ruse, a scheme in the unseen world that is working blindness among the masses. And the spiritual consequence of this blindness is devastating.

The third scheme is front and centre at the moment. Two thousand years ago, Jesus made a simple observation about the created order: *Humans are made male and female.* From that observation, He drew some fairly common-sense conclusions about the nature of sex and marriage: *one man, with one woman, becoming one flesh, for one lifetime.*^{Mat. 19:4-6}

Jesus was not trading on His Divine authority here, or even on His superior perception. No special clout nor spiritual shrewdness is necessary to see what is self-evident. Rather, Jesus was making a pedestrian observation about something that nature (and nature’s God) had clearly

⁴ Tanya Basu, “*What Does ‘Islamophobia’ Actually Mean?*”, The Atlantic [online], Oct. 15, 2014.

dictated: *There are males and there are females and each was made for the other.* Nowadays, though, this simple truth is no longer clear to multitudes. In fact, it is aggressively repudiated by hordes of otherwise intelligent people.

Why is the obvious no longer obvious? Why is Jesus' observation lost on so many (including countless Christians, sadly) when it comes to gender and homosexuality and a host of other sexual adventures? And what accounts for the intensity of the opposition towards those who see what others are blind to? It's not something natural; it's something supernatural. This lie is driven by a hidden power in an invisible place. The gender/sexuality controversy is ultimately about neither. **Rather, it is about who is in charge—the creature or the Creator, the Potter or the clay.**

Out of the Shadows

You can see the significance of each of these lies from the perspective of spiritual combat. Each is a scheme to blind and deceive regarding something spiritually significant.

Islam is a threat to religious liberty the world over and is a special menace to the “*people of the book,*” Jews and Christians. Relativism undermines all attempts to separate truth from lies, giving free rein to the father of lies. The “*gender wars*” takes personal choice to near comical extremes and places those who advance God's view of sex and marriage right in the crosshairs of the spiritual conflict.

Here is the key. **If you want to see the unseen, look for something spiritually dramatic going on in the visible realm that is so obvious everyone else should see it, but they don't.** That is the tipoff. That is the “*tell.*” That is the giveaway letting us know we're dealing with an area where the enemy has doubled down.

Others are blind to the ruse since it's driven by spiritual forces of darkness in a realm they cannot perceive, but we can. We can see the scheme, we can marshal our forces of truth at that point, we can do everything within our means—by wisdom and truth and the grace of God—to “*stand firm.*”

I will close with this word from former slave trader turned hymnist and pastor, John Newton, taken from his first public service at St. Mary Woolnoth, London, December 19, 1779. His text was “*...speaking the truth in love...*” from Eph. 4:15: *The Bible is the grand repository of the truths that will be the business and the pleasure of my life to set before you. It is the complete system of divine truth to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken with impunity. Every attempt to disguise or soften any branch of this truth in order to accommodate it to the prevailing taste around us either to avoid the displeasure or court the favour of our fellow mortals must be an affront to the majesty of God and an act of treachery to men. My conscience bears me witness that I mean to speak the truth among you.*⁵

Sunday 23rd July 2017. Ps.119:89-96. Lk.16

Making sense of an unfair world.

King David reflecting on the unfairness of life said: *Here is what sinful people are like. They don't have a care in the world. They keep getting richer and richer. It seems as if I have kept my heart pure without any reason. It didn't do me any good to wash my hands to show that I wasn't guilty of doing anything wrong. Day after day I've been in pain.*^{Ps.73:12-14} (David went on to say if he had spoken like he felt, he would have betrayed God's children.^{Ps.73:15})

We live in a sinful world amongst sinful people who are under the influence of a sinful ruler – the devil! *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*^{1Jn.5:19} *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*^{Eph.2:1-2} Eliphaz told Job that his troubles were “*karma*” and that he was getting what

⁵ Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton—From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 272.

he deserved: *Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope? As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it.*^{Job.4:6-8} But God said Job was blameless and upright: *Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.*^{Job.1:8} Some of the world's great successes were previously dismissed as failures. Walt Disney worked for the Kansas City Star paper but was fired by the editor in 1919 because he “lacked imagination and had no good ideas.” Thomas Edison was told by his teacher that he was “too stupid to learn anything,” and he was fired from his first two employment positions for not being productive enough. After over 9,000 attempts at inventing a viable electric lightbulb, he was asked if he ought to give up, but he simply stated “*Why would I feel like a failure? And why would I ever give up? I now know definitely over 9,000 ways an electric lightbulb will not work. Success is almost in my grasp.*” Edison went on to become probably the greatest innovator of all time with 1,093 US patents to his name, along with several others in the UK and Canada. Henry Ford failed twice and became bankrupt before he successfully launched the Ford Motor Company. King Solomon said: *I have observed something else under the sun. The fastest runner doesn't always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn't always win the battle. The wise sometimes go hungry, and the skilful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don't always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time. People can never predict when hard times might come. Like fish in a net or birds in a trap, people are caught by sudden tragedy.*^{Ecc.9:11-12}

Other people seem to have great potential and then lose their expected reward—some from altruistic reasons, others by neglect or laziness and some from circumstances like disease or even untimely death. Douglas Engelbart invented the computer mouse. He first came up with the idea for the mouse in 1968 and patented it but the patent ran out in 1987 before the technology became widely used! Since then, at least one billion computer mice have been sold. Sir Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web but he put no patent on his idea because he decided it should be freely available—and so he received no royalties. But however life treats us, we must never forget that there is another dimension to life beyond the visible. People accept the invisible dimension of air, electricity, radio waves, internet, etc. yet few are willing to seriously consider the invisible dimension of spiritual life. This is because most people's understanding of the spiritual dimension is based on fiction—stories handed down as mythology and re-enforced by superstition or films. Even in the Church, this unseen dimension of spiritual life is sometimes distorted, with fiction being portrayed as fact. People accept all sorts of superstition and go off into a “*realm of fantasy*” because they have not actually studied the Bible for themselves and discerned the truth in the light of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*^{Matt.22:29} But this invisible dimension of spiritual life is not just a parallel world to the physical—it is the domain of Almighty God to whom we must all give an account: *So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*^{Rom.14:12} *Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time.*^{Deut.4:39-40}

Jesus spoke in parables (*i.e.* stories to illustrate spiritual truths) *to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight.*^{Matt.13:13} Although His parables are not necessarily historical events, they are all true-to-life stories. Jesus never used falsehoods or mythology in His teaching, whereas Aesop's fables and Greek mythology stories belong to the realm of fantasy and are clearly fictitious. The story of the Rich man and Lazarus is a parable and shows us the reality of life after death and God's comfort to those who reach out to Him. After we die, there are two destinations: a **place of comfort** or a **place of agony**. *Remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.*^{Lk.16:25} When we die, there is no waiting or sleeping and there is no “*purgatory*” (where souls are

supposedly “purged” from their sin) but rather an **immediate transition to our eternal state** of being “with Christ” or “without Christ”. *Everyone has to die once, then face the consequences.*^{Heb.9:27} Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”^{Lk.23:42-23} For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.^{Phil.1:21-23}

Jesus told this story about Lazarus and the rich man during His ministry and so at that time He had not yet died to take away the sins of the world. *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} *But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.2:1-2} *the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*^{1Jn.1:7} It appears that the OT Believers were waiting with Abraham until Jesus paid the price for sins by His death on the cross. *That is why he is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant.*^{Heb.9:15} *These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*^{Heb.11:39-40} But for us NT Believers, the price has now been paid in full and so we have immediate access to God (through prayer not a priest) and we will be escorted directly into His presence when we die. Lazarus (an OT believer) was escorted through death by angels: *Finally, the poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham*^{Lk.16:22} so I am sure that we NT Believers will have the same transition into eternity—if not better! The rich man had a very different experience which ended in torment with no relief—and for all his wealth and social standing, Jesus does not even give him a name!!

The criteria for “comfort” or “agony” is **repentance**—repentance now because there is no opportunity after we die. *I want him to warn them so they don't end up in this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read what they wrote.’ The rich man replied, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will repent of their sins and turn to God.’ But Abraham said, ‘If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead.*^{Lk.16:28-31}

No! Life is not fair—but then **neither is God fair! Grace is about God not being fair by giving us what we don't deserve** (forgiveness of our sins and eternal life) and **not giving us what we do deserve** (punishment for our sins and eternal death)! But whatever we face in this life, **if we repent of our sins and turn to God, we have spiritual peace and comfort now and will continue to enjoy God's favour for eternity.**

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. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ. Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer. We are confident that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in the comfort God gives us.^{2Cor.1:3-7}

Sunday 30th July 2017. Ps.119:97-104. Lk.17 The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is within you.^{Lk.17:22}

There has been a lot of confusion and speculation about the Kingdom of God and yet it was the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached about: *From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*^{Matt.4:17} But we should remember that the Gospel is simple not complicated and the Bible is not complicated either. The people to whom the Bible was originally written were not confused by what they read! Of course, there were many who did

not understand its spiritual meaning but that was because they did not have the Holy Spirit. *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.*^{1Cor.2:12-14} Paul wrote things that were hard to understand: *And remember, the Lord's patience gives people time to be saved. This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him—speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction.*^{2Pet.3:15-16} But because the Bible is a spiritual book inspired by God,^{2Tim.3:16} this “hard to understand” is a spiritual “hard” not academic “hard”. *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. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.*^{2Cor.3:14-18} Once we have received God's life and He has written His laws on our heart,^{Ez.36:26} we can understand God's Word: *You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of God. But I use parables to teach the others so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled: When they look, they won't really see. When they hear, they won't understand.*^{Lk.8:9}

However, there is a mystery and a secret to the Bible but it is not some hidden or encrypted message for the clever or those “*in the know*”. The Bible is not tomorrow's newspaper predicting great catastrophes or world rulers. There is no “*secret code*” to the Bible other than the one that Paul taught—**JESUS!** He is the Mystery—the “*secret code*” that unlocks the Bible: *I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, **which is Christ in you, the hope of glory**. He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.*^{Col.1:25-29}

The Kingdom of God that Jesus preached was not (and never will be) a political kingdom or even a geographical kingdom but a spiritual kingdom—God's Kingdom is the Domain of the King of kings and the rule of Christ in our hearts. Luke 17 gives us some insights into our King's domain or rule.

Fragility. We all have the capacity to stumble and so we should make every effort to ensure we don't fall but we should also make every effort to ensure that we don't cause others to fall either. *Stumbling blocks are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him to have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. Watch yourselves!*^{Lk.17:1-3} **Maturity is not** being able to do anything but rather, **maturity is** being strong enough to not do something in order to help others grow in their faith: *Just because something is technically legal doesn't mean that it's spiritually appropriate. If I went around doing whatever I thought I could get by with, I'd be a slave to my whims.*^{1Cor.6:12} *But the point is not to just get by. We want to live well, but our foremost efforts should be to help others live well.*^{1Cor.10:23-24}

Forgiveness. *If your brother sins, tell him he is wrong. Then if he turns away from his sins, forgive him. Suppose he sins against you seven times in one day. And suppose he comes back to you each time and says, 'I'm sorry.'*^{Lk.17:3-4} Forgiveness is the very core of God's Kingdom. Jesus said that if we don't forgive others then God will not forgive us. *Forgive people when they sin against you. If you do,*

your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.^{Matt.6:14-15} **God's love is unconditional** but **forgiveness is conditional**—it is conditional upon repentance. True repentance is liberating and life-changing: *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*^{2Cor.7:10}

True repentance will always include these five A's

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

Faith. *The apostles said to the Lord, "Give us more faith!" He replied, "Suppose you have faith as small as a mustard seed. Then you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up. Be planted in the sea.' And it will obey you."*^{Lk.17:5-6} Faith is the absolute confidence in God based on what He has said (His written Word) and what He has done (His living Word—Jesus). As we journey through life and see how God keeps His Word—how He does what He says He will do—we are able to face situations without being anxious or overly concerned because we know God is with us and that He will see us through every situation. We are not **care-less** but we are **care-free**! Every day with Jesus will make us more trusting and more confident so that eventually we will be able to face our largest and final hurdle (death) without fear or fright. But we don't need lots of faith—just living faith (like a growing seed rather than a grain of sand). We can build up our faith through prayer: *But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit.*^{Jude.20} It is in prayer that we ponder our calling, our position, our power, our rights, our mandate, our reasons for believing and also what God's Word says about our ideas. We then conform our concepts to His and align our thinking, emotions and plans with His. It is in prayer that we condition our spirit by pondering God's Word, by reflecting on His plan, by rethinking His objectives, by remembering His defeat of satan, by contemplating the Holy Spirit's power in our life—until we are confident that our life will be lived with power to break the grip of satan over his captives. We can then pray with confidence, share our testimony with confidence and live our life with confidence.

Faithfulness. *Suppose you have done everything you were told to do. Then you should say, 'We are not worthy to serve you. We have only done our duty.'*^{Lk.17:10} Faithfulness is literally being **full of faith** but it is also doing what we should have done—with joy and love! Spiritual growth doesn't come from dramatic experiences even though they are important and enjoyable. Spiritual growth comes from being faithful in our study of the Word of God (both the written Word—the Bible—and the living Word—Jesus); from being faithful in fellowship with God and God's people; from being faithful in prayer—pondering God's promises and re-aligning our thoughts and actions to His Will. We have been given a trust and must prove that we are faithful. *Here is how you should think of us. We serve Christ. We are trusted with God's secret truth. Those who have been given a trust must prove that they are faithful.*^{1Cor.4:1-2}

We won't find God's kingdom by pilgrimage because it is within us—it is God's domain within us: *The coming of God's kingdom is not something you can see just by watching for it carefully... God's kingdom is among you... People will tell you, 'There he is!' Or, 'Here he is!' Don't go running off after them.*^{Lk.17:20-23} **But we can live in God's Kingdom by being faithful**—and God rewards faithfulness: *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!*^{Matt.25:21}

We are receiving a kingdom that can't be shaken. So let us be thankful. Then we can worship God in a way that pleases him. We will worship him with deep respect and wonder. Our "God is like a fire that burns everything up."^{Heb.12:28-29}

August

Songs for the Moment: David. Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His love endures forever. *1Chron.16:34*

Sunday 6th August 2017. Ps.119:105-112. Lk.16

Who will trust you with true riches?^{Lk.16:11}

We take up an Offering each week as part of our Sunday Service and say that we are “giving to God” and yet we put the money in our Church bank account and claim it as ours! So why do we give our money and are we really giving it to God?

Our Country’s economy is measured by how much we spend and save. Our currency is pound sterling and our money represents our labour—what we have done. We buy our food, clothes and possessions with what we have earned from our work—either from the toil of our hands or the toil of our brains (because not all work is manual). God’s plan for all mankind is to work and work is not a result of sin because as soon as God created Adam, he was set to work: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.* ^{Gen.2:15} That is why idleness is ungodly—we may not all be able to have paid employment, but everyone should “work”, even if it is “only” encouraging others, witnessing or praying. In fact Paul teaches that if you don’t work, you don’t eat! *Even when we were with you, we gave you a rule. We said, “Anyone who will not work will not eat.” We hear that some people among you don't want to work. They aren't really busy. Instead, they are bothering others. We belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. So we strongly command people like that to settle down. They have to earn the food they eat. Brothers and sisters, don't ever get tired of doing the right thing.* ^{2Thess.3:10-13}

Twenty or thirty years ago it was the custom of some Churches to preach on “Giving” every week and many times their “Offering” sermons were longer than their main sermons! But very soon we had learned just about everything we could learn about the subject and so there was nothing left to preach about “Giving” that we hadn’t already heard at least 20 times before! So we began to think about how we could encourage people to give Biblically without another sermon on it. We collated some relevant Bible verses into the confession or prayer that we have used for the last 18 years here in Deal. In those days we also used to have little collection bags for our Offerings, which were so small that it was difficult to put a £10.00 note in them and they certainly did not convey the generosity and greatness of God or permit generous Offerings! So we began to use a builder’s bucket for people to come and place their money in, rather than “collect” money from people in little bags. Our Offerings had now become a personal choice with people having to come to the front of the Church to give rather than someone taking a “collection” off them whilst they stayed in their seats.

God is all-sufficient and owns everything that He has created, so why do we “take up an Offering” in our Church service? The Psalmist explains: *I don't need a bull from your barn. I don't need goats from your pens. Every animal in the forest already belongs to me. And so do the cattle on a thousand hills. I own every bird in the mountains. The creatures of the field belong to me. If I were hungry, I wouldn't tell you. The world belongs to me. And so does everything in it... Bring me thank offerings, because I am your God. Carry out the promises you made to me, because I am the Most High God.* ^{Ps.50:9-14} We give to God as a “thank offering”—it is our **Thank You** to Him for being our God.

Father, in the Name of Jesus, I confess that Your Word reigns over every area of my life.

Jesus is God’s Living Word and the Bible is God’s Written Word which explains God’s plan of Salvation as revealed in Jesus and also His principles for our daily life. So the Bible is our point of reference and we accept it as completely true and trustworthy. *God has breathed life into all of Scripture. It is useful for teaching us what is true. It is useful for correcting our mistakes. It is useful for making our lives whole again. It is useful for training us to do what is right. By using Scripture, a man of God can be completely prepared to do every good thing.* ^{2Tim.3:16-17} *The Scriptures cannot be discredited.* ^{Jn.10:35} Not only is the

Bible trustworthy but in our Offering Prayer, we affirm that we yield to God's authority and do what God tells us to do! **In our Offering Prayer, we affirm that we yield to God's authority and do what God tells us to do!**

You give me the ability to produce wealth and so confirm Your covenant. ^{Dent.8:18} Although we work to earn our living, it is God who enables us to the work. *LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.* ^{Is.26:12} By bringing our Offerings to God, we affirm that we acknowledge God as the Source and Owner of everything we have. *The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does.* ^{Ps.145:15} **In our Offering Prayer, we affirm that we acknowledge God as the Source and Owner of everything we have.**

I bring my whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. ^{Mal.3:10}

In the OT, Tithing meant bringing the first 10% of the income to God. Because Israel was an agriculture economy, they brought the first part of their harvest into the Temple "storehouse" or barn and so the Temple priests had food in their house. God also promised that the Believers who gave faithfully would also prosper: *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.3:9-10} We are NT Believers and under grace not the law, but the principle of bringing the first part of our income to the "storehouse" still remains (the "storehouse" is the place that feeds us spiritually—our local Church). This enables the local Church to function and also releases God's blessing on the believing Givers. Although tithing is literally 10%, we should not be bound by rules but give what we have agreed before God to give (10% is much easier to work out than 7% or 12.45%!). *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* ^{2Cor.9:7} When we give, we should give as an act of worship and thanksgiving to God not merely out of duty. Able recognised this principle of giving as an act of faith whereas Cain gave out of duty not gratitude. *By an act of faith, Abel brought a better sacrifice to God than Cain. It was what he believed, not what he brought, that made the difference. That's what God noticed and approved as righteous. After all these centuries, that belief continues to catch our notice.* ^{Heb.11:4} We should give to impress God and never to impress others: *Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to someone in need, don't do as the hypocrites do—blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I tell you the truth, they have received all the reward they will ever get. But when you give to someone in need, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.* ^{Matt.6:1-4} **In our Offering Prayer, we affirm that God will provide for us.**

I am generous and freely give, knowing that I will prosper. ^{Pron.11:24-25} God is generous to the greatest extreme and He gave His One and Only Son. ^{Jn.3:16} God gave us His Love to us when we were unlovely—that is generosity! We are to be like God and conformed to the image of Jesus: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.* ^{Rom.8:28-29} **So the more Godlike and holy we become, the more generous we become!** However, generosity does not make us poorer but richer: *One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.* ^{Pron.11:24-25}

Prosperity is not an abundance of money and neither is poverty a lack of money—they are both "spirits" or attitudes. We can be prosperous with no money and poor with an abundance of money because the currency in God's Kingdom is not money but FAITH. We can buy from God without money! *Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good and your soul will delight*

in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.^{Is.55:1-3} This is an important principle of the Kingdom of God: *Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.*^{Matt.13:11-12} **In our Offering Prayer, we affirm that we are generous and give freely.**

True prosperity is knowing God's blessings because He will meet all our needs: *And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*^{Phil.4:19-20} **As we are faithful with worldly wealth, God will entrust us with true riches—which is great wealth indeed** (to be continued next month).

**Our Prayer over our Offering
Father, in the Name of Jesus,**

I confess that Your Word reigns over every area of my life.

You give me the ability to produce wealth and so confirm Your covenant (^{Deut.8:18}).

I bring my whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house (^{Mal.3:10}).

I am generous and freely give, knowing that I will prosper (^{Prov.11:24-25}).

I give generously, cheerfully and willingly, knowing that You will make me rich in every way,
so I can be generous on every occasion (^{2Cor.9:6-11}).

I am a partner with You in giving and receiving, confident of You crediting my account and
supplying all my needs according to Your glorious riches in Christ Jesus (^{Phil.4:15-19}).

Because I obey You, I am blessed when I go out and when I come in. You send a blessing on
everything I put my hand to (^{Deut.28:1-8}).

Your blessing brings wealth and You add no trouble to it (^{Prov.10:22}).

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

**Father, I thank you for true prosperity in Jesus Name
AMEN- I make this prayer mine**

Sunday 13th August 2017. Ps.119:113-120. Lk.18

What must I do to inherit eternal life?^{Lk.18:18} Eternal life is life (*i.e. life with God*) for eternity as opposed to eternal death which is death (*i.e. separation from God*) for eternity. Although the phrase “*eternal life*” occurs 43 times in the Bible (including 25 in the Gospels and 6 in John’s letter), there still seems to be some confusion over what eternal life is and how to obtain it. But it was the same in Jesus’ day which is why Jesus answered the question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*^{Lk.18:18} At first glance, Jesus appears to be saying that to inherit eternal life you must: *Sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.*^{Lk.18:22} But the conversation comes after Jesus’ teaching on justification and child-like faith—both of which are very relevant to understanding how to inherit eternal life.

Justification: *God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*^{Lk.18:13} God’s mercy is the basis of our salvation and our justification (being right with God) and the man who prayed for God’s mercy *went home justified before God.*^{Lk.18:14} However, we cannot have a relationship with God (that is, know God personally and intimately) by one single sentence prayer. Knowing God is much more wonderful and expansive than a simple formula like that. There is only One Way to God—Jesus Christ, who said: *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.*^{Jn.14:6} But there are many different facets to that One Way and so the way each of us arrive at the Gate to eternal life is unique to us—but we must come through that Gate: *anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber... I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.*^{Jn.10:1-9} Because Adam died spiritually when he sinned, all his descendants are born spiritually dead (*i.e. separated from God*) which is why we must be born

again: *I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.*^{Jn.3:3} Conversion is a Sovereign work of God and He chose us individually before He created the world: *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*^{Eph.1:4} But God's Sovereignty does not mean that we are kept in the dark about our salvation because when we respond to the Holy Spirit's conviction we know that God has chosen us: *For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.*^{1Thess.1:4-5} Although God chose us, we still have to choose Him and receive Him for ourselves: *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*^{Jn.1:12-13} Jesus is the Good Shepherd^{Jn.10} who left heaven to seek and save the lost—you and me: *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*^{Lk.19:10} *Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'*^{Lk.15:4-6} If we could save ourselves, we would not need a Saviour, but: *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*^{Is.53:6} **In the Old Covenant,** God's laws were written in stone and people had to follow God's instructions to the letter or they could not come near Him—but in practice, no-one was able to keep those rules. The main purpose for those rules was to remind people that God is holy and that sin is offensive as well as being fatal. But when Jesus, the Promised Messiah and Saviour of the world came, the rules had to be changed because Jesus was a different sort of priest! *For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.*^{Heb.7:12} *For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*^{Heb.9:15} **In the New Covenant,** God's laws are written on our hearts so we have the desire to keep His laws! *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 is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*^{Heb.8:10-12} We are justified by faith: *So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.*^{Gal.2:16} But we still have to call on the name of the Lord to be saved!

Childlike Faith: *Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*^{Lk.18:17} Children have no doubts about what their parents tell them and simply accept their word as good and trustworthy. We are to trust (believe) God in the same way as children trust their parents—simply accepting what God has said with childlike confidence and no complications. *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*^{Heb.11:1} Before we became a Christian, our soul used to dominate us (our soul is our personality—the part of us that makes us unique, including our emotions, desires and passions). When we became a Christian, we asked God to dominate us and changed our allegiance from self to Saviour—we confessed Jesus as Lord. Jesus is our Master and we are His slaves. *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.*^{Rom.6:22} We heard Jesus' call to follow Him and followed Him. *Jesus answered... You must follow me.*^{Jn.21:22} This is a life-long commitment and, unlike marriage which is commitment to love “*until death do us separate*”, Christianity is a commitment to love Jesus “*until death do us unite*”—and that includes following and obeying Him! *Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."*^{Mt.9:62} Although we are saved

by doing nothing except trusting God, after we are saved and have been forgiven all our sins, we must honour God by living a godly life. Sin dishonours God. If we do anything that dishonours God and have no regret, we have not understood the very basics of Christianity and our love for Him is merely lip-service. *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. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is near-sighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*^{2Pet.1:3-11}

So, **What must I do to inherit eternal life?**^{Lk.18:18} Jesus responded to this question by referring the inquirer to the Scriptures (see also Lk.10:26; Lk.16:31; Jn.5:39/46; Mk.12:24). One of our axioms is: “never read a Bible verse—read the whole paragraph!” because taking a verse out of context is a pretext and that is how most heresies start. We should compare Scripture with Scripture to see exactly what God is saying about an issue and it is certainly true of this verse because the Bible clearly explains that we cannot buy eternal life or anything spiritual with money. Peter said “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.8:20-23}

When we preach or lead a Bible study, we present the spiritual food (“grain”) in the Bible to others so they can be spiritually fed. *For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever ploughs and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?*^{1Cor.9:9-11} Or as the hymn says: “Break Thou the Bread of Life, dear Lord to me, As Thou didst break the loaves beside the sea. Beyond the sacred page, I seek Thee Lord; My spirit pants for Thee, O Living Word.” We are to: *study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, dividing the word of truth aright.*^{2Tim.2:15}

Eternal life in its simplest definition is knowing God and Jesus: *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*^{Jn.17:3} **We obtain eternal life by asking God to have mercy on us and trusting Him with childlike faith. However, after we receive eternal life, we must follow God wherever He leads and whatever the cost.**

Sunday 20th August 2017. Ps.119:121-128. Lk.19:1-27

I must stay at your house today.^{Lk.19:5} For many people August is a holiday month when they take the opportunity to visit people and places. Their holiday accommodation may be in a hotel, B&B, caravan, tent or with friends or relatives, but however comfortable or luxurious the holiday, it is always good to return home because there is no place like home. Home is where we belong—we don't have to ask permission to do something at home. At home, the family shares the ownership—it is **OUR** home (regardless of who owns the house)—**we** live there and **we** change it from a house to a home by having our belongings and caring for it. But with **ownership** comes **responsibility**. At home we are **collectively responsible** for the welfare of our family even though we will have different degrees of responsibility and different functions. If one member of the family doesn't co-operate, then there is disharmony; if one member is

opposed to the family values, it could lead eventually to a complete breakdown of the family structure.

The same is true of our spiritual family—our Church. At Church, and especially in our Church Services, we **share ownership and responsibility**—we don't need to ask permission to pray, praise or prophesy (that is, bring an encouragement of testimony for Jesus: *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus*^{Rev.19:10}). Indeed, Paul encourages us to each bring something to build up the Church when we meet together: *When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all... If you choose to speak, you're also responsible for how and when you speak. When we worship the right way, God doesn't stir us up into confusion; he brings us into harmony. This goes for all the churches—no exceptions.*^{1Cor.14:26-33} Obviously it is best to liaise with one of the Church leaders before you do something that affects others, especially if there is no ready-made opportunity at the time. For instance, if we are reading the Bible, it would normally be better to wait until we had finished reading before you started singing your praises; or if we are praying, it would be prudent to wait until we had finished before you started to clean the Church! **Let common sense and courtesy prevail!!** Like the different parts of a body, we each have a different function, yet we are still part of that one Body: *The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ... God has put the body together such that extra honour and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honoured, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.*^{1Cor.12:12-27} We are collectively the House of God and we are being built into the Temple of God. *As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—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.2:4-5} We are called **Living Stones** and are being prepared for God's House (Temple). This was illustrated by Solomon's Temple where the stones were hewn at the quarry and so when they were brought to Jerusalem, there were perfectly shaped to fit exactly into the right place with no adjustment or cement. *In building the temple, only blocks dressed at the quarry were used, and no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple site while it was being built.*^{1Kg.6:6-7} God is shaping us in life's "quarry" now, so that when we arrive at the New Jerusalem^{Rev.21:1-4} (our life in heaven) we will be complete, perfect and free from any defects or flaws. **But we are also God's Temple (House) now because God dwells within us.** We are God's Temple **collectively** as the Church: *You are a building that is built on the apostles and prophets. They are the foundation. Christ Jesus himself is the most important stone in the building. The whole building is held together by him. It rises to become a holy temple because it belongs to the Lord. And because you belong to him, you too are being built together. You are being made into a house where God lives through his Spirit.*^{Eph.2:20-21} And we are God's Temple **individually** as Believers: *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple? God's Spirit lives in you.*^{1Cor.3:16} *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*^{Col.1:27} Jesus told Zacchaeus: *I must stay at your house today.*^{Lk.19:5} If we love God and obey His teaching, God doesn't just visit us as if He were on holiday, but He comes and makes His home with us—and brings the whole "family" with Him—Father, Son and Holy Spirit: *Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."*^{Jn.15:23} *The Holy Spirit controls you. The Spirit of God lives in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ. Christ lives in you*^{Rom.8:9-10} Jesus wants to come to stay at our house, not kept on the doorstep, or worse, to be told not to come at all. The centurion did not invite Jesus to his home—he had faith but not fellowship: *Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.. Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment.*^{Matt.8:8-13} **We need both faith AND fellowship!**

My question to you this morning is: **Where is Jesus: Have you left Him outside?** *Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal*

together as friends.^{Rev.3:20} Or, **Have you opened the door to let Jesus in, but ignored Him?** “**Christ is the Head of this house; the Unseen Guest at every meal; the Silent Listener of every conversation**” used to be a common poster and is a timely reminder for us that Jesus is not only present with us (Emmanuel) but wants to be included in every part of our life. **Have you welcomed Jesus into your life and do you fellowship with Him throughout the day?** Spiritual fellowship is sharing our life with Jesus through the Holy Spirit, hour by hour, day by day. Fellowship is communion with the King of Glory: *Open up, ancient gates! Open up, ancient doors and let the King of glory enter. Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty; the LORD, invincible in battle. Open up, ancient gates! Open up, ancient doors and let the King of glory enter. Who is the King of glory? The LORD of Heaven's Armies—he is the King of glory.*^{Ps.24:7-10}

An important part of family life is sharing—sharing glad times and sad times, big things and little things. Actually it is often the little things that give the most pleasure and become the most precious—it is those little personal gifts that bring the greatest enjoyment. And those special treats are enjoyed most when they are shared—for we were created to share: *It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.*^{Gen.2:18} If we know what God enjoys, then we can give Him a “*treat*”—something that He enjoys—and then share it with Him. The Bible makes it clear that God does not enjoy formal religion but He does take delight in our obedience: *You take no delight in sacrifices or offerings. Now that you have made me listen, I finally understand—you don't require burnt offerings or sin offerings. Then I said, “Look, I have come. As is written about me in the Scriptures: I take joy in doing your will, my God, for your instructions are written on my heart.”*^{Ps.40:6-8; Heb.10:5-7} For I desire mercy, not sacrifice and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.^{Hos.6:6} God also says that a good name is greatly desirable: *A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.*^{Prov.22:1} To have a good name by living a life that honours God is the best “*treat*” that we can give Him—a “**faithful**” life—i.e. a life that is both **consistently authentic** and also **full of faith**.

Jesus wants to stay at our “*house*” and **make His home with us**. Don’t ignore Him or take Him for granted but fellowship with Him, share your life with Him and give Him a “*treat*” today of *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*^{Gal.5:22-23} Jesus is still saying: **I must stay at your house today.**^{Lk.19:5} *Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don't drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular check-ups. You need first-hand evidence, not mere hearsay, that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it.*^{2Cor.13:5}

Sunday 27th August 2017. Ps.119:129-136. Lk.19:28-48

If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace.^{Lk.19:42}

WWI hostilities formally ended at the **11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918** when the Armistice was signed by representatives of the Allies and Germany. *The Allies included the British Empire, the French Republic, the Russian Empire, Italy, Japan, Belgium, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Romania, the Czechoslovak legions and the USA.* But an armistice is not the same as peace because peace is the end of the conflict itself, not just an end of hostilities. “*Armistice*” comes from the Latin *arma*, (weapons) and *statium*, (stopping) and is not necessarily the end of a war. The WW1 conflict wasn’t formally concluded until six months after Armistice when a Peace Treaty (*Treaty of Versailles*) was signed on 28th June 1919. Although an Armistice Agreement stopped the fighting in the Korean war (1950-1953), no Peace Treaty has ever been signed, so technically North and South Korea are still at war!

The greatest peace we can ever have is peace with God, but this peace does not come from “*prayer*” or any other religious activity but from **knowing God AND Jesus our Lord**: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} We used to be enemies of God. *Once we were God's enemies. But we have been reconciled to him because his Son has died for us.*^{Rom.5:10} Although the “*end of hostilities*” came at Calvary when Jesus paid the price for our

sins and defeated the devil, the “*peace treaty*” is not signed until we are born again. It is only when we are converted that we are completely reconciled to God and justified from our sins. *Since we have been acquitted and made right through faith, we are able to experience true and lasting peace with God through our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One, the Liberating King... the blood of Jesus has made us right with God now, and certainly we will be rescued by Him from God’s wrath in the future... In fact, **we stand now reconciled and at peace with God.***^{Rom.5:1-11}

Faith in God is not (and never has been) a formula or a philosophy. Eliphaz tried to theorise faith by telling Job that he was of no consequence to God but the answer was to “*trust*” God and “*confess His Word*”. Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied: “*Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise person benefit him? What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous? What would he gain if your ways were blameless? Is it for your piety that he rebukes you and brings charges against you? Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?*” ...*Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you. Accept instruction from his mouth and lay up his words in your heart... You must throw your gold nuggets away. You must toss your gold from Ophir into a valley. Then the Mighty One himself will be your gold. He’ll be like the finest silver to you. You will find delight in the Mighty One. You will honour God and trust in him. You will pray to him, and he will hear you. You will keep the promises you made to him. What you decide to do will be done. Light will shine on the path you take. When people are brought low you will say, ‘Lift them up!’ Then God will help them.*^{Job.22:3-29} Some of what Eliphaz said was true, but he did not really know God at all. An intimate relationship with God is not a mathematical equation where “*a+b = c*” and faith is not an academic exercise—we will never learn to trust God from philosophy, science or arts. *After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.’*^{Job.42:7}

When Jesus lamented that the people did not know what would bring them peace, it was just after they had welcomed Him as Messiah and shouted “*peace in heaven*”: “*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*” “*Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!*” *Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’ ‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’*^{Lk.19:38-40} They recognised Jesus as the Messiah, the “*son of David*” but unlike Peter, they did not have the revelation that He was also the Son of God: “*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} Yes! True peace—peace with God—can only come from knowing God and His Son Jesus Christ the Lord. We know God through the Word of God—the Living Word (Jesus) and the Written Word (Scriptures). The Living Word is the Prince of Peace: *And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.*^{Is.9:6-7} The Written Word is the means of peace: *I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil. I hate and detest falsehood but I love your law. Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws. Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:162-165} *If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea.*^{Is.48:18} Believers who love God’s Word are contented, happy people whose minds are stable and settled: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*^{ln.14:26-27} *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.*^{Is.26:3} *In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.*^{Ps.4:8} *The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Though hail flattens the forest and the city is levelled completely, how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.*^{Is.32:17-20} This is because God has established peace for us: LORD, *you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.*^{Is.26:12} God established peace by becoming our peace and uniting us with God the Father: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he*

himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.^{Eph.2:13-18} God is Peace: But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die." So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD Is Peace.^{Jdg.6:23-24} But Jesus became **OUR** peace when He took our punishment: Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. 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.53:4-5} It was at Calvary that Righteousness and Peace met: Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.^{Ps.85:10}

Although many people purport to offer peace, unless they know God personally, like Eliphaz, they are not telling the truth and only offer deception. *From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.*^{Jer.6:13-15} They lead my people away from me. They say, 'Peace.' But there isn't any peace. They are like people who build a weak wall. They try to cover up the weakness by painting the wall white. Tell those who do it that their wall is going to fall. Heavy rains will come. I will send hailstones crashing down. Powerful winds will blow. The wall will fall down. Then people will ask them, 'Now where is the paint you covered it with?'^{Ez.13:10-12}

Jesus has not given us an Armistice where we have agreed not to fight God and God has agreed not to punish sin. Jesus has given us true peace with God by His blood (His death) because God **DID** punish sin: *God made peace through Christ's blood, through his death on the cross.*^{Col.1:20} And this peace will last for eternity: *I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant.*^{Ez.37:26}

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.^{2Thess.3:16}

September

Songs for the Moment: David. My God is my Rock, in whom I take refuge, my Shield and the Strength of my salvation. He is my Stronghold, my Refuge and my Saviour.

2Sam.22:3

Sunday 3rd September 2017. Ps.119:137-144. Lk.12:1-34

Is your life truly blessed?

Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. ^{Lk.12:15}

God is Spirit ^{Jn.4:24} and we are made in God's image ^{Gen.1:26} so it is obvious that we are essentially spirit but we also have a soul and we live in a body. ^{1Thess.5:23} When God made Adam out of the earth, He breathed His life into him and Adam became a living soul. ^{Gen.2:7} Our soul is our

personality and the part of us that makes us the person we are (our emotions, likes, dislikes, preferences, attitude, etc.) but our spirit is the real us—it is the part of us that is **God-conscious** and it cannot be destroyed or annihilated because our spirit is eternal ^{Ecc.3:11} (will live forever). If

we live for our own enjoyment we are called “*hedonistic*”. But we were created to live for God's enjoyment—“*heavenistic*”—and so if we ignore God, living for own pleasure, we will “*short-circuit*” and fail to reach the potential and purpose for which He created us AND we will still

have to give an account to God for our life! *But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.* ^{Lk.12:20-21} When we live for God's good

pleasure, we not only live the way we were created but we live the best and most enjoyable life too: *God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfil his own good pleasure.*

And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan. ^{Eph.1:9-11}

Last month we introduced the **Prayer of Confession over our Giving** that we recite each week. We saw why we introduced it 20 years ago—that it is a weekly reminder of what God says about how we should live and give, and help us keep focused on God's purpose for our lives as we re-align our attitudes and actions. This month we are continuing with our Confession:

I give generously, cheerfully and willingly, knowing that You will make me rich in every way, so I can be generous on every occasion. ^{2Cor.9:6-11}

Generosity is the character of God and so generosity should also be the character of every Christian. However, generosity does not mean sharing our resources regardless of need or consequences—that is squandering our resources and it dishonours God. Generosity is the sharing of our resources cheerfully and willingly, knowing that others will be as blessed as ourselves—or even more blessed! Generosity sees a need, counts the cost and gives freely—

with no strings attached—rejoicing that others are helped. But Christian giving is more than being philanthropical—Christian giving is also an act of worship. That is why we have an opportunity to give within our Service and pray together as we give, rather than having a box on the wall for us to put some money in as we leave. Our Offering time is more than about just

giving our money though, because: *Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath but righteousness delivers from death.* ^{Prov.11:4} Our Offering time is also about **getting** a right attitude towards God and each other so we can be generous on every occasion. Money is what we use to pay our bills and represents the effort we have exerted to gain our income, and so money is the normal commodity for our giving. But we must not forget all the other assets we have—including

ourselves and our time. Christian giving is about the **giving of ourselves**—first to God and then to others: *Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given to the churches in Macedonia. They have suffered a great deal. But their joy was more than full. Even though they were very poor,*

they gave very freely. I give witness that they gave as much as they could. In fact, they gave even more than they could. Completely on their own, they begged us for the chance to share in serving God's people in that way. They did more than we expected. First they gave themselves to the Lord. Then they gave themselves to us in keeping with what God wanted.^{2Cor.8:1-5} We are already more blessed than we can imagine: 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} But every action has consequences and the result of giving to God as a “thank you” is that we **enjoy God’s blessings more. In our Offering Prayer we affirm that we love to give generously.**

I am a partner with You in giving and receiving, confident of You crediting my account and supplying all my needs according to Your glorious riches in Christ Jesus.^{Phil.4:15-19}

Partnership is fellowship and when we work together we gain friendship and trust. Christian giving is a partnership with God—He gives and we receive! Everything we have is originally from God and He freely gives to us regardless of how we will respond. After we have received from God, we give in gratitude for what He has done, acknowledging God as the Giver of all good things.^{Jas.1:17} *A person can receive only what God gives him from heaven.*^{Jn.3:27} We also sow to the heavens in praise and worship as we respond to God’s good gifts, and God responds to our praise by sowing back to the earth. There is a cycle of responding—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 will sow] and I will sow her for myself in the land.”^{Hos.2:21-23} We reap in the same manner as we sow, which is why we should take every opportunity to sow generously. *Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven. Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.*^{Lk.6:37-38} *Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.*^{Ecc.11:6} *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.” Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.*^{2Cor.9:6-13} **In our Offering Prayer we affirm that we are partners with God.**

Because I obey You, I am blessed when I go out and when I come in. You send a blessing on everything I put my hand to.^{Deut.28:1-8} If we love God we will want to obey Him.

The way we show our love is to obey God's commands. He commands you to lead a life of love.^{2Jn.1:6} Obedience is not just doing the right thing—**obedience is doing the right thing, willingly and cheerfully.** God has placed His Spirit within us to enable us to **desire** to do His will. *And I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good for them. I will put a desire in their hearts to worship me, and they will never leave me.*^{Jer.32:40} Now it is up to us **co-operate** with God and **willingly and cheerfully obey Him and honour Him.** *I will guide you and teach you the way you should go. I will give you good advice and watch over you. Don't be like the horse or the mule. They can't understand anything. They have to be controlled by bits and bridles. If they aren't, they won't come to you. Sinful people have all kinds of trouble. But the LORD's faithful love is all around those who trust in him. Be glad because of what*

the LORD has done for you. Be joyful, you who do what is right! Sing, all of you whose hearts are honest!^{Ps.32:8-11} God told Abraham (who is the “Father of all who believe”^{Rom.4:11}) that he would **be blessed** and also **be a blessing**: *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.*^{Gen.12:2-3} This blessing from God is a spiritual blessing and there is no greater blessing than having our sins forgiven: *David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.*^{Rom.4:6-8} However, when we seek God’s kingdom first, we are promised subsequent blessings as well: *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 **as well**. 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} **In our Offering Prayer we affirm that we are truly blessed.**

Yes our life is truly blessed when we love to give generously as partners with God.

Sunday 10th September 2017. Ps.119:146-152. Lk.20:1-26

Are you qualified? *By what authority are you doing all these things? Who gave you the right?*^{Lk.20:2}

If we are to be credible we need to be qualified and also give proof that we are qualified.

Many people find waiting for the results of exams stressful because the exam results show whether they have qualified or been disqualified in their subjects. However, not all

“qualifications” are certificated and not all certificates are genuine and it is easy today, especially over the internet, to buy bogus “qualifications” for anything—including PhD’s! So, a certificate alone is not proof of qualification—there needs to be real evidence of ability by being able to actually **do** the work—to “walk the talk”.

Jesus showed that He was qualified as the Messiah by the authority in His preaching and healing—by actually doing what the Messiah was going to do. *The people surrounded him and asked, “How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus replied, “I have already told you, and you don't believe me. The proof is the work I do in my Father's name. But you don't believe me because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else. No one can snatch them from the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.”*^{Jn.10:24-30} *Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.*^{Jn.7:28-29}

Jesus had great authority which was seen by what He did and what He said: *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} *All the people were amazed and said to each other, “What words these are! With authority and power he gives orders to impure spirits and they come out!”*^{Lk.4:36} But Jesus was also gentle and compassionate too: *This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.*^{Matt.12:17-21}

To follow Christ is good and commendable but just trying to follow Jesus will not make us a Christian because being a Christian is more than just being a follower of Christ. To be a Christian, Christ has to reside within us and this happens at the “new birth” when God becomes our heavenly Father and we become His child: *Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God. To be a child of God has nothing to do with human parents.*

Children of God are not born because of human choice or because a husband wants them to be born. They are born because of what God does.^{Jn.1:12-13} **God qualifies us to be called a Christian.** In his great mercy he has given us a new birth and a hope that is alive. It is alive because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He has given us new birth so that we might share in what belongs to him. It is a gift that can never be destroyed. It can never spoil or even fade away. It is kept in heaven for you. Through faith you are kept safe by God's power. Your salvation is going to be completed.^{1Pet.1:3-5}

Our confidence to call our self a Christian must be never be in a baptism certificate or a church membership certificate—or any other certificate issued by a Church.

Our confidence to call our self a Christian is that **God has qualified us to be a Christian.** And because God has qualified us – and empowered us we are now able to “walk the talk” and live a life that is worthy of our Lord: *For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a **life worthy of the Lord** and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has **qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people** in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*^{Col.1:9-14}

It is 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* or *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences* to the door of Wittenburg Castle church. This questioning of the Church's teaching was the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. It was in opposition to Luther's theses that in 1521 Henry VIII wrote his “*Defence of the Seven Sacraments*” for which Pope Leo X bestowed the title “*Fidei Defensor*” on him. In 1530 when Henry broke away from Rome Pope Paul III regarded it as an attack on “*the Faith*” and revoked the title but Henry decided to keep it anyway! This title is still in use today: *Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith* and *fid def* is imprinted on our coins. The Reformation began because **Sola Fide—faith alone** (i.e. *justification by faith*)—had been re-discovered: *What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and 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.4:3,23-25} (The Reformation also taught other **Solas**: **Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone)** i.e. no teaching of the Church supersedes the authority of the Scriptures; **Sola Gratia (by Grace alone)** i.e. there is nothing that we can do to merit our salvation; **Solus Christus (by Christ alone)** i.e. there is no place for any priesthood or sacraments to mediate between us and God; **Soli Deo Gloria (Glory to God alone)** i.e. no-one can claim any credit – all the glory goes to God).

Although the Reformation's emphasis on **Sola Fide** was well overdue and needed, we must not forget that faith is living (like a seed^{Lk.17:6}) and if our faith is not seen by the way we live, it is nothing more than a concept or thought. Our theology must be more than theory or we are just a loud gong or a noisy cymbal (nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate).^{1Cor.13:1} 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.” You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless?^{2Jas.2:17-20} If you should ever doubt your validity as a Christian, then re-examine your faith and credentials: *You are asking me to prove that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you. He is powerful among you. It is true that Christ was nailed to the cross because he was weak. But he lives by God's power. In the same way, I share his weakness. But by God's power I will live with him to serve you. Take a good look at yourselves to see if you are really believers. Test yourselves. Don't you realize that*

Christ Jesus is in you? Unless, of course, you fail the test! I hope you will discover that I haven't failed the test. I pray to God that you won't do anything wrong. I don't pray so that people will see that I have passed the test. Instead, I pray so that you will do what is right, even if it seems I have failed. I can't do anything to stop the truth. I can only work for the truth.^{2Cor.13:3-8} Any spiritual authority we have is from God because He qualified us to be a Christian, so we must be careful that do not abuse that delegated authority—we have no dominion over other people's faith or life. *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*^{2Cor.1:24} You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.^{Matt.20:25-28}

Jesus authorised His disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God: Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."^{Matt.28:18-19} **And He has qualified us to do the same, so let's give proof of our faith and then pass the message on to others who will also be qualified:** As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.^{2Cor.8:23-24} And 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} **Then we can proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom with confidence as we live our lives for His glory.**

Sunday 17th September 2017. Ps.119:153-160.

Excuse Me, Do You Speak Bible?

As Dave Smethurst is with us this week I have used this article from Andrew Corbett

Understanding The Bible As A Language:

When it comes to understanding the Bible, we are thankful to diligent translators who convey the intended meaning of a passage from the original Biblical language (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into English. But there is an aspect of the Bible's "language" that goes beyond just the words that are used. If you really want to understand the Bible, you have to appreciate its language. In fact, much of the Old Testament serves the purpose of establishing the language of Scripture. Almost immediately it teaches us the language of *numbers*. Its opening chapters teaches us that "7" relates to "**complete**" *So the creation of the heavens and the earth and everything in them was completed. On the seventh day God had finished his work of creation, so he rested from all his work.*^{Gen.2:1-2} (Knowing this helps the reader to understand why John's Gospel contains: 7 "I AM" statements by Christ; 7 miracles of Christ; 7 sermons by Christ.) In Genesis chapter 3 we are introduced to Christ as *The Seed*, a term filtered through Abraham then applied to all the redeemed in Christ.^{Gal.3:28-29} The Biblical term "*the elect*" relates to this Seed not by ethnicity but by spiritual redemption through Christ. By the middle of Genesis, we are told that Joseph dreamed of Israel (his family) as being like "*the sun, moon, and stars*".^{Gen.37} And the prophets, including Christ, would use this same metaphor for Israel as *becoming darkened, falling from the skies, and no longer giving forth its light* whenever Israel ceased to fully obey God and reflect His light.^{Joel 2, Matt 24}

Biblical Idioms, Analogies, & Metaphors:

In recent times, the Bible has undergone several severe attacks. One newly released book, by a former graduate of Wheaton College, who now denounces Christ and the Bible, claims that the Bible is unreliable, scientifically faulty, historically inaccurate, and not preserved to its original edition. This attack on the Bible by someone who had one of the finest evangelical educations available is bewildering. He confuses *preservation* with *inspiration* when it comes to understanding

God's Word. He fails to identify and distinguish idioms, analogies and metaphors in the Bible. A failure in this regard is an admission of literary-laziness when it comes to understanding the language of the Bible.

Reading The Bible Literally:

When the Bible says that the trees of the field "*clap their hands*", or that the sun "*rises*" and goes "*down*", or that the stars of the heavens "*fall from skies*", we are in danger of misunderstanding these statements if we claim that they must be understood in a wooden literal sense. To read the Bible *literally* means that we accept the *intended meaning* of a passage. To do this we must identify and distinguish Biblical idioms, analogies and metaphors. If we fail to understand that certain Biblical genealogies are more *analogical* than genealogical (such as the one in Matthew 1 which divides the genealogy of Christ into three groups of 14 generations, where "14" is an analogy to *David* - the Hebrew word for David is *DWD*, which in Hebrew [Gematria](#) equals 14) we will fail to appreciate what the Biblical author was intending to communicate. Biblical genealogies served a purpose greater than merely detailing a family lineage which is why Great Grandfathers are sometimes referred to as being "*the father of...*" That's why many of the Bible's genealogies are not *exhaustive* (not every generation is listed) but rather *particular*, making it very difficult to make accurate chronological calculations based on them.

Reading the Bible "*literally*" involves converting these idioms, analogies, and metaphors into their intended meaning. Critics of the Bible who fail to do this, present what they consider to be the "*errors*" of Scripture when they cite supposed scientific errors within Scripture, such as *The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, And hastens to the place where it arose.*^{Ecc1.1:5} Critics of the Bible claim that verses like this erroneously claim that the Bible teaches that the earth is stationary and the Sun revolves around it. But the expression "*the sun rises*", "*the sun goes down*", are accepted idioms for the start and end of a day. The writer intends to convey a timeframe reference, not a cosmological argument!

"Plenary" Inspiration:

The Bible claims to be inspired by God.^{2Tim.3:16} But unlike the claims of other religions, the Bible presents its inspiration as "*plenary*" not "*mechanical*". *Mechanical Inspiration* is the idea that God dictated every word of the Bible to men who merely wrote them down in a mechanical fashion. Plenary Inspiration on the other hand is the idea that God inspired men to write His Word in their own words with the result being that God totally inspired the Scriptures. This means that they contain expressions, figures of speech, and words that both the author and his original audience understood.

"The biblical authors did not simply take dictation from God. They were not mere secretaries or automatons, but they were faithful to proclaim the whole message from God without adding to it or taking away from it."^{Pron.30:6; Rev.22:18-19} *God used the individual personalities, vocabularies, literary styles, and conscious desires of the biblical authors to produce His Word. Thus, while being completely from God, the words of Scripture are also human words in particular human languages (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic) expressed in distinctive human literary forms that include narrative (Samuel), poetry (Psalms), and parables (Gospels), as well as metaphor,^{Jn.15:1-8} some allegory,^{Gal.4:21-5:1} and even hyperbole.^{Ps.6:6; Lk.14:26}"* Dr. Norman Geisler, ["Who Made God?: And Answers to Over 100 Other Tough Questions of Faith"](#), Zondervan, 2003, p.108.

Plenary Inspiration means that God allowed human perspective into His Sacred Text. From a human perspective, certain Biblical expressions make sense (like the sun rising and setting), and even certain time-frame references (the Hebrews regarded a new day beginning at sunset while Romans regarded it as sunrise which explains why some time-frame differences occur between the various Gospel accounts).

Translation Errors?:

One of the strongest attacks made against the Bible is that it is full of errors due to copying mistakes (both deliberate and unintentional). Some of the treasured doctrines of Christianity, it

is claimed, were never endorsed by Christ but were invented centuries later and added to Scripture then. But we know with the highest degree in certainty that the Bible we have today is indeed what God has originally inspired. This is because of the vast number of ancient manuscripts of the Bible that have been discovered (over 5,000) concur with what we have today. But another attack on the Bible is that no two of these manuscripts agree in the exact wording of their text. Firstly, this is not true. These manuscripts reveal amazing agreement regarding the original text of Scripture. In the occasional verses where certain words are different, translators are able to use a literary reconstruction device called "*Textual Criticism*" to determine the original text. They do this by comparing the all the available manuscripts. Dr Norman Geisler illustrates Textual Criticism this way-

"Yo# have won 20 million dollars."

"You #ave won 20 million dollars."

"You h#ve won 20 million dollars."

Dr Geisler goes on to say that because the error is in a different place each time, it actually helps us to be *more* sure of what the intended message is (page 121). According to New Testament Textual Critics such as Sir Frederick Kenyon and Dr A.T. Robertson, we can be 99.9% certain that our modern Bibles are completely faithful to the original text.

Thus, the language of Scripture is comprised of more than just *words*. Reading the Bible "*literally*" doesn't just mean taking its words in a wooden literal sense—it means taking it the way the author intended. This is one reason why doing "*word-studies*" can actually be detrimental to arriving at a correct understanding of Scripture. Pursuing the intended meaning of Scripture demands that we become more than just *readers* of the Bible and become *students* of the Bible as well. Those who take the time to do this will find that the Bible is truly God's Word and that it is without error. And for those seeking to hear the voice of God, understanding the *Word of God* helps us to become familiar with the *language of God* so that we can recognise the voice of God.

May God grant us the understanding we need to learn the language of His Word. *And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*^{1Jn.5:20}

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Sunday 24th September 2017. Ps.119:161-168. Lk.20:20-47

Children of the resurrection. *But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.*^{Lk.20:35-36}

The resurrection of the dead and the return of Jesus is foundational to our Christian faith: *For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.*^{1Cor.15:13-20}

Sadly some denominations have allowed their Ministers to continue in ministry after they have publicly stated that "there is no resurrection"—either of Jesus or of people. But it was the same in Jesus' time: *Then Jesus was approached by some Sadducees—religious leaders who say there is no resurrection from the dead.*^{Lk.20:27} Jesus' response then was: *Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?*^{Lk.20:24} It is nearly 2000 years since Jesus physically rose from

the dead and the NT was written. Over that time, countless theories of the return of Jesus and the resurrection from the dead have come and gone. Some are plausible but many are just weird and these theories usually arise when people try to make the Gospel complicated. But we should remember that the Gospel (and our Faith) is **simple** (*anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*^{Lk.18:17}), **settled** (*contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.*^{Jude:3}) and **spiritual** (i.e. it is to do with our relationship with God: *God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.*^{Jn.4:24}).

To help us from going into “the realm of fantasy”, here are some basic principles to remember.

God always honours His Son Jesus. The Kingdom of God is about Jesus not about us and our comfort: *The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.*^{Jn.3:35} *This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!*^{Matt.17:5} Jesus is God's One and Only Son: *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.3:16} Jesus is the only Mediator between God and people: *For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*^{1Tim.2:5-6} Jesus is the only means of salvation: *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*^{Acts.4:12} We must honour Jesus and keep our attention on Him. *We must focus on Jesus, the source and goal of our faith.*^{Heb.12:2}

God's promises are for God's people—and God keeps His promises! God's people are Believers—and **Believers, believe!** *By faith we understand ... By faith Abel... By faith Abraham... These were all commended for their faith...*^{Heb.11} God's people come from every generation and from every nationality and **they all believe (trust) God:** *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.”*^{Rev.7:9-10} So when we think about the resurrection of the dead and Jesus' return, we should not get carried away with theories about dangers or demons but focus on Jesus and the Hope that He brings: *On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*^{Lk.21:26-28}

God will do it His way. God is unravelling **History** (His story), **His way** regardless of our theories or even our co-operation (or lack of co-operation!), so it is not worth falling-out over our interpretation of the Bible—unless there is a clear contradiction of the basics of salvation. The non-negotiable basics of salvation include: the Trinity; Jesus' virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary death, physical resurrection, physical ascension and physical return; man's personal salvation through personal faith in Jesus Christ; the authority of Scripture. God has a **Kingdom** and He is the **King** of His **Domain**. *God has rescued us from the power of darkness and has brought us into the kingdom of his Son, whom he loves. His Son paid the price to free us, which means that our sins are forgiven.*^{Col.1:13-14} This means that God is in charge and He will do what He wants, when He wants, regardless of what we want or believe!

No-one will miss Jesus' return or the resurrection of the dead. Jesus' return will be visible, audible, physical, immediate, unexpected, on time, and final! Any theory of a secret or silent return of Jesus really does not stand up to scrutiny. Whenever God honours His Son, He does it publicly: *Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things. So I can speak openly to him. I am certain he knows everything that has been going on. After all, it was not done in secret. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”*^{Acts.26:25-27} As Believers, we should anticipate Jesus' return with an attitude of joy and not worry about what might happen: *Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.*^{Matt.6:34}

Jesus' return will be visible: *Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.*^{Rev.1:7}

Jesus' return will be audible: *Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*^{Matt.24:30-31}

Jesus' return will be physical: *After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*^{Acts.1:9-11}

Jesus' return will be instantaneous: *Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*^{1Cor.15:51-52}

Jesus' return will be unexpected: *No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man ...they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.*^{Matt.24:36-39}

Jesus' return will be on time: *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*^{2Pet.3:9} *For in just a little while, the Coming One will come and not delay.*^{Heb.10:37}

Jesus' return will be final: *But here is the order of events. Christ is the first of those who rise from the dead. When he comes back, those who belong to him will be raised. Then the end will come. Christ will destroy all rule, authority and power. He will hand over the kingdom to God the Father.*^{1Cor.15:23-24} *Therefore, brothers and sisters, use more effort to make God's calling and choosing of you secure. If you keep doing this, you will never fall away. Then you will also be given the wealth of entering into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*^{2Pet.1:10-11} *Then man goes to his eternal home.*^{Ecc.12:5}

Yes! We are God's children and we are children of the resurrection^{Lk.20:35-36} **with a glorious hope and a wonderful future.** Jesus' return is our theology not just a theory. Even though we may not understand all the intricate details of Jesus' return or the resurrection, we can trust God enough to be able to anticipate our future with Him instead of fearing it. *You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*^{Lk.12:40} *It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 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.1:7-8} But until Jesus' return and the resurrection, we must continue to walk and work with God as we live discerning, pure and blameless lives *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... 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.*^{Phil.1:6-10} Someone asked John Wesley what he would do if he knew his Lord would return the next day. He said, "I would go to bed and go to sleep; wake up in the morning, and go on with my work, for I would want Him to find me doing what He had appointed." **Let's respond in the same way as Wesley! He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**^{Rev.22:21}

October

Songs for the Moment: The Redeemed: Give thanks to the LORD, call on His Name; make known among the nations what He has done, and proclaim that His Name is exalted. *Is.12:4*

Sunday 1st October 2017. Ps.119:169-176.

Your blessing brings wealth and You add no trouble to it. *Prov.10:22* Ascetics renounce material possessions and physical pleasures in order to become more “*spiritual*”. It stems from the idea that “*flesh*” is evil and “*spirit*” is good and so the more you can deny the “*flesh*”, the more “*spiritual*” you become! Actually, the word “*ascetic*” is derived from the Greek and means training or exercise—the original usage referred to the physical training required for athletic events, not to self-denial. To live a meaningful and useful life, we all need a certain amount of “*stuff*”—possessions and comfort. We need food (or we will die from starvation); we need clothes (or we will die from hypothermia or sunstroke!); we need transport (even Jesus used a donkey); we need to be able to communicate; we need... (and there are lots of other “*needs*” that are essential for a meaningful life). But Jesus didn’t say that we don’t *need* possessions but rather: *Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.* *Lk.12:15* Life without God is impoverished—truly poor—but life with God is enriched—truly rich: *GOD’s blessing makes life rich; nothing we do can improve on God.* *Prov.10:22* **Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways. You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours.** *Ps.128:1-2* **God is Spirit** *Jn.4:24* **and we need His Spirit to make us spiritual.** Spirituality does not come from asceticism—denial of normal everyday commodities and comforts. *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* “*Food is for the stomach. And the stomach is for food.*” *But God will destroy both of them.* *1Cor.6:13* Sadly, the belief that we must become more “*spiritual*” by renouncing possessions and pleasure is now widespread in the Church but you cannot get more “*spiritual*” than being joined to God: *But anyone who is joined to the Lord becomes one with him in spirit.* *1Cor.6:17* The word “*joined*” means “*glued*” or “*contracted together*” as in the consummation of a marriage. At conversion, the Holy Spirit and our spirit are “*glued*” together and we become a “*new creation*”. *2Cor.5:17* **Being spiritual means being one with God!** Once we become a Christian, we receive a new Master, a new mission and a new motivation—we not only *want* to serve God but we are *enabled* to serve Him too! Our struggle is not to become more “*spiritual*” but to become **more trusting** of God and to conform our personality to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. *Rom.8:26* We trust God more by getting to know Him better and we become conformed to the image of Jesus by renewing our minds. We do both of these things through the Word of God, by aligning our thoughts with His thoughts, our desires with His desires and our words with His words as they are revealed in Scripture. That is why fellowship is so important—fellowship with God, fellowship with His Word and fellowship with His people. Actually, by rejecting the good things that God has given us to enjoy, asceticism usually makes people **less spiritual**. *Tell those who have the riches of this world not to be arrogant and not to place their confidence in anything as uncertain as riches. Instead, they should place their confidence in God who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. Tell them to do good, to do a lot of good things, to be generous, and to share. By doing this they store up a treasure for themselves which is a good foundation for the future. In this way they take hold of what life really is.* *1Tim.6:17-19* We should appreciate what God has given us and then we can freely give to others—if we reject what God has given us we have nothing to give to others! As God blesses us, we can bless others—regardless of their social or civic standing *because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.* *1Jn.4:4* Thus, Jacob who was an unknown foreigner in Egypt, was able to bless Pharaoh, the leader of the greatest country in the known world—Egypt: *Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh and went out from his presence.* *Gen.47:10* *And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater.* *Heb.7:7* Jesus said that the least of us is more important than anyone in

the OT, including Jacob! *I tell you, no one more important than John has ever been born. But the least important person in God's kingdom is more important than he is.*^{Lk.7:28} **So who will you bless?** Yes, we are spiritually rich—not by rejecting God's good gifts but by accepting His greatest Gift of eternal life. **In our Offering Prayer, we affirm that we are spiritually wealthy.**

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

Good health is not the same as perfect health! We can do lots of practical things to look after our bodies, but ultimately we will die, either of disease or old age. Although we can and should respect our bodies by eating sensibly and living sensibly, our **priority should be our spiritual life.** *Dear friend, I hope all is well with you and that you are as healthy in body as you are strong in spirit.*^{3Jn.1:2} Other translations put it this way: "I pray that you may prosper in every way and be in good health physically just as you are spiritually." "I pray that everything is going well for you and that your body is as healthy as your soul is prosperous." Our mental health can affect our physical health but our spiritual health will affect both our mental health and our physical health.

We should take every care to look after our spiritual health by consistently and constantly trusting God: *But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers.*^{Lk.22:32} *Unless your faith is firm, I cannot make you stand firm.*^{Is.7:9}

We must make our spirit dominate our soul (our natural life—which includes our mind and emotions). *Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*^{Ps.43:5}

God wants us to have a good and fulfilling life: *My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.*^{Jn.10:10} *Trouble pursues the sinner, but the righteous are rewarded with good things.*^{Prov.13:21}

Looking after our spiritual health is not difficult, nor is it just a duty but it is a privilege and now God has given us the desire and ability to live for Him, it is a joy: *Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers.*

But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.^{Ps.1:1-3}

When we put God's kingdom first, He has promised to add even more to our spiritual life: *What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works.*

Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.^{Matt.6:31-33}

In our Offering Prayer, we affirm that, in Jesus, we have a great inheritance of God's blessings.

Father, I thank You for true prosperity: Giving thanks is not just the polite thing to do but it is also the right thing to do because it shows we appreciate what we have received—this is especially true when we give thanks to God our heavenly Father. **True prosperity is spiritual prosperity.**

Only Believers are truly prosperous because only God can bestow the true riches of faith and godliness: *Your faith is more precious than gold, and by passing the test, it gives praise, glory, and honour to God.*^{1Pet.1:7}

Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth.^{1Tim.6:2} *And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.*^{Heb.11:6}

If we don't show our appreciation to God, we do not value our blessings and neither do we value our Heavenly Father who blesses us. Giving thanks is not complicated or difficult and when thanks comes from the heart it is never a formal ritual. **In our Offering Prayer, we affirm that we are thankful to God for His blessings—both spiritual and physical**

In Jesus Name. AMEN—I make this prayer mine: We make our prayers specific when we pray in the Name of Jesus—they are specific to whom we pray and also specific in what we pray. *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 given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.*^{Acts.3:16}

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.^{Col.3:17}

Our Offering Prayer is much more than repeating some Bible verses or

listening to someone else pray. By praying the Offering Prayer, we are making it our own personal agreement with God! *The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.* ^{Jas.5:16} *The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.* ^{Prov.15:29} **In our Offering Prayer, we affirm that we are personally praying in Jesus' Name. Yes! God is good, His Word is true and it works in my life**

Sunday 8th October 2017. Ps.120. Lk.21

Stand firm in your faith.

Luke chapter 21, like Matthew chapter 24 is predominately about the destruction of Jerusalem. The Roman attack of Jerusalem began in 64A.D. but was intensified in 66A.D. culminating with the destruction of the Temple in 70A.D. The historian Josephus' eye-witness account of these events, matches Jesus' description in the Gospels and John's description in the first 19 chapters of Revelation. But because the prophetic descriptions in the Bible condense the timeline, we can't be exactly sure what was specifically about the immediate time (*the impending judgement on Israel and the destruction of the Temple concluding with the end of the Old Covenant*) or what is about the future time (*the final judgement at the end of history and the return of Jesus*). Because the Bible writers use types (i.e. *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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.* ^{Col.2:16-17}) and allegories (i.e. *the sun, moon and stars represent the natural Israel* ^{Gen.37:9-10}), we can't be sure what is absolutely literal and what is figurative. However, the main principle in Luke 21 is clear and relevant: **Stand firm in your faith.**

Watch out that you are not deceived. ^{Lk.21:8} People who are deceived don't realise their deception because they are ensnared. The devil is an expert at deception and he deceived Eve by twisting what God had said. *Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"* ^{Gen.3:1} *The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."* ^{Gen.1:13} And the devil is still deceiving people today by twisting God's Word—both the Living Word (Jesus) and the Written Word (what God has said—the Scriptures): *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.* ^{2Cor.11:3-4} However, God had a rescue plan —**the birth of the Child, Jesus Christ.** *Besides that, Adam was not deceived. It was the woman who was deceived and sinned. However, she and all women will be saved through the birth of the child, if they lead respectable lives in faith, love, and holiness.* ^{1Tim.2:14-15} (It seems that Adam was not deceived—he deliberately disobeyed!) God's rescue plan involved **breaking** the devil but at the cost of **bruising** Jesus: *I will put hatred between you and the woman. Your children and her children will be enemies. Her son will crush your head. And you will crush his heel.* ^{Gen.3:15} The "deceiver" (the devil) will be eternally punished along with all who follow him: *And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.* ^{Rev.20:10} *Then he will say to those on his left, 'You are cursed! Go away from me into the fire that burns forever. It has been prepared for the devil and his angels.'* ^{Matt.25:41} False messiahs and false prophets are still around today and are they are still using the same methods as their spiritual father did at the beginning—twisting God's Word—both the Living Word (Jesus) and the Written Word (what God has said—the Scriptures). *At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.* ^{Matt.13:21-23} They **twist** (actually wicked means "twisted") God's truth into lies such as: *If you pray with enough faith, God will grant whatever you ask. You can earn God's favour through good works. Sickness and trials are the result of your personal sin. God wants you to be happy, so do*

*what makes you happy. You can't lose your salvation, so live as you please. You can lose your salvation, so you better not sin. We must be diligent and make every effort to keep on the straight and narrow path that has been trodden by the faithful Believers for centuries. For the last 2000 years there has been no new revelation about God or his plan of salvation—and neither will there be any new revelation, because all that God wants us to know has already been **clearly** recorded in the Scriptures. I say this because many deceivers have gone out into the world. They deny that Jesus Christ came in a real body. Such a person is a deceiver and an antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked so hard to achieve. Be diligent so that you receive your full reward. Anyone who wanders away from this teaching has no relationship with God. But anyone who remains in the teaching of Christ has a relationship with both the Father and the Son.^{2Jn.1:7-9} To keep on the “paths of righteousness”^{Ps.23:3} we need to immerse ourselves in the Word of God by continually talking about it, thinking about it and living the Kingdom principles! Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.^{Josh.1:8}*

By standing firm you will gain life.^{Lk.21:19} “No gain without pain” is a well-worn cliché, but it is a reminder that any real achievement requires effort. Our whole life consists of choices and every choice has consequences—the kind of life we are living today is the result of the choices we made days, months and years ago. Although we all make wrong choices sometimes (and like Adam, sometimes our wrong choices are intentional), there is a way back to the “paths of righteousness” if we want to get right with God and change. Even Esau was offered the chance of returning: *You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.*^{Gen.27:40} Although God’s Grace ensures that we have the benefits of God’s favour without earning it, we still have to stand firm in our faith, and that entails a lot of work and patience. *By your patience possess your souls.*^{Lk.21:19} *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9} *If you fail under pressure, your strength is too small.*^{Pron.24:10} To receive our reward we must do more than start the race—**we must finish the race too!** We must do more than just “make a decision” to follow Jesus Christ, we must follow Him to the very end. *All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*^{Matt.10:22} *You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*^{Is.5:8-9} **So how do we “stand firm”?** Watchmen Nee taught that God’s order for spiritual success is to **Sit**, then **Walk**, and then **Stand!** When God saves us, He lifts us up out of the mire of our sin and degradation and **sits** us with Christ as legitimate family members: *God raised us up with Christ. He has seated us with him in his heavenly kingdom because we belong to Christ Jesus.*^{Eph.2:6} Until we realise that we **are already seated** with Christ, we will never **walk** (fellowship) with Him. *And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.*^{Eph.5:2} But we will not **walk** with God if we don’t agree with Him.^{Amos.3:3} Fellowship is partnering—sharing our life—and so we must **walk** prudently and wisely as children of light: *Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth).*^{Eph.5:8-9} *See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise.*^{Eph.5:15} When we are **walking** with God—in fellowship with God—we can **stand** firm. *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.*^{1Cor.16:13-14} *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 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, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*^{Eph.6:13-14}

Be always on the watch, and pray... that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.^{Lk.21:36}

To stand firm in our faith we must stay prayerfully alert and in fellowship with God, His Word and His people and then we will not be caught off guard by the devil's deceit. Fellowship is a willing partnership not a forced imposition. We can (and do) work together with you but we cannot impose fellowship on you or control your faith. *Your faith is not under our control. You stand firm in your own faith. But we work together with you for your joy.*^{2Cor.1:24}

Let's continue to work together, encouraging, edifying and exhorting one another in our faith so we may be able to stand firm until Jesus comes. *You are receiving the salvation of your souls. It is the result of your faith.*^{1Pet.1:9}

Sunday 22nd October 2017. Ps.122. Lk.22

I confer on you a Kingdom.^{Lk.22:29}

A kingdom is the king's domain or rule and when we think of a "kingdom", we picture a king with his princes helping him to rule. We have good kings and bad kings, strong kings and weak kings, authoritarian kings and puppet kings but they all depend on having people to rule over. Their subjects pay taxes to finance the kingdom and if the people revolt the king could lose his domain or if enemies attack, he could be deposed. But God's Kingdom is completely different. God is All-Powerful, All-Sufficient, All-Benevolent and neither He nor His kingdom (rule) is dependent upon support from people or safety from enemies. God's rule is good, just, fair and right because He rules in accordance with His character which is good, just, fair and right. But God is also holy and so His rule is also holy (i.e. pure and untainted by anything impure or wrong), which means that He cannot leave sin unaccounted for.

This world is often seen as divided between the "haves" and the "have nots"—the rich are comfortable because they are the "haves" and the poor are vulnerable because they are the "have nots". (Life is complicated and includes many interlinking factors, so this analysis of life is too simplistic to be accurate.) However, in God's Kingdom it is the poor who receive God's provisions and the rich who are sent away empty. *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*^{Lk.1:46-53} *But Abraham replied, Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.*^{Lk.16:25} *God has chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith. They are the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him.*^{Jas.2:5} *The kings of nations have power over their people, and those in authority call themselves friends of the people. But you're not going to be that way! Rather, the greatest among you must be like the youngest, and your leader must be like a servant. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*^{Lk.22:25-30} The poor who receive help in God's kingdom are not necessarily those who lack money but they are those who realise their inability to help themselves spiritually: *God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*^{Matt.5:3} This reversal of the world's norm is not an automatic event but is the result of faith, which includes loving God and living for God. God then exchanges our weaknesses and poverty for His strength and riches: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*^{2Cor.8:9} *That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*^{2Cor.12:10} *But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD.*^{Mic.3:8}

Poverty and prosperity are both attitudes or "spirits" (i.e. they have their root in our spirit). This is why new-birth is absolutely basic to the Christian life. Until we are born-again we will always

be spiritually poor and whatever we achieve will always be infected with spiritual death. But after we are born-again (when God gives us a new spirit), we become spiritually prosperous. Whatever we do is then “infected” or “infused” with spiritual life and God will always make something good out of every situation.^{Rom.8:28} True prosperity is spiritual prosperity, which is an abundance of God’s blessings—the blessings of sins forgiven: *But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners. David says the same thing about those who are blessed: God approves of people without their earning it. David said, “Blessed are those whose disobedience is forgiven and whose sins are pardoned. Blessed is the person whom the Lord no longer considers sinful.”*^{Rom.4:5-8}

We are truly prosperous when we are spiritually rich. Our whole life then changes—we are happy and hopeful, generous and gracious, loving and lovely. We also live by a different set of rules—God’s rules. Life is no longer just about making money or living comfortably and even though these are desirable goals, they are not our priority. Our priority becomes: *not my will, but Yours be done.*^{Lk.22:42} 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} In God’s Kingdom money is not a disqualification, but money can be a disadvantage. Look here, you rich people: *Weep and groan with anguish because of all the terrible troubles ahead of you. Your wealth is rotting away, and your fine clothes are moth-eaten rags. Your gold and silver have become worthless. The very wealth you were counting on will eat away your flesh like fire. This treasure you have accumulated will stand as evidence against you on the day of judgment.*^{Jas.5:1-3} However, there is only one instance of Jesus telling anyone to sell everything: “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” But when the young man heard this, he went away very sad, for he had many possessions.^{Matt.19:21-22} It is the love of money that is the problem not money itself. Suppose someone teaches ideas that are false. He doesn’t agree with the true teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. He doesn’t agree with godly teaching. People like that are proud. They don’t understand anything. They like to argue more than they should. They can’t agree about what words mean. All of that results in wanting what others have. It causes fighting, harmful talk, and evil distrust. It stirs up trouble all the time among people whose minds are twisted by sin. The truth they once had has been taken away from them. They think they can get rich by being godly. You gain a lot when you live a godly life. But you must be happy with what you have. We didn’t bring anything into the world. We can’t take anything out of it. If we have food and clothing, we will be happy with that. People who want to get rich are tempted. They fall into a trap. They are tripped up by wanting many foolish and harmful things. Those who live like that are dragged down by what they do. They are destroyed and die. Love for money causes all kinds of evil. Some people want to get rich. They have wandered away from the faith. They have wounded themselves with many sorrows. 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.^{1Tim.6:3-11} Zacchaeus gave half his possessions away without being asked, showing that he valued spiritual goods above temporal goods: *Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled. Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, “I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!” Jesus responded, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.”*^{Lk.19:7-10}

When we begin to understand God’s Kingdom, we realise that our natural, physical, social and financial assets carry no spiritual influence or favour with God. As we see life from God’s perspective we no longer think like the world thinks but value the Kingdom principles of faith and faithfulness, of hope and love; of grace and graciousness; of obedience to Jesus Christ and

His honour. *Command people who are rich in this world not to be proud. Tell them not to put their hope in riches. Wealth is so uncertain. Command those who are rich to put their hope in God. He richly provides us with everything to enjoy. Command the rich to do what is good. Tell them to be rich in doing good things. They must give freely. They must be willing to share. In that way they will put riches away for themselves. It will provide a firm basis for the next life. Then they will take hold of the life that really is life.*^{1Tim.6:17-19} *A believer who finds himself in a low position in life should be proud that God has given him a high position. But someone who is rich should take pride in his low position. That's because he will fade away like a wild flower. The sun rises. Its burning heat dries up the plants. Their blossoms fall. Their beauty is destroyed. In the same way, a rich person will fade away even as he goes about his business. Blessed is the man who keeps on going when times are hard. After he has come through them, he will receive a crown. The crown is life itself. God has promised it to those who love him.*^{Jas.1:9-12}

The Kingdom that Jesus has conferred upon us *has nothing to do with eating or drinking. It is a matter of being right with God. It brings the peace and joy the Holy Spirit gives.*^{Rom.14:17} *For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God's power.*^{1Cor.4:20} So let's live in the richness of God's Kingdom by trusting Him to take care of our needs as we rejoice in our spiritual wealth of God's blessings and favour.

Sunday 29th October 2017. Ps.123. Lk.22:31-71

Pray that you don't fall into temptation.^{Lk.22:40}

Last week we saw that God's kingdom is good, just, fair and right because God rules in accordance with His character which is good, just, fair and right. But we also saw that God is holy and so His rule is also holy (i.e. pure and untainted by anything impure or wrong), which means that He cannot leave sin unaccounted for. Jesus came to account for our sin when He died on the cross. He delivered us from Satan and sin together with all their contamination, so that we can have peace with God and live with Him for ever. However, we are still influenced by sin and we are still capable of yielding to temptation. Temptation itself is not sin but yielding to temptation is, and we must make every effort to stay true to our commitment to serve God in purity and holiness. Luther said: *you can't stop swallows flying over your head but you can stop them nesting in your hair!*

The world (people who don't know God) reject God and His standards, preferring their own standards and values, regardless of their temporal or eternal consequences. Oscar Wilde, a 19th Century hedonistic poet and playwright, summarised the world's values thus: *"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful."* Far from being "monstrous laws", God's laws are good and pure and they give us strength. The Bible (which contain God's laws and values) was written to cheer us up and give us hope—but a true and pure hope, not a false hope: *Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us. The Scriptures give us strength to go on. They cheer us up and give us hope. Our God is a God who strengthens you and cheers you up. May he help you agree with each other as you follow Christ Jesus. Then you can give glory to God with one heart and voice. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.15:4-6} *Now those things happened as examples for us. They are supposed to keep us from longing for evil things, as the people of Israel did.*^{1Cor.10:6}

The devil is called the "tempter" because he tempts! *The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert. There the devil tempted him. After 40 days and 40 nights of going without eating, Jesus was hungry. The tempter came to him. He said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written, 'Man doesn't live only on bread. He also lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"^{Matt.4:1-4} Jesus resisted the devil with a scripture not with an argument or even a discussion—even when the devil (mis)quoted scriptures himself (actually the devil is skilful at misquoting and twisting scripture). The devil wants to separate us from Jesus, just as he wanted to separate the apostles from Jesus, but Jesus is looking after us: *Then the Lord said, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded*

to have you apostles for himself. He wants to separate you from me as a farmer separates wheat from husks. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith will not fail. So when you recover, strengthen the other disciples.¹*Mk.22:31-32* Because Jesus was tempted, we know that He understands our temptations: Because Jesus experienced temptation when he suffered, he is able to help others when they are tempted.²*Heb.2:18* We have a high priest who can feel it when we are weak and hurting. We have a high priest who has been tempted in every way, just as we are. But he did not sin. 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.³*Heb.4:15-16* However, we must still do our part of watching, praying and learning from Scripture: *Watch and pray. Then you won't fall into sin when you are tempted. The spirit is willing. But the body is weak.*⁴*Mk.14:38* Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.⁵*Jas.4:7-8* These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.⁶*1Cor.10:11-13* When we are tempted, we can resist the devil and escape his influence. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.⁷*1Pet.5:7-9* I sent Timothy to find out about your faith. I wanted to see whether the tempter had in some way tempted you, making our work meaningless. But Timothy has just now come back to us from you and has told us the good news about your faith and love. He also told us that you always have fond memories of us and want to see us, as we want to see you. So brothers and sisters, your faith has encouraged us in all our distress and trouble. Now we can go on living as long as you keep your relationship with the Lord firm.⁸*1Thes.3:5-8* Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.⁹*Eph.6:16* As we draw near to God, using scripture and prayer, we build up our faith which enable us to overcome the world's influence (faith comes from hearing the word of God¹⁰*Rom.10:17*). Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome. For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.¹¹*1Jn.5:3-5*

The NT was written in Greek which uses the same word for *tempt* as well as *test* and although God does not tempt us, He does test us. The motive and purpose of temptation is to trip us up and cause us to sin, whereas the motive and purpose of testing is to see what we know and to strengthen us. *God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.*¹²*Jas.1:12-15* God wants us strong and He wants us to know that we are strong, but whether we are tested or tempted, we should pray that we don't sin—just as Jesus taught us to pray: *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.*¹³*Matt.6:13*

We live in the world, with all the values of the world surrounding us (and therefore influencing us). We are inundated with worldly values from the media, at work and even at home, so we should be careful what we watch, what we listen to and what we think about. But even if we could isolate ourselves from the external "world", we cannot isolate ourselves from the internal "world" of our hearts—which is where the real danger is. *It is what comes from inside that defiles you. For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you.*¹⁴*Mk.7:20-23* You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But here is what I tell you. Do not even look at a woman in the wrong way. Anyone who does has already committed adultery with

her in his heart.^{Mat.5:27-28} But we can ensure that our hearts are clean and pure by focusing on God and godly values: *And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honourable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.*^{Phil.4:4-9} *You were taught to 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... In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*^{Eph.4:23-27}

Although we cannot un-think our thoughts, we can replace our thoughts with the Word of God—which is sharper than any knife and stronger than the evil one: *God's word is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*^{Heb.4:12} *I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*^{1Jn.2:14}

Let's keep alert, watching and praying as we stay close to God and His Word, so we don't fall when we are tempted, for **Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.** *God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*^{Jas.1:12} **AMEN!**

November

Songs for the Moment: The Redeemed Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. Is.12:2

Sunday 5th November 2017. Ps.124.

Lessons from the Reformation.

Five hundred years ago, on the 31st of October 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg Castle Church (“theses” were propositions for an academic debate). Although many consider this the start of the Reformation, the seeds were planted more than 100 years earlier in England with John Wycliffe speaking out about the abuses of the Church leaders and their doctrines, especially the Mass. Wycliffe preached that “*every man had the right to examine the Bible for himself*” and Queen Anne (Richard II’s wife), the daughter of Charles IV of Bohemia, took a personal interest in his teaching. In Prague, John Huss was introduced to Wycliffe’s teaching which soon attracted the support of royalty and churchmen as well as the common people. Huss was condemned to death for heresy in 1415, but his followers continued the quest for truth and a hundred years later Martin Luther took up the baton. Luther was a Roman Catholic priest who, after reading the Bible realised that Jesus was the only Mediator between God and man and so any other mediator was not only spurious but false. The turning point of his life was reading: *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} This came to be known as “**sola fide**” - **justification by faith alone** and eventually led to the other great “**solas**” of the Reformation: **Sola scriptura** (**Scripture alone** i.e. no teaching of the Church supersedes the authority of the Scriptures); **Sola gratia** (**by Grace alone** i.e. there is nothing that we can do to merit our salvation); **Solus Christus** (**by Christ alone** i.e. there is no place for any priesthood or sacraments to mediate between us and God); **Soli Deo Gloria** (**Glory to God alone** i.e. no-one can claim any credit for themselves – all the glory goes to God).

Luther had long been troubled about the extremes of the Church’s traditions but when the Pope permitted the use of “*indulgences*” by Archbishop of Mainz to recoup the expenses he had incurred from buying his position of Archbishop and also to finance the rebuilding of St. Peter’s in Rome, he eventually spoke out. (People were offered the chance to buy themselves, or their relatives, out of “*purgatory*” through “*indulgences*”, hence this rhyme: “*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul into heaven springs.*”) Like Wycliffe before him (and all true Disciples of Jesus), Luther looked to the Bible for answers, however, he was a man of his time and, like most other great pioneers, could not see everything as clearly as his successors. Luther was not able to shake off all of the Roman Catholic traditions and superstitions but he had a better understanding in some areas of doctrine, than many people have today—especially justification: “*the just shall live by faith*”. Luther was denounced as a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church and declared an outlaw, which gave anyone the permission to kill him without threat of prosecution. But he escaped arrest and became a prolific writer, translating the complete Bible into German, as well as producing such classics as ‘*Table Talk*’ before he died in 1546 at the age of 63. Two hundred years later Wesley wrote: *I finished the translation of Martin Luther’s Life. Doubtless he was a man highly favoured of God, and a blessed instrument in his hand. But O! what pity that he had no faithful friend! None that would, at all hazards, rebuke him plainly and sharply, for his rough, untraceable spirit, and bitter zeal for opinions, so greatly obstructive of the work of God!*

So, 500 years after Luther and the Reformation began in earnest, what are the benefits for us today? I believe that the 3 greatest benefits of the Reformation are: **a respect for the Scriptures; a return to the Biblical explanation of salvation; and a release from the control of people and organised religion.**

A respect for the Scriptures. The invention and production of the Printing Press was instrumental in the rapid spread of the Reformation throughout Western European Christianity and the reason why Eastern Christianity remained relatively untouched. The printing-press was able to influence people directly and by publishing literature, especially the Bible, relatively cheaply and in the vernacular, the effect of the Reformation spread quickly. By using the Bible as the primary authority for doctrine, the protestants were able to equipped to reject the papal authority and with it much of the traditional beliefs and practices of the established church. Today, we have so many translations of the Bible available to us and yet, like the people from Jesus' day, so many people still do not understand the Bible, yet alone its purpose: *There is nothing left in your memory of his Message because you do not take his Messenger seriously. You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want.*^{Jn.5:38-40} Our aim is to help each of us become Bible-literate.

A return to the Biblical explanation of salvation. Like most things in life—there is no shortcut. If you want something important, you must make every effort to obtain it. Although our salvation is a free gift, living out our salvation requires work: *Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth.*^{2Tim.2:15} *Like new-born babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness.*^{1Pet.2:2-3} This is not the “hard work” that comes from the curse of Adam's sin: *sweating in the fields from dawn to dusk, until you return to that ground yourself, dead and buried; you started out as dust, you'll end up dust.*^{Gen.3:19} No! Our work is a joy and a pleasure: *Burst into song! Shout with joy! Enlarge your house; build an addition. Spread out your home, and spare no expense! For you will soon be bursting at the seams.*^{Is.54:1-3} *The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.*^{Jn.6:29} Doing what God wants us to do does not make us tired or weary but refreshes us: *Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome.*^{1Jn.5:3} *Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well... His disciples were saying to him, “Rabbi, eat something!” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.” Then his disciples asked each other, “Did someone bring him food?” Jesus said, “My food is to do what my Father sent me to do. My food is to finish his work... Here is a true saying. ‘One plants and another gathers.’ I sent you to gather what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work. You have gathered the benefits of their work.”*^{Jn.4:6-38} *Come to me, all of you who are tired and are carrying heavy loads. I will give you rest. Become my servants and learn from me. I am gentle and free of pride. You will find rest for your souls. Serving me is easy, and my load is light.*^{Matt.11:28-30} As we become more Bible-literate, we put our energy into important areas rather than emotional areas—into fellowship with God, His Word and His people.

A release from the control of people and organised religion. Religion controls people and keeps them in slavery to superstition by alienating them from “god” which then requires someone to be an intermediate. However, Biblical Christianity unites people with God through Jesus our Mediator. *There is one God. There is also one mediator between God and humans—a human, Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for all people to free them from their sins. This message is valid for every era.*^{1Tim.2:5-6} Biblical Christianity also liberates us so we aren't dominated by sin and neither do we dominate others. *We're not in charge of how you live out the faith, looking over your shoulders, suspiciously critical. We're partners, working alongside you, joyfully expectant. I know that you stand by your own faith, not by ours.*^{2Cor.1:24} Now we are free—free from our sins; free to serve God; free to live our lives in purity and holiness—we should never go back to our previous life of slavery to sin and all of its consequences. *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*^{Gal.5:1} *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*^{Gal.5:13}

As we remember the Reformation, let's also remember these lessons from the Reformation: **a respect for the Scriptures; a return to the Biblical explanation of salvation; and a release from the control of people and organised religion.** And then let's live in the benefits of the Reformation.

For those who would like a little more insight into the Reformation, you can download the dissertation I did for my M.Th. on the Anabaptists from our website under:

[What we teach/resources](#)

www.dealpentecostal.co.uk/MTh%20Essay%20ReformationPSF.pdf

Sunday 12th November 2017. Ps.125. Lk.23:1-31.

We would like to see Jesus.^{Jn.12:21}

Many people have wanted to see God but He is so holy, pure and glorious that no one may approach Him or see Him: *GOD continued, "But you may not see my face. No one can see me and live."*^{Ex.33:20} *No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.*^{Jn.6:46} But Jesus showed us what God is like: *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 all received one blessing after another. God's grace is not limited. Moses gave us the law. 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.1:16-18} So when we see Jesus, we see God the Father: *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*^{Jn.14:9}

Isaiah had an incredible experience of seeing the Lord (we call this a "Christophany"—an appearing of Christ before His birth): *I saw the Lord. He was seated on his throne. His long robe filled the temple. He was highly honoured. Above him were seraphs... They were saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD who rules over all. The whole earth is full of his glory."*^{Is.6:1-3} But as soon as Isaiah saw God, he realised his sinfulness and was afraid: *"Woe is me! For I am lost; for my lips are contaminated by sin and I live among people whose lips are contaminated by sin. And I live among people who speak sinful words. Now I have seen the King with my own eyes. He is the LORD who rules over all."*^{Is.6:5} When Isaiah was told that his sin had been paid for, he immediately volunteered to speak for God: *A seraph flew over to me... He said, Your guilt has been taken away. Your sin has been paid for."* Then I heard the voice of the Lord. He said, *"Who will I send? Who will go for us?"* I said, *"Here I am. Send me!"* So he said, *"Go and speak to these people. Tell them..."*^{Is.6:6-9} When some Greeks wanted meet Jesus, God spoke from heaven: *They said, "Sir, we want to meet Jesus." ... Then a voice spoke from heaven, saying, "I have already brought glory to my name, and I will do so again."* When the crowd heard the voice, some thought it was thunder, while others declared an angel had spoken to him.^{Lk.23:21-29} But many people who saw Jesus, rejected God. Herod the Great said that he wanted to meet and worship Jesus,^{Matt.2:8} but then tried to murder Him. Herod Tetrarch (Herod's son Antipas) wanted to meet Jesus but then mocked Him. *Now Herod, the ruler of Galilee, heard about everything that was going on. He was bewildered... [and] said, "I had John's head cut off. So who is it that I hear such things about?"* And he tried to see Jesus.^{Lk.9:7-9} *Herod was delighted at the opportunity to see Jesus, because he had heard about him and had been hoping for a long time to see him perform a miracle. He asked Jesus question after question, but Jesus refused to answer. Meanwhile, the leading priests and the teachers of religious law stood there shouting their accusations. Then Herod and his soldiers began mocking and ridiculing Jesus.*^{Lk.23:8-11}

Obviously, Jesus is not available for interviews today but we can still see Him—we can see Him in His Creation, in His Scriptures, in His Believers and in His Miracles.

Seeing Jesus in His Creation. Jesus created everything: *In the past God spoke to our ancestors at many different times and in many different ways through the prophets. In these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. God made his Son responsible for everything. His Son is the one through whom God made the universe. His Son is the reflection of God's glory and the exact likeness of God's being.*^{Heb.1:1-3} And Jesus is clearly seen in His creation, leaving no-one with any excuse for not believing in Him. But when

people refuse to honour God, He allows them to go their own way: *Ever since the world was created it has been possible to see the qualities of God that are not seen. I'm talking about his eternal power and about the fact that he is God. Those things can be seen in what he has made. So people have no excuse for what they do. They knew God. But they didn't honour him as God. They didn't thank him. Their thinking became worthless. Their foolish hearts became dark. They claimed to be wise. But they made fools of themselves. They would rather have statues of gods than the glorious God who lives forever. Their statues of gods are made to look like people, birds, animals and reptiles. So God let them go. He allowed them to do what their sinful hearts wanted to.*^{Rom.1:20-24} The way we were formed, develop and grow, can only cause us to wonder at our Creator in amazement: *You created the deepest parts of my being. You put me together inside my mother's body. How you made me is amazing and wonderful. I praise you for that. What you have done is wonderful. I know that very well...When you were putting me together there, your eyes saw my body even before it was formed. You planned how many days I would live. You wrote down the number of them in your book before I had lived through even one of them. God, your thoughts about me are priceless. No one can possibly add them all up.*^{Ps.139:13-17} But when people think that they evolve from animals it is little wonder they behave like animals! However, we are all made in God's image and we will all have to give an account to God at the end of our life.

Seeing Jesus in His Scriptures. The Bible is a spiritual book containing spiritual truths which need the Holy Spirit to reveal its meaning: *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.*^{1Cor.2:12-14} Although the Scriptures contain some things that appear difficult, the Bible is not complicated. *Paul wrote to you about, using the wisdom God gave him... Some things in his letters are hard to understand. Ignorant people and people who aren't sure of what they believe distort what Paul says in his letters the same way they distort the rest of the Scriptures. These people will be destroyed.*^{2Pet.3:15-16} The Scriptures—both Old and New Testaments—point to Jesus and His plan of salvation for mankind. *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.*^{Jn.5:39}

Seeing Jesus in His Believers. God created Adam in His image^{Gen.1:27} and has recreated us Believers in His image: *Anyone who believes in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new has come! ...God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^{2Cor.5:17-21} Now Christ lives in His Believers. *Christ is in you. He is your hope of glory.*^{Col.1:27}

Seeing Jesus in His Miracles. A miracle is something that God does for us that we can't do ourselves. Jesus did (and still does) perform miracles because He is God: *We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.*^{Jn.9:31-33} Jesus' miracles confirms His Deity: *Why do you call it blasphemy when I say, 'I am the Son of God'? After all, the Father set me apart and sent me into the world. Don't believe me unless I carry out my Father's work. But if I do his work, believe in the evidence of the miraculous works I have done, even if you don't believe me. Then you will know and understand that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father.*^{Jn.10:36-38} *I have already told you, and you don't believe me. The proof is the work I do in my Father's name. But you don't believe me because you are not my sheep.*^{Jn.10:25-26} However, Jesus does not perform miracles to order and neither are we guaranteed a personal miracle from every prayer. God never tries to prove to us that He is God and it doesn't matter to Him what we think about Him—you either believe or you don't. When people lose faith because God didn't do for them what seemed reasonable, they were testing God and true faith is never disappointed, miracle or no miracle, healing or no healing. Testing God is a subtle sin, with the doubters demanding hard evidence and scientific proof. But God is love, and nothing in the world is so hard to pin down in concrete form as love. We can only trust

God and He is known only by faith. He continues to perform miracles but never to convince critics. You can't push God. If anyone wants to be an unbeliever He will let them be. Miracles are for believers and by the way, they do happen!

We may not be able to see God directly: *God is the blessed and only Ruler. He is the greatest King of all. He is the most powerful Lord of all. God is the only one who can't die. He lives in light that no one can get close to. No one has seen him. No one can see him. Give honour and power to him forever. Amen.*^{1Tim.6:15-16} But we can see Jesus and we see Jesus in His Creation, in His Scriptures, in His Believers and in His Miracles. And when we do see Jesus, we are never disappointed, because *he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.*^{Rev.17:14}

Sunday 19th November 2017. Ps.126. Lk.24:1-35.

Which Jesus do you worship?

No one can see God the Father and so when people see God, they actually see God the Son—Jesus. *No one can see me and live.*^{Ex.33:20} *No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.*^{Jn.6:46} So when people see God, they see Jesus, the Word of God: *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. So how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?*^{Jn.14:9} Unlike the rest of humanity, Jesus existed before He was born of Mary: *In the beginning, the Word was already there. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*^{Jn.1:1-2} But in the OT but when people saw a Jesus, they often did not recognise Him as God because He usually looked like another human being. *Then the woman went to her husband and told him, "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name. . . . Then Manoah prayed to the LORD: "Pardon your servant, Lord. I beg you to let the man of God you sent to us come again to teach us how to bring up the boy who is to be born." . . . Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD. "We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!" But his wife answered, "The LORD doesn't want to kill us.*^{Jdgs.13:6-22} (When God was seen before Jesus' birth we call it a "Christophany".) Even during Jesus' ministry, few people actually recognised that He was God and Jesus only referred to Himself as the Son of Man. *But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.*^{Matt.9:6} However when challenged, Jesus clearly stated that He was the Son of God. *"If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me. And if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They all asked, "Are you the Son of God then?" He replied, "You are right in saying that I am.*^{Lk.22:67-70}

Jesus was perfect in every way so when Isaiah wrote: *There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him,*^{Is.53:2} he was describing Jesus' crucifixion, not His normal physical appearance: *But many were amazed when they saw him. His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man.*^{Is.52:14} *He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.*^{Is.53:3} Although Jesus was eternally God, He was born of a real human woman, in a real place, at a real time: *The Word became a human being. He made his home with us.*^{Jn.1:14} *Mary had been promised to Joseph in marriage and was pregnant. While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to have her child. She gave birth to her firstborn son.*^{Lk.2:5-6} He lived in Nazareth and had (step) brothers and sisters. *He came to his hometown of Nazareth. There he began teaching the people in their synagogue. They were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom? Where did he get this power to do miracles?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary? Aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Then where did this man get all these things?" They were not pleased with him at all.*^{Matt.13:54-57} As a human being, Jesus had all the natural characteristics that the rest of humanity has, including growing, learning, suffering, tiredness, hunger, sadness and distress. *Then he returned with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. Jesus grew in wisdom and maturity. He gained favour from God and people.*^{Lk.2:51-52} *Jesus was God's Son. But by suffering he learned what it means to obey.*^{Heb.5:8} *Jesus was tired*

from the journey.^{Jn.4:6} Jesus was hungry.^{Matt.4:2} Jesus wept.^{Jn.11:35} Jesus prayed while he lived on earth. He made his appeal with loud cries and tears. He prayed to the One who could save him from death. God heard him because he truly honoured God.^{Heb.5:7} He became anguished and distressed. He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”^{Matt.26:37-38} After Jesus died and rose again, people did not initially recognise Him because they did not expect Him to be alive—and He still appeared as an ordinary person. While they were talking, Jesus approached them and began walking with them. Although they saw him, they didn't recognize him.^{Lk.24:15-16} Even though Jesus had repeatedly told His disciples that He was going to rise from the dead, they did not understand what He meant until after the resurrection. Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple. I will raise it up again in three days...” But the temple Jesus had spoken about was his body. His disciples later remembered what he had said. That was after he had been raised from the dead. Then they believed the Scriptures. They also believed the words that Jesus had spoken.^{Jn.2:19-22} When Jesus raised people from the dead, He prayed for them, but no one had prayed for Jesus to rise from the dead, so when people saw Jesus after His resurrection, they found it hard to believe it was really Him: Afterward he appeared in a different form to two of his followers who were walking from Jerusalem into the country. They rushed back to tell the others, but no one believed them. Still later he appeared to the eleven disciples as they were eating together. He rebuked them for their stubborn unbelief because they refused to believe those who had seen him after he had been raised from the dead.^{Mk.16:13-14} However, when they did realise Jesus was alive, they were filled with reverence and joy: The disciples didn't realize that it was Jesus... The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It's the Lord.” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put back on the clothes that he had taken off and jumped into the sea.^{Jn.21:4-7} Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. But he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Weren't we excited when he talked with us on the road and opened up the meaning of the Scriptures for us?”^{Lk.24:31-32} Then Jesus said... “Stop doubting, and believe.” Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”^{Jn.20:27-28}

After Jesus ascended to heaven, His transformation to glory was complete: When he said “living water,” he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. But the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet entered into his glory.^{Jn.7:39} So when John saw Jesus after His ascension, it was a very different experience—he fell at Jesus’ feet as if dead! I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw... someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.^{Rev.1:12-17} Some of Jesus’ disciples (including John) had had a preview of this glory: And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white... They were glorious to see... they saw Jesus’ glory and the two men standing with him... Peter, not even knowing what he was saying, blurted out, “Master, it's wonderful for us to be here! ...But even as he was saying this, a cloud came over them, and terror gripped them as the cloud covered them. Then a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him.”^{Lk.9:29-35} The word “transformed” is literally “metamorphosis” and describes the incredible change of Jesus from earth to heaven, from ignoble to noble and from glory to glory. The same word is also used of us when we spend time with Jesus, focusing on His glory and read the Bible with opened minds: To this very day, when the Law of Moses is read, a veil covers the minds of those who hear it. But when anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away... We all display the Lord's glory. We are being changed [metamorphosis] to become more like him so that we have more and more glory. And the glory comes from the Lord, who is the Holy Spirit.^{2Cor.3:15-18} 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}

Jude understood the transformation between the Jesus who had been his half-brother and the Jesus who was now glorified and so referred to Him as *Jesus Christ our Lord* rather than *my brother*

Jesus: Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ... To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.^{Jude:1:1;24-25}

That is why we must be born-again.^{Jn.3:3} And when we are born-again, Jesus becomes precious^{1Pet.2:7} and we begin to reverence Him in a way that was impossible for us before. *We have received the Spirit who is from God. The Spirit helps us understand what God has freely given us... 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.2:12-14}

So which Jesus do you worship? Some people are still waiting for Jesus to come—they usually focus on the OT prayers and still want God to accept them. Some people think of Jesus as the Carpenter or Prophet from Nazareth who went around doing good—they usually focus on the social aspect of religion. But Jesus has come, He has died, He has risen from the dead and He has ascended to the Father. *And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang: "Blessing and honour and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever." And the four living beings said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped the Lamb.*^{Rev.5:13-14} Although Jesus' character hasn't changed, His appearance has changed and He wants us to be like Him. *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}

Sunday 26th November 2017. Ps.127. Lk.24:19-53.

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.^{Lk.24:46}

The Bible is like a jigsaw puzzle, with each part of the Bible showing a part of the whole picture—which is **God's plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus**.

Jesus said *"You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. These Scriptures are all about me!"*^{Jn.5:39} Although in the OT the picture was not clear to those who believed, when Jesus came in human form the jigsaw was completed and the picture became clear. We see **God's plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus** in the whole of the Bible from beginning to end—from the Tree of Life in Genesis^{2:9} to the Tree of Life in Revelation²² and from Eve's Seed who will crush satan's head^{Gen.3:15} to the One who said: *I am the Living One. I was dead. But look! I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys to Death and Hell*^{Rev.1:18} and who is *coming soon.*^{Rev.22} We see it in Abraham and Isaac, in Moses and the Passover, in David and Solomon. However, understanding the Scriptures is much more than just learning about **God's plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus**—it is **applying God's plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus**. Wisdom is applied knowledge and until we apply the knowledge we have of the Scriptures, our theology is just theory—hence Paul's prayer: *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.*^{Eph.1:17} Having our minds opened to understanding the Scriptures and then applying the Scriptures—becoming Bible-literate—enables us to know the hope to which He has called us: *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, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*^{Eph.1:18-19} This is something that we should continually pray for—we should pray this for each other and for ourselves—because knowing this hope will elevate us above the world's way of thinking and the world's problems. This **hope** is not just a wish but it is a certainty—it is a confident assurance that Christ resides within us: *the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*^{Col.1:27} We no longer need to live a mundane, aimless life because we have been redeemed from that—now we can live a purpose driven life that is full of faith, hope and love. *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you*

were redeemed from the aimless way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.^{1Pet.1:18-19}

When we were born-again, it was not just to get us out of hell and into heaven, but that we might have joyful fellowship with God the Father, His Son and His family of Believers: *we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 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.1:2-4} We should to live our life as if we were running a race: *And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.*^{Heb.12:1-2} By keeping our eyes on Jesus, we will keep within the tracks (parameters) that God has set for us—and they are tracks of **righteousness**: *He makes me whole again, steering me off worn, hard paths to roads where truth and righteousness echo His name.*^{Ps.23:3} God has not abandoned us to run this race by alone but He leads us each step of the way and lifts us if we fall: *I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. When you walk, your step will not be hampered and if you run, you will not stumble.*^{Prov.4:11-12} *The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the LORD upholds him with His hand.*^{Ps.37:23-24} And when we finish our race, God will take us to glory: *You guide me with your counsel and afterward you will take me into glory.*^{Ps.73:24} But living a good life, a moral life, or even a devout life, does not qualify us for heaven—they are just the parameters of the tracks of the race we are running. So, if we go outside the “tracks of righteousness” we will get “bogged down” and lose valuable time—or worse, we may even be disqualified! *So let us throw off everything that stands in our way. Let us throw off any sin that holds on to us so tightly. Let us keep on running the race marked out for us. Let us keep looking to Jesus... He put up with attacks from sinners. So think about him. Then you won't get tired. You won't lose hope.*^{Heb.12:1-3} *So I do not run like someone who doesn't run toward the finish line... No, I train my body and bring it under control. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.*^{1Cor.9:26-27}

In order to run life's race successfully means that we have to keep within God's parameters **right to the end of our life**—with no cheating or shortcuts. But to do this, we don't need to learn and retain lots of information from the Bible. Although that can be helpful, most of are not academic and our brains are not “wired up” to read and study for hours on end. No! We just need our spiritual eyes to be opened and then we can see the spiritual truths about **God's plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus** —we call this **revelation**. This is what Jesus did for His Disciples: *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.24:31-32} What Jesus did for His Disciples in person then, He does for us today through the Holy Spirit: *Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And he said, “Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: ‘There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.’ You are witnesses of all these things. “And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised.”*^{Lk.24:45-49} Paul prayed for this and we too should pray this—for ourselves and for others: *I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called.*^{Eph.1:18}

Although we don't need to be academic to understand **God's plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus**, we must open our hearts to God, His Spirit and His Word if we are to get spiritual understanding. **Revelation comes from meditation**. *Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.*^{2Tim.2:7} Christian meditation (which is the only true or acceptable sort of meditation) is not emptying our minds but filling our minds—filling our minds with God's Word and godly thoughts: *And don't for a minute let this Book of The Revelation be out of mind. Ponder and meditate on it day and night, making sure you practice everything written in it. Then you'll get where you're going; then you'll succeed.*^{Josh.1:8} Finally, brothers and sisters, fill your minds with beauty and truth.

Meditate on whatever is honourable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is good, whatever is virtuous and praiseworthy. Keep to the script: whatever you learned and received and heard and saw in me—do it—and the God of peace will walk with you.^{Phil.4:8} When we get the revelation that **God is with us** (Emmanuel^{Matt.1:23}) and **Christ is in us**,^{Col.1:27; 2Cor.13:5} we can face anything and everything, with joy and confidence—actually, this is an integral part of **God’s plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus** for us. We cannot change all our circumstances but we can change the way we face our circumstances. Academic knowledge alone will not enable us to live a fully blessed life, but a revelation of **God’s plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus** will completely change us—change our spiritual health, change our mental health and even change our physical health. As Kathryn Khulman used to say “*if you only knew...*” *That you may know... his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*^{Eph.1:18-23}

Because Jesus has **all** authority and He is with us **all** the time, we can live in **God’s plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus all** the time. But we need to be regularly reminded of God’s purposes, and we need to be regularly encouraged to trust God—to take our cares and concerns to Him and to leave them with Him. **That is the mission of the Church:** *For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, “Come back to God!” For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.*^{2Cor.5:19-21}

Let’s keep reminding ourselves (and others) of **God’s plan of Salvation for mankind through Jesus—and then live in it!**

December

Songs for the Moment: Zechariah. Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. *Lk.1:78-79*

Sunday 3rd December 2017. Ps.34:1-10.

God's plan for your life or your life for God's plan?

“Mr Men” is a series of 49 children's books by Roger Hargreaves and they were also used for children's TV. Each book introduced a different title character such as Mr. Perfect, Mr. Marvellous, Mr. Good, Mr Happy, Mr. Strong, etc., and used his personality to convey a simple moral lesson.

Jesus was (and is) perfect in every way—He is always marvellous, good, strong and happy because He never changes. *Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. So do not be attracted by strange, new ideas. Your strength comes from God's grace.*^{Heb.12:7-9}

None of us are perfect—we are not always marvellous, good, happy and strong but most (hopefully all) of us would like to be like that. However, God has a plan for us to be good, happy and strong: *For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen.*^{Jer.29:11-12} God's plan for us to be good, happy and strong is to make us like Jesus. *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. He appointed them to be saved in keeping with his purpose. God planned that those he had chosen would become like his Son.*^{Rom.8:28-29}

This plan for us is called **salvation**. Salvation is not just being saved **from** our sins but also being saved **for** our Saviour. Salvation **begins** at conversion, where we are saved **from** our sins: *Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, to your children, and to those far away—all who have been called by the Lord our God.*^{Acts.2:38-39} But the **process** of salvation continues throughout our life where we are saved **for** our Saviour: *you turned away from false gods to serve the real, living God and to wait for his Son to come from heaven. His Son is Jesus, whom he brought back to life. Jesus is the one who rescues us from God's coming anger.*^{1Thes.1:9-10} Although we **were sanctified** (made holy) at conversion, we still need to **become sanctified** (live holy lives) after we become Christians: *Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived... 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.6:9-11} *For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.*^{1Thess.4:7} *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God.*^{Heb.12:14-15}

When God saved us **from** our sins, we were emancipated from our sins. *So don't let sin rule your body, which is going to die. Don't obey its evil longings. Don't give the parts of your body to serve sin. Don't let them be used to do evil. Instead, give yourselves to God. You have been brought from death to life. Give the parts of your body to him to do what is right. Sin will not be your master.*^{Rom.6:12-14} But God also saves us **for** our Saviour and gives us blessing after blessing: *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... We have all received one blessing after another. God's grace is not limited. Moses gave us the law. Jesus Christ has given us grace and truth.*^{Jn.1:14-17}

As we receive God's blessings, we are motivated to change which makes us effective in telling others of God's plan of salvation. *So continue to work out your own salvation. Do it with fear and trembling. God is working in you. He wants your plans and your acts to be in keeping with his good purpose. Do everything without finding fault or arguing. Then you will be pure and without blame.*^{Phil.2:12-15} What we really believe will change us automatically. Peter explains that our faith results in the “salvation

of your souls” i.e. trusting God will change our attitude and our life style: *Your troubles have come in order to prove that your faith is real. It is worth more than gold. Gold can pass away even though fire has made it pure. Your faith is meant to bring praise, honour and glory to God. That will happen when Jesus Christ returns. Even though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not see him now, you believe in him. You are filled with a glorious joy that can't be put into words. You are receiving the salvation of your souls. It is the result of your faith.*^{1Pet.1:7-9}

In his inauguration address on 20th January 1961 US President John F Kennedy said: '*Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country*'. Likewise, we should not ask what God can do for us, but rather, ask what we can do for God. Instead of **God's plan for our life we should focus on our life for God's plan** and how we can fit our life into God's plan: *not my will, but yours be done.*^{Lk.22:42} Instead of trying to get blessed, we should remember that **we are already blessed**: *Through Christ, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing that heaven has to offer.*^{Eph.1:3} If we are already blessed with **every** spiritual blessing, why should we keep asking God to bless us. Instead, we should be **thanking** God for all His blessings and reminding ourselves that He will never leave or abandon us: *God is there, ready to help; I'm fearless no matter what. Who or what can get to me?*^{2Heb.13:6} The lowest level of maturity is to be blessed, but the greatest level of maturity is to be a blessing. God told Abraham: *I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*^{Gen.12:2} Everything God does is good and so if we change to fit in to His plans, we will automatically be blessed and we will also be a blessing to others as well! **So how do we change?** We change by always thanking the Lord; by always praising God and saying good things about Him; by honouring God; by being joyful; by praying; by experiencing God; by going to God for safety; by respecting God; by looking 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. This poor man called out, and the LORD heard him. He saved him out of all of his troubles. The angel of the LORD stands guard around those who have respect for him. And he saves them. Taste and see that the LORD is good. Blessed is the man who goes to him for safety. You people of God, have respect for the LORD. Those who respect him have everything they need. The lions may grow weak and hungry. But those who look to the LORD have every good thing they need.*^{Ps.34:1-10} We should each have a regular spiritual health check to remind ourselves that Christ is not only **with** us but also **within** us. *Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is **in** you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith.*^{2Cor.13:5} This spiritual health check should also include our relations with other Christians, especially how we respect and relate to those in our local Church family: *That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honouring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died.*^{1Cor.11:28-30}

As we put God's Word into practice, we really do change and dedicate our life for God's plan instead of trying to find God's plan for our life. Then we become like Mr. Right, Mr. Good, Mr Happy, Mr. Strong and Mr. Perfect—well, at least begin to be like them anyway!

Be assured that from the first day we heard of you, we haven't stopped praying for you, asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will, and so acquire a thorough understanding of the ways in which God works. We pray that you'll live well for the Master, making him proud of you as you work hard in his orchard. As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work. We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us.^{Col.1:9-12}

Sunday 10th December 2017: Ps.128. Lk.1:1-45

Advent

Advent means “arrival”—literally “to come” and now usually refers to the time leading up to the celebration of the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas. However, the Greek word for “advent” is “*parousia*” which is often associated with the 2nd coming of Jesus: *May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ^{1Thes.5:23} And so, at this Christmas time as we think about Advent—about how and why Jesus came let us also think about how and why Jesus will come again.

Any important event or work demands a careful preparation because if it doesn’t start right it won’t finish right! If the foundation is wrong, the building will collapse; if the facts are wrong the argument fails; if the directions are wrong, the journey will not be completed. So it is with our faith because: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.* ^{Is.7:9} Jesus said: *If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple. But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you. They would say, 'There's the person who started that building and couldn't afford to finish it!'* ^{Lk.14:26-30}

But to count the cost of living our Christian life, we must have reliable and credible information or we are just building on hearsay—or worse, lies! Although many people had started to write about Jesus’ life—from His birth through to His death—Luke wanted to write a **reliable** account so we *can be certain of the truth of everything [we] were taught.* ^{Lk.1:4} And because Luke’s account has been accepted as Scripture, it is not only historically accurate but it is also spiritually accurate, containing spiritual life ^{Jn.6:63} that will impact our spirits today: *Didn't we feel on fire as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us?* ^{Lk.24:32}

To start his account of Jesus, Luke sets out the facts around the beginning—how God had prepared the right conditions, so Jesus could be born at the right time, in the right place and amongst the right people. This was not just a coincidence or even a last-minute thought, because hundreds of years previously God had already recorded in the Scriptures the people and place of Jesus’ birth. God had promised that He would send Someone to reconcile mankind to God, and referred to Him as the Messiah—which means “*God’s Anointed*” or “*God’s Remedy*”—who would be born in the town of Bethlehem to a virgin who was a direct descendant of king David. The coming of the Messiah would be so important that people would need to be prepared for Him, so God promised He would send someone like Elijah to prepare the way for the Messiah. ^{Mal.4:5} That person was John the Baptist and when he just born, his father prophesied this over him: *You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his way. You will make his people know that they can be saved through the forgiveness of their sins. A new day will dawn on us from above because our God is loving and merciful.* ^{Lk.1:76-78} However, when John did tell people about the Messiah, they did not all accept the message or the Messiah—but some did: *God sent a man named John to be his messenger. John came to declare the truth about the light so that everyone would become believers through his message. John was not the light, but he came to declare the truth about the light. The real light, which shines on everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into existence through him. Yet, the world didn't recognize him. He went to his own people, and his own people didn't accept him. However, he gave the right to become God's children to everyone who believed in him. These people didn't become God's children in a physical way—from a human impulse or from a husband's desire to have a child. They were born from God.* ^{Jn.1:6-13}

At Jesus’ 1st Advent, Israel was the nation that God had chosen to serve Him and to be a testimony to the world about God. Although they failed miserably in their calling, the Jews were still God’s vehicle to show the world who God was. Whenever the Jews approached God, they

had to follow an elaborate system of rules and regulations. The reason for this was that God is holy and people are unholy—and the two are not compatible. When you mix certain substances together (such as bi-carb and water; or KMnO₄ and glycerol), you get an explosion. When you mix a holy God with unholy people you also get an explosion! *God is a consuming fire.*^{Heb.12:29} The only way to bring unholy people to a holy God is to make them holy. Judaism (the rules and regulations that God had given Israel) was a reminder that God is holy and people are unholy. But Judaism never actually made anyone holy or cleansed anyone's consciences. However, the rituals were a reminder that there was a real Remedy coming that would make people holy and that Remedy was the Messiah!

Judaism revolved around an ornate Temple (originally a tent but later replaced with a building). This Temple was managed by a complicated hierarchy of Officials (called Levites) who officiated at numerous elaborate rituals in the Temple, and each ritual represented an aspect of the future Remedy. Among the Levites were an elite group called Priests who could all trace their ancestry back to Moses' brother Aaron, who was the very first Priest. These Priests were organised into 24 courses or groups who served twice a year in the Temple for 8 days at a time.^{1Chron.24:7-19} Their work included the killing and burning of animals on the Altar and burning Incense twice a day (at 9.00am and 3.00pm)—the smoke and aroma of the burning Incense represented prayers ascending to God: *May my prayer be set before you like incense.*^{Ps.141:2} *Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.*^{Rev.8:3-4} It was while Zechariah was burning Incense that God spoke to him through the angel Gabriel about how his son would prepare the people for coming of the Messiah—God's Remedy for sin.

When Jesus did come as God's Remedy, all the trappings of Judaism became obsolete because Jesus fulfilled all those Temple rituals of Judaism. *God called that covenant "new." So he has made the first one out of date. And what is out of date and getting older will soon disappear. The first covenant had rules for worship. It also had a sacred tent on earth... the gifts and sacrifices they offered were not enough. They were not able to remove the worshiper's feelings of guilt. They deal only with food and drink and different kinds of special washings. They are rules that deal with things outside our bodies. People had to obey them only until the new covenant came... But Christ offered himself to God without any flaw. He did this through the power of the eternal Holy Spirit. So how much more will his blood wash from our minds our feelings of guilt for committing sin! Sin always leads to death. But now we can serve the living God. That's why Christ is the go-between of a new covenant. Now those God calls to himself will receive the eternal gift he promised. They will receive it now that Christ has died to save them.*^{Heb.8:13-9:15} So now we don't need a building for a Temple, because

we are God's Temple: *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple? God's Spirit lives in you... God's temple is holy. And you are that temple.*^{1Cor.3:16-17} We don't need a Priesthood to manage that

obsolete (and destroyed) Temple or to perform rituals on our behalf, because **all Believers are now Priests:** *You are coming to Christ, the living stone who was rejected by humans but was chosen as precious by God. You come to him as living stones, a spiritual house that is being built into a holy priesthood. So offer spiritual sacrifices that God accepts through Jesus Christ.*^{1Pet.2:4-5} We don't need rituals to make us holy

because **we have been made holy through Jesus:** *You have been made holy because you belong to Christ Jesus. God has chosen you to be his holy people. He has done the same for all those everywhere who pray to our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{1Cor.1:2}

As we celebrate Advent—the arrival of Jesus at Bethlehem this Christmas—let us remember that He is God's Remedy for sin but that He will also come again to conclude the work He began: *People have to die once. After that, God will judge them. In the same way, Christ was offered up once. He took away the sins of many people. He will also come a second time. At that time he will not suffer for sin. Instead, he will come to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*^{Heb.9:27-28}

Sunday 17th December 2017: Ps.130. Lk.1:39-80

You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.^{Lk.1:45}

It is quite easy to imagine something that you have already seen or experienced, and if you can imagine it, you can believe it and see it happening for you. But to imagine something that has never happened before is nearly impossible. So, for Mary to have a baby without any relations with a man was beyond her imagination—and Joseph's too—which is why God spoke to them directly through the angel Gabriel. Unlike Zechariah, who doubted Gabriel's message from God and said *How can I be sure this will happen?*^{Lk.1:18} Mary believed—but she still needed clarity: *But how can this happen? I am a virgin.*^{Lk.1:34} When Gabriel explained what would happen, Mary simply answered: *I serve the Lord. May it happen to me just as you said it would.*^{Lk.1:38} The angel told Mary *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.*^{Lk.1:35}

The same thing happens today when a person is converted—Christ casts out our sin and enters in, He is born in us and He abides with us:

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel*

Although Mary was young, she was godly and favoured, not gullible or foolish: *Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God.*^{Lk.1:28} She had none of the false humility that some Christians show today, such as: I'm not good enough, I'm not worthy, I'm not experienced enough, etc. Mary simply said: *I serve the Lord. May it happen to me just as you said it would.*^{Lk.1:38} Rather than asking God to bless her life or her plans for her life, Mary wanted her life to fit in with God's plan—however unique or unexpected it would be.

None of us are good enough or worthy enough, or experienced enough for Jesus to *enter in, be born in us* and to *abide with us* but our own personal participation in God's plan will be determined by our own personal response to God's plan. This is the essence of the prayer that Jesus taught His Disciples to pray: *Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* Whatever our own ability—or lack of it—none of us qualify to serve God in any capacity because we are all by nature “*unrighteous*”: *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... We are made right with God by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. That happens to all who believe.*^{Rom.3:10-22} But it is God Himself who qualifies us, not our own ability or behaviour: *giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*^{Col.1:12-14}

Because God is the Creator, His Words are creative too—every word is a Miracle Word: *Every word you give me is a miracle word—how could I help but obey? Break open your words, let the light shine out, let ordinary people see the meaning.*^{Ps.119:129-130} Every Word from God has intrinsic power within it so that it brings life: *For no word from God will ever fail. [literally: no word from God is void of power]*^{Lk.1:37} Just as in the beginning when God said: “*Let there be light.*” *And there was light.*^{Gen.1:3} So now when God says *let there be light* to us, His light shines in our hearts: *For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.*^{2Cor.4:6-7}

God's Word is **Jesus** *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.*^{1Jn.1:1} And **God's Word** is described as **Seed** that is living and produces a harvest of Righteousness in a good and noble heart: *The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved... But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*^{Lk.8:11-15} **God's Word** is described as a **Lamp** that illuminates our life, showing us how to avoid sin: *Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.*^{Ps.119:105} **God's Word** is described as **Bread** that feeds our spiritual life: *Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*^{Matt.4:4} **God's Word** is described as **Honey** that nourishes and energises our spirit: *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*^{Ps.119:103} **God's Word** is described as a **Sword** that gives us a conscience so we know what is right or wrong: *His name is the Word of God... Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations... On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.*^{Rev.19:13-16} *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*^{Heb.4:12-13} So when Jesus is born in us we have **Life** from the **Seed**; we have **Light** from the **Lamp**; we have **Food** from the **Bread**; we have **Energy** from the **Honey**; we have **Discernment** from the **Sword**. The Bible states: *Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.*^{Prov.30:5-6} Jesus also said: *Scripture cannot be broken.*^{Jn.10:35} Now it is up to us—we can either be like Zechariah, who doubted God's Word and said *How can I be sure this will happen?*^{Lk.1:18} or we can like Mary, who believed but still wondered how God would work it all out: *But how can this happen?*^{Lk.1:34} Unbelief is dumb—quite literally for Zechariah: *But because you didn't believe what I said, you will be unable to talk until the day this happens. Everything will come true at the right time.*^{Lk.1:20} But faith speaks—like Mary who said: *I serve the Lord. May it happen to me just as you said it would.*^{Lk.1:38} Mary went on to say: *My soul gives glory to the Lord. My spirit delights in God my Saviour. He has taken note of me even though I am not important. From now on all people will call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me. His name is holy. He shows his mercy to those who have respect for him, from parent to child down through the years. He has done mighty things with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their deepest thoughts.*^{Lk.1:46-51}

When we believe God, we will be like all the Believers who trusted God throughout the history of Mankind, and spoke because they believed God and knew that He had brought them back to life: *It is written, "I believed; therefore, I spoke." We have that same spirit of faith. We also believe; therefore, we also speak. We know that the one who brought the Lord Jesus back to life will also bring us back to life through Jesus. He will present us to God together with you.*^{2Cor.4:13-14} We will be like Jeremiah, who found that he could not help but speak God's word—regardless of the consequences: *Sometimes I think, "I won't talk about him anymore. I'll never speak in his name again." But then your message burns in my heart. It's like a fire inside my very bones. I'm tired of holding it in. In fact, I can't!*^{Jer.20:9}

Let's be like Mary: *You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.*^{Lk.1:45} *I pray that you will be active in sharing what you believe. Then you will completely understand every good thing we have in Christ.*^{Phil.1:6} **Then we can enjoy the Christian faith as well as enjoying the Christmas fun.**

Sunday 24th December 2017: Lk.1:46-55. Lk.2

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord."^{Lk.2:10-11}

In "The Old Curiosity Shop" Mr Swiveller says: "a gentleman's word is as good as his bond, sometimes better, as in the present case where his bond might prove but a doubtful sort of security." meaning that a

gentleman would keep his word whatever the cost or inconvenience. Jesus said that we should not need to use an oath to back up our word because our word should be good enough: *But I tell you, Do not swear at all... Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*^{Matt.5:34-37} Words are important and they can either help others or harm them: *The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*^{Prov.18:21} Words can appear cheap but they carry a big price because each of us will have to ultimately give an account for what we say: *For whatever is in your heart determines what you say. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. And I tell you this, you must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak. The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you.*^{Matt.12:34-37} But our words only carry the same authority that we have and if we don't have the authority to speak about something or to give advice, then spicing up our speech with slick syllables or by shouting will not change anything—except to make us look stupid! “Never submit to another person's insecurity” was good advice we received from a friend. When someone tries to advise us or speak into our life, we should see evidence that the person has the authority and experience to make them credible otherwise it is just their opinion—which might or might not be valid! If I were to speak about Physics, my words would not carry any authority because I have no expertise in the subject (at school I failed Physics GCSE twice!), but if I were to speak about Venerology, I can speak with some expertise as that was my profession for 16 years. The same with Christianity—I was brought up in the Christian faith and have been a professing Christian for over 50 years. I have been a “*professional*” Pastor for over 30 years. After training and serving a period of probation, I was ordained as a Minister in the Elim Pentecostal Church because I had shown full proof of my ministry. This “*expertise*” has been confirmed by pastoring this Church congregation here for over 18 years, preaching in several countries across the world and earning a Masters' degree in Theology. But as Paul the apostle writes: *As the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD." When people commend themselves, it doesn't count for much. The important thing is for the Lord to commend them.*^{2Cor.10:17-18} However, Paul's training and experience **did** give him authority to speak into the Churches that he founded: *We will not boast about things done outside our area of authority. We will boast only about what has happened within the boundaries of the work God has given us, which includes our working with you.*^{2Cor.10:13} So also, our training and experience give us authority to speak into situations that we face—so long as we don't *boast and claim credit for the work someone else has done.*^{2Cor.10:15} If we can speak with authority about our specialised subjects or from our experiences, how much more authority does God have when He speaks to us—even when He uses an angel to bring the message, as He did to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. It is worth noting that the Greek word for “*angel*” is actually “*messenger*” and the word for evangelism and gospel is “*good message*”. Thus, someone who brings good news is an evangelist—**angel**—and these messengers can be either a spirit being or a human being: *But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.*^{Lk.2:10-11} *He [John] is the one written about in Scripture. It says, 'I will send my messenger [angel] ahead of you. He will prepare your way for you.*^{1Lk.7:27} However, when we refer to angels we usually mean Spirit messengers or “*ministering spirits*”, i.e. they are not human: *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?*^{2Heb.1:4} These angels are God's servants: *In speaking of the angels he says, “He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.”*^{Heb.1:7} This means that angels work for God, not us—God commands them and we have no authority to give them any orders: *For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect and guard you.*^{1Lk.4:10} And because they are not human, angels don't marry or reproduce: *For when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven.*^{Matt.22:30} However, not all these spirit messengers (or human messengers) are from God. *That comes as no surprise. Even Satan himself pretends to be an angel of light. So it doesn't surprise us that those who serve Satan pretend*

to be serving God. They will finally get exactly what they should.^{2Cor.11:14-15} But suppose even we should preach a different “good news.” Suppose even an angel from heaven should preach it. I’m talking about a different one than the good news we gave you. Let anyone who does that be judged by God forever. I have already said it. Now I will say it again. Anyone who preaches a “good news” that is different from the one you accepted should be judged by God forever.^{Gal.1:8-9}

When God speaks to people, their natural reaction is fear because God is holy and we are unholy—and the two are combustible not compatible: *It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*^{Heb.10:31} Since we are receiving a Kingdom that is unshakable, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping him with holy fear and awe. For our God is a devouring fire.^{Heb.12:28-29} But when an angel (especially a spirit messenger) brings a word from God, his greeting is “Peace” or “Do not be afraid.” The reason we don’t have to be afraid is that God has introduced His solution to Man’s problem of sin—a Saviour! Now our sins are no longer a barrier between us and God because Jesus has taken away the sins of the world. John the Baptist said: *Look! This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘A man who comes after me was before me because he existed before I did.’ I didn’t know who he was... But God, who sent me to baptize with water, had told me, ‘When you see the Spirit come down and stay on someone, you’ll know that person is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen this and have declared that this is the Son of God.*^{Jn.1:29-34} This message is not fake news and neither is it something just to make us feel better—it is fact. But it is more than just a fact—it is a life-bringing and life-changing message that fills us with all the superlatives that we can think of—and more. Superlatives, such as *great joy, exceeding great joy, extremely happy, richly blessed—it is good news of great joy for all people!*

Yes! This message is not just for the Jews (or just for the non-Jews), it is not just for the rich (or just for the poor), and neither is it just for the men (or just for the women). This message is for all people so not one of us need be excluded. *You are all children of God by believing in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ as if he were your clothes. There is no Jew or Greek. There is no slave or free person. There is no male or female. Because you belong to Christ Jesus, you are all one. You who belong to Christ are Abraham’s seed. You will receive what God has promised.*^{Gal.3:26-29}

We now have a Saviour who is Christ the Lord. Jesus did not grow into a Saviour later in life—no! He was born a Saviour and He was Christ the Lord from before His birth: *In the beginning, the Word was already there. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*^{Jn.1:1-2}

Let’s remember that God’s Words carry the authority of God: *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. When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted.*^{Ps.138:2-3} So we can take God’s words seriously and we can trust them as much as we trust God Himself.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. It is for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.”^{Lk.2:10-11}

Wishing you all a very Blessed Christmas and a truly prosperous New Year.

Sunday 31st December 2017: Ps121. Lk.2

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.^{Matt.2:6}

God speaks to us today through Jesus: *Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son.*^{Heb.1:1-2} And God especially speaks to us through Jesus in the Scriptures: *You study the Scriptures carefully. You study them because you think they will give you eternal life. The Scriptures you study are a witness about me... For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?*^{2Jn.5:39-47} *Look to God’s instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.*^{Is.8:20} But while the Bible was being written, the people did not have ready

access to God's Word. The Scriptures were written on scrolls and kept in the Temple (and later, copies were kept in the synagogues) and it was the priests and scribes who read the Scriptures—although the Jews were expected to memorise large portions of the Scriptures by heart.

In those days God predominately spoke through the Prophets: *The LORD spoke his word to Micah.*^{Mic.1:1} And it was Micah who prophesied that a Ruler would come from Bethlehem. **So, what is significant about Bethlehem?** Bethlehem means “*House of Bread*” and is a small town about 5 miles (about 7 miles by road) from Jerusalem. Bethlehem was where Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin and so it became a national memorial site: *Leaving Bethel, Jacob and his clan moved on toward Ephrath. But Rachel went into labour while they were still some distance away. Her labour pains were intense. After a very hard delivery, the midwife finally exclaimed, "Don't be afraid—you have another son!" Rachel was about to die, but with her last breath she named the baby Ben-oni (which means "son of my sorrow"). The baby's father, however, called him Benjamin (which means "son of my right hand"). So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Jacob set up a stone monument over Rachel's grave, and it can be seen there to this day.*^{Gen.35:16-20} Bethlehem was also the home town of Naomi and to where she returned with Ruth. *So Naomi returned from Moab. Ruth, her daughter-in-law came with her. They arrived in Bethlehem just when people were beginning to harvest the barley.*^{Ruth.1:22} Ruth later married Boaz: *Then the elders and all who were at the gate spoke. They said, "We are witnesses. The woman is coming into your home. May the LORD make her to be like Rachel and Leah. Together they built up the nation of Israel. May you [Boaz] be an important person in Ephrathah. May you be famous in Bethlehem. The LORD will give you children through this young woman.*^{Ruth.4:11-12} Boaz and Ruth's grandson Jesse was the father of David *The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you be filled with sorrow because of Saul? I have refused to have him as king over Israel. Fill your animal horn with olive oil and go on your way. I am sending you to Jesse in Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king." So Samuel... anointed David in front of his brothers. From that day on, the Spirit of the LORD came on David with power.*^{1Sam.16:1;13}

King David was told that his son would build a house for God and reign for ever: *I tell you that I will build a royal house for your family. Some day your life will come to an end. You will join the members of your family who have already died. Then I will give you one of your own sons to become the next king after you. I will make his kingdom secure. He is the one who will build me a house. I will set up his throne. It will last forever. I will be his father. And he will be my son. I took my love away from the man who ruled before you. But I will never take my love away from your son. I will place him over my house and my kingdom forever. His throne will last forever.*^{1Chron.17:10-14} Whilst this prophecy partially referred to Solomon, it ultimately referred to another descendant^{Heb.1:5} who would be born in Bethlehem—Jesus Christ: *Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*^{Lk.1:30-33}

David was from the tribe of Judah and Jacob had prophesied that his son Judah would be victorious and revered by brothers; he would be like a lion that is powerful and strong; he would be a ruler that all nations would honour; his reign would be prosperous and successful: *Judah, your brothers will praise you. You will grasp your enemies by the neck. All your relatives will bow before you. Judah, my son, is a young lion that has finished eating its prey. Like a lion he crouches and lies down; like a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from his descendants, until the coming of the one to whom it belongs, the one whom all nations will honour. He ties his foal to a grapevine, the colt of his donkey to a choice vine. He washes his clothes in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth are whiter than milk.*^{Gen.49:8-12} This prophesy ultimately referred to Judah's greatest descendant—Jesus Christ. *But one of the twenty-four elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals."*^{Rev.5:5}

Although Bethlehem, David's home town was small and apparently insignificant, out of her would come a very significant Ruler who would have His origins in eternity and would shepherd

(nurture, care and protect) His people—not abuse them like the tyrant Herod: *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.*” Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.^{Mic.5:2-4} Jesus was born “king of the Jews” unlike Herod who was not even Jewish because he was a descendant of Esau not Jacob—so it was little wonder Herod wanted to kill the legitimate heir to the Throne!

Isaiah, who lived at the same time as Micah, also prophesied about this Ruler: *For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father (or, Father of Eternity), Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!*^{Is.9:6-7}

Jesus is not just a king or even just “king of the Jews” (as was his epitaph on the Cross)—Jesus is the ruler who will shepherd my people Israel^{Mat.2:6}—**the Shepherd-King**: *My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd.*^{Ezek.37:24} Jesus the Shepherd-King reigns with care and compassion as He leads and protects His flock with true love: *I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.*^{Jn.10:14-16}

Let's give thanks to God for Jesus, who came from Bethlehem—the House of Bread—and who feeds us spiritually with the bread from heaven—Himself: *Jesus said to them, “What I'm about to tell you is true. It is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven. It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. The bread of God is the One who comes down from heaven. He gives life to the world.” “Sir,” they said, “give us this bread from now on.” Then Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever go hungry. And no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty.*^{Jn.6:32-35} **Yes, Jesus is the great Ruler who is our Shepherd King who watches over us now and forever:** *The LORD watches over you. The LORD is like a shade tree at your right hand. The sun won't harm you during the day. The moon won't harm you during the night. The LORD will keep you from every kind of harm. He will watch over your life. The LORD will watch over your life no matter where you go, both now and forever.*^{Ps.121:5-8}

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:

External evidence:

Clement of Alexandria (150-220 AD) plainly states that it was Nero who banished John to Patmos, not Emperor Domitian: *And to give you confidence, when you have thus truly repented, that there remains for you a trustworthy hope of salvation, hear a story that is no mere story, but a true account of John the apostle that has been handed down and preserved in memory. When after the death of the tyrant (previously identified as Nero) he removed from the island of Patmos to Ephesus, he used to journey by request to the neighbouring districts of the Gentiles, in some places to appoint bishops, in others to regulate whole churches, in others to set among the clergy some one man, it may be, of those indicated by the Spirit.* (“Who is the Rich Man that shall be Saved?”, Section 42)

Cerinthus was a first century AD author who wrote *The Pseudo-Apocalypse*. He died well before John, i.e. well before 95AD, but his Pseudo-Apocalypse contains many references to John's Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation).

Internal evidence:

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 2017 Songs for the Moment

January: Mary: My soul does magnify the Lord and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He who is mighty has done great things and holy is His Name. *Lk.1:46-48*

February: Zechariah: Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come and has redeemed His people. *Lk.1:68*

March: Zechariah: For you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him, to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins. *Lk.1:76-77*

April: Simeon: Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the sight of all people. *Lk.2:29-31*

May: Moses: The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise Him, my father's God, and I will exalt Him. *Ex.15:2*

June: Moses: Ascribe greatness to our God the Rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A God of faithfulness and without injustice, good and upright is He. *Deut.32:3-4*

July: Deborah: When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the LORD. I will sing to the LORD, I will sing; I will make music to the LORD. *Jdg.5:2-3*

August: David: Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; His love endures forever. *1Chron.16:34*

September: David: My God is my Rock, in whom I take refuge, my Shield and the Strength of my salvation. He is my Stronghold, my Refuge and my Saviour. *2Sam.22:3*

October: The Redeemed: Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. *Is.12:2*

November: The Redeemed: Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name; make known among the nations what He has done, and proclaim that His name is exalted. *Is.12:4*

December: Zechariah: Because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. *Lk.1:78-79*



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