

Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2019

Daily Prayer for 2019

Compassionate Lord, as I cross the threshold of this day, I commit myself, my soul, my body, my affairs and my friends to Your care. Watch over me, keep me, guide me, direct me, sanctify me and bless me. Your mercies have brought me to the dawn of another day. Vain will be its gift unless I grow in grace, increase in knowledge and ripen for spiritual harvest.

Mould me wholly into the image of Jesus, as a potter forms clay. May my lips be a well-tuned harp to sound Your praise. Let those around, see me living by Your Spirit, transformed by a renewed mind, clad in the entire armour of God, shining as a never-dimmed light and showing holiness in all my doings. Let no evil this day soil my thoughts, words or hands. Preserve my understanding from subtilty of error, my affections from love of idols, my character from stain of vice and my profession from every form of evil. May I engage in nothing in which I cannot implore Your blessing and in which I cannot invite Your inspection. Prosper me in all lawful undertakings—or prepare me for disappointments.

Teach me how to use the world and not abuse it; to improve my talents and to redeem my time; to walk in wisdom toward those without and in kindness to those within; to do good to all people and especially to my fellow Christians. May I view all things in the mirror of eternity, waiting for the coming of my Lord and listening for that last trumpet call to herald the new heaven and earth.

Order this day, all my communications according to Your wisdom and to the gain of mutual good. May I speak each word as if my last word and walk each step as my final one. If my life should end today, let this be my best day.

January:

February

March

April

May

June

July

August

September

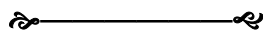
October

November

December

Bible Time Chart

Memory Verses 2019—New Covenant Praying



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January:

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ^{Colossians 1:9}

Sunday 6th January 2019 Ps.61. Matt.6

New Covenant Praying

Life is fragile - handle with prayer! The Theme for this year's Memory Verses is "**New Covenant Praying**". There are some basic truths about prayer. **1) Jesus prayed:** *Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray. He spent the night praying to God.*^{Lk.6:12} **2) Jesus taught us to pray:** *Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. 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.6:6-9} There are many examples of praying in the Bible and because they in Scripture, we can learn from all of them: *Every Scripture passage is inspired by God. All of them are useful for teaching, pointing out errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God's approval. They equip God's servants so that they are completely prepared to do good things.*^{2Tim.3:16-17} Unless we distinguish between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, we will be praying obsolete prayers—prayers that ask God to do what Jesus HAS ALREADY DONE! When Jesus came to earth as a human being, He introduced the New Covenant in His blood (*i.e.* through His death) and made the Old Covenant obsolete: *By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:13} And included in the New Covenant is the Great Commission: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Therefore go and make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*^{Matt.28:18-20} There is no point pleading with God to "*save the lost?*", when He has done everything He can to save them—all the lost need now is to hear the Gospel. Instead, we should follow Paul's instructions: *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. **Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.***^{Eph.6:18-19} However, there are 2 types of prayers that God will never respond to: **1)** prayers asking God to do what has already been accomplished through Christ's sacrifice, and **2)** prayers asking God to do what He has commissioned us to do.

It is easy to become blasé and be led only by our emotions when we pray—asking for blessings that God has promised, freely offered and already provided. But if we conform our prayers to New Covenant truth and the facts of redemption, we will discover that prayer is a time of communion and fellowship with our heavenly Father and not a time of imploring God for favours. And our heavenly Father is also the Sovereign Lord who is Omnipotent: *Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.*^{Jer.32:17} *I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.*^{Job.42:2} The blessings provided by Christ's vicarious death need no pleading—these blessings are accepted by faith and appropriated by putting our faith into action. So, prayer is never the time to be angry or anxious, because God is ultimately in control of everything and everyone. *Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them... They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*^{Acts.4:23;28} And neither is prayer a time to agonize over our sins—because Christ has

already forgiven them. Martin Luther wrote: *Remorse before Calvary is of God; remorse after you have been to Calvary is of the devil. Repent of your sin, yes; but do not make your sin a subject for long and melancholy meditation. Why should I cheat God by spending my time and energy on remorse? I am greater than my sins.* Of course we should make every effort to live a holy life—but if we fail, Jesus is the answer to our sin and He is also the answer to our conscience: *But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts. My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.*^{1Jn.1:7-2:2} *Through the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God and cleansed our consciences from the useless things we had done. Now we can serve the living God.*^{Heb.9:14}

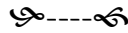
People who approach prayer militantly, those who focus on doing spiritual battle with the powers of hell, can become belligerent, hostile and adversarial toward other people. Instead of peace and harmony, love and compassion, an offensive and combative spirit is engendered in their lives that does not reflect the Spirit of Christ. But the prayer Jesus taught is not crying out against evil powers, nor even pleading for blessings. The prayer life that Jesus taught begins by contemplating our relationship with the Father. We are created in His likeness, we are His children—and what a hallowed Name we bear! We are to express harmony with His will, agreeing that His Kingdom is to be realised through us. The prayer that Christ taught us is a confession of His faithfulness in providing our daily needs. We appropriate His forgiveness to the degree that we forgive others. In temptation and evil, we express our trust in His deliverance and in His guidance. Crowning each season of prayer we confess agreement with His Kingdom plan, appropriating His power to see it fulfilled in us and through us. We accept the glory that He bestows on us as His triumphant children. There is no hint of begging, or of imploring, or of fighting spiritual powers of darkness. The prayer that Jesus taught is composed of statements, confessions, and assertions of harmony, of confidence, of commitment, of receptivity before Him, of agreement, of rapport with Him and His will—with no perspective of spiritual military belligerence.

In prayer, we launch far out into the eternal world and things here below become unimportant as we give ourselves to God with all our heart—nothing seems important but holiness of heart and the salvation of others. In prayer, we are lifted above the frowns and flatteries of life and taste heavenly joys; our worldly cares, fears and anxieties disappear—they are of no significance, like puff of wind. In prayer, we can place all our concerns in God's hands, to be entirely at His disposal—having no will or interest of our own. In prayer, we can intercede for family, friends, sinners and saints—for God's kingdom to come. In prayer, we draw near to God, by pondering His Word; by reflecting on His plan; by rethinking His objectives; by remembering Christ's defeat of satan; by contemplating the Holy Spirit's power in our lives—all of that and much more. Then we go in confidence, knowing that our Gospel witness is with power to break satan's rule over his captives. We will function as Christ's ambassadors and satan can do nothing to prevent the all-conquering power of the Gospel!

Our prayers should always be meaningful, leaving us moved by God's presence—and yet solidly based on New Covenant truth. But sometimes it can be hard to get the balance between praying passionately yet meaningfully, between praying intelligent, theologically-sound prayers yet not becoming mechanical and routine in our prayers. That is where other people's prayers that have been written down (and proof-read for doctrine) can be helpful **as a basis for our prayers**—so long as we don't make them into a religious ritual:

[Below is an adaption of *Wee Willie Winkie* by Gordon Bailey:

*Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town,
Up stairs and down stairs in his night-gown,
Tapping at the window, crying at the lock,
Are the children in their bed, for it's past ten o'clock?]*



*Wee Willie Winkie climbs the stairs,
Wee Willie Winkie kneels to say his prayers:
Hands together, eyes closed, a bowing of his head,
Mumbles words his mother taught him—tumbles into bed.*

*Wee Willie Winkie never fails to pray,
Wee Willie Winkie knows just what to pray.
Wee Willie wonders what good the words have done,
For he has never prayed a prayer with words that are his own.*

Mme Guyon, was Christian from C18th who understood the simplicity and joy of prayer: *As soon as you come in the presence of God, remain in respectful silence for a little while... Simply Enjoy God. After you have been meditating in the Word and praying it out to God for some time, you will gradually find how easy it is to come into His presence. You will remember other Scriptures with less difficulty. Prayer has now become easy, sweet, and delightful.* And to assist us in our **New Covenant praying**, I have edited some *Puritan Prayers* for us to use. Let's use these prayers to motivate and guide us, and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit who resides within us—and keep in step with Him too! *But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.*^{Gal.5:22-25} As we focus on praying **New Covenant praying** this year, let's contemplate the glory of Jesus, the perfectness of His Sacrifice and the effectiveness of His Intercession—making each day not only our favourite day, but our best day yet!

Sunday 13th January 2019 Ps.30 Acts 9

What is your Growth Forecast for 2019?

The congregations grew larger and larger with the Believers being empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. They worshipped God in wonder and awe and walked in the fear of the Lord.^{Acts9:31}

Growth forecasts are integral to all businesses and few investors will put money into a business if it is unable to provide a set of clear forecasts. But they are just forecasts, a projection of expectations and there is no certainty that the forecasts will be realised—and some turn out to be just wishful thinking! However, when it comes to Church, people try to make *growth forecasts* using the same criteria as businesses—but the Church is not a business producing “Christians” like widgets on a conveyer-belt. Church is primarily a spiritual organisation whose purpose is to enable people to become mature Christians. *He also gave apostles, prophets, missionaries, as well as pastors and teachers as gifts to his church. Their purpose is to prepare God's people to serve and to build up the body of Christ. This is to continue until all of us are united in our faith and in our knowledge about God's Son, until we become mature, until we measure up to Christ, who is the standard.*^{Eph.4:11-13} The starting point may be **no faith**—where conversion is needed—or **some faith**—where instruction is needed—but **all** need the exhortation of preaching and encouragement of pastoral care to enable them to take the next step.

Although we can accurately forecast that we are going to grow spiritually, the amount of growth however, will be determined mainly by 2 factors: **1) our difficulties** and **2) our determination** and so the more hardships we encounter, the more opportunities we will have to grow spiritually. *My brothers and sisters, be very happy when you are tested in different ways. You know that such testing of your faith produces endurance. Endure until your testing is over. Then you will be mature and complete, and you won't need anything.*^{Jas.1:2-4} God really is in control of our lives and He *gives the Holy Spirit without limit*^{1n.3:34} so we should never let fatigue distract or debilitate us: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time **we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.** Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*^{Gal.5:7-10}

When it comes to our Church congregation, our “growth forecast” can often be greater than reality because, although we want to grow numerically, we cannot make people become Christians and neither can we make Christians come to our Church—these are factors outside of our control. Congregations grew in the early Church because *the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*^{Acts.2:47} but which congregation a person attends, is that person’s own choice and so is that person’s **own spiritual growth**. However, we deliberately plan our Church Services and activities to provide a balanced spiritual diet that will enable each member of our congregation to grow spiritually—*the congregations grew larger and larger*. This spiritual growth happens when *Believers are empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit*. And as Believers are empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, *they worship God in wonder and awe and walk in the fear of the Lord*.

If we don’t grow spiritually we will stagnate and may even lose our first love for God and His Kingdom (like the Ephesians): *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*^{Rev.2:4-7} (The word Nicolaitans means “to rule over” and were the start of a “professional” clergy who “ruled over” the churches instead of seeing every Believer as a NT priest. The word in Aramaic can be translated as “the performing of rituals” which would render the verse “you despise the performing of rituals which I also despise.” see: *not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death.*^{Heb.6:1}) However, Jesus did not write the Ephesians off but encouraged them to get back on course—to repent and return to their first love. Repentance (change of mind) and a return to our first love, leads to restored fellowship (*eat from the tree of life*). Our first love is love for God and His kingdom: *‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.*^{Matt.22:37-38} *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*^{Matt.6:33} And the way we keep our first love alive and animated, is to *worship God in wonder and awe and walk in the fear of the Lord*.

We started the year by talking about **New Covenant praying** (and this is also the theme of our *Memory Verses* for 2019). R.A. Torrey, a well-known early C20th Evangelist, said: *Triumphant prayer is almost impossible where there is neglect of the study of the Word of God. Prayer that is born of meditation upon the Word of God is the prayer that soars upward most easily to God's listening ears*. As we become more Bible literate, we will become more fluent in our understanding of what Christ accomplished in His vicarious death—forgiven, accepted, justified, sanctified, cleansed, made righteous—which will then enable us to become more fluent in our praying. And as we become more fluent in praying, our faith will become more attractive and less arduous—and we will automatically *worship God in wonder and awe and walk in the fear of the Lord*. Christianity is simple but not simplistic, profound but not complicated. *I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins*

and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven.^{Matt.18:23} Jesus never intended Christianity to be wearisome or onerous. Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."^{Matt.11:28-30} And neither Jesus did intend prayer to be wearisome or onerous. I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.^{Matt.11:25-26}

Mme Guyon, a C17th French Christian, wrote a book called *A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer* in which she encourages every Christian to take prayer seriously, yet keep it simple: *All are capable of prayer, and it is a dreadful misfortune that almost all the world have conceived the idea that they are not called to prayer. We are all called to prayer, as we are all called to salvation. Let all pray: you should live by prayer, as you should live by love. I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that ye may be rich.*^{Rev.3:18} *This is very easily obtained, much more easily than you can conceive. All who are desirous of prayer, may easily pray, enabled by those ordinary graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which are common to all men. You must, then, learn a species of prayer which may be exercised at all times; which does not obstruct outward employments; which may be equally practised by princes, kings, prelates, priests and magistrates, soldiers and children, tradesmen, laborers, women, and sick persons; it is not the prayer of the head, but **of the heart**. Nothing is so easily obtained as the possession and enjoyment of God. He is more present to us than we are to ourselves. He is more desirous of giving Himself to us than we are to possess Him; we only need to know how to seek Him, and the way is easier and more natural to us than breathing. I would warmly recommend to all, never to finish prayer without remaining some little time afterward in a respectful silence.*

When we practice prayer in this way we will be *empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit* because we will be living our life in fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit and through the Word of God. The Morning Prayer (from last week) includes: *Let those around, see me living by Your Spirit, transformed by a renewed mind, clad in the entire armour of God, shining as a never-dimmed light and showing holiness in all my doings. Let no evil this day soil my thoughts, words or hands. This is worshipping God in wonder and awe and walking in the fear of the Lord.* Few of us will ever have such a dramatic encounter with Jesus that Paul had on the road to Damascus—but we can all have the same *spiritual* encounter with Jesus that Paul had. Like Paul, we can all be: *baptized. Have your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord.*^{Acts.22:6} And like Paul we can all **press on to maturity**: *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached maturity. But I press on to possess that maturity for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, 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. Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things.*^{Phil.3:12-15}

Our spiritual growth forecast is **to be enlarged, empowered and encouraged**. So let's make this forecast into a reality—as it was for the early church: *The congregations grew larger and larger with the Believers being empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. They worshipped God in wonder and awe and walked in the fear of the Lord.*^{Acts9:31}

Sunday 20th January 2019. Ps.31. Acts 10.

Are you clean enough to come to God? *Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.*^{Acts.10:15}

Although religion is "the belief in and worship of a personal God," religion also keeps people away from God! Religious status, rituals, language and clothes become a barrier that separates people from God rather than a bridge to unite them with God. Ordinary people remain alienated from God because they are spectators instead of participators—and the Jewish religion was no exception! Although Judaism's ritualistic religion was ordained by God, it left worshippers feeling guilty because their sins were only "atoned" by the animal sacrifices (*atoned* means *covered*

up). Judaism (the *Old Covenant*) never actually dealt with people's consciences and was only intended to be temporary until the New Covenant came. The New Covenant that Jesus introduced is permanent and really does work—it deals with people's consciences because their sins are not covered up but forgiven and removed: *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. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another... But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day, says the LORD: I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins."* When God speaks of a "new" covenant, it means he has made the first one obsolete. It is now out of date and will soon disappear.^{Heb.8:6-13} God is holy and God expects us to be holy: *Never allow yourselves to become unclean... Here is the reason: I am the LORD your God. You must live holy lives. Be holy because I am holy. Never become unclean.*^{Lev.11:43-44} But no one is truly holy: *No one is right with God, no one at all.*^{Rom.3:10} *There isn't anyone on earth who does only what is right and never sins.*^{Ecc.7:20} *Because all people have sinned, they have fallen short of God's glory.*^{Rom.3:23} And so we need a mediator—someone who is holy to speak to God on our behalf. *Yet if there is an angel on his side as a mediator, one out of a thousand, to tell a man what is right for him, to be gracious to him and say, 'Spare him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom for him'—then his flesh is renewed like a child's; it is restored as in the days of his youth. He prays to God and finds favour with him, he sees God's face and shouts for joy; he is restored by God to his righteous state. Then he comes to men and says, 'I sinned, and perverted what was right, but I did not get what I deserved. He redeemed my soul from going down to the pit, and I will live to enjoy the light.'*^{Job.33:23-28} Under the Old Covenant, God ordained human priests to mediate. *Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: "The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace." So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.'*^{Nu.6:24-27} Jesus is the only person who was born holy: *the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.*^{Lk.1:35} So only Jesus can truly mediate between us and God and bridge the great divide between *holy* and *unholy* ("clean" and "unclean"): *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} *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.*^{Heb.2:11-14} *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... 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.*^{Eph.2:13-16}

Last week we mentioned the Nicolaitans: *But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*^{Rev.2:6-7} We saw that the word *Nicolaitans* in Greek means "to rule over" and that the Nicolaitans were the start of the professional clergy who "ruled over" the churches instead of treating every Believer as a priest of the New Covenant. *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*^{1Pet.2:9} The word *Nicolaitans* in Aramaic can be translated as "the performing of rituals" which would render the verse "you despise the performing of rituals which I also despise." The Nicolaitans started to turn Christianity into a ritualistic religion—just like Judaism. But the New Covenant is different from the Old Covenant. Religion, including the Old Covenant, can never clear the conscience of the worshipper because rituals are "useless" and lead to death: *not laying again the foundation of repentance from useless rituals (acts that lead to death).*^{Heb.6:1} *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through*

the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!^{Heb.9:14}

Unfortunately, religion has continued to influence Christianity and “useless” rituals have continued to alienate worshippers from God by using status, rituals, language and even clothes, so that people are prevented from becoming participators and remain just spectators. Until 1534 when Henry VIII separated the English Church from Rome, Church services were conducted in Latin, (a language the congregation did not understand), and the congregation only ate the Lord’s Supper (the *mass*) once a year—at Easter (but even then it was only the priests who drank the wine). In 1544, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, published the first officially authorised service in English called *the Exhortation and Litany*. In 1549, under Edward VI, Cranmer published a full English prayer book but 7 years later he was burnt at the stake for his work—during Mary’s 5 year reign, 284 Protestants were executed and another 34 died in prison! However, even though Church services were held in English, they still remained a liturgical ritual that had to be rigidly adhered to. The *Act of Uniformity 1549* enforced the use of the Prayer Book and if any Minister deviated from it, the punishment was: 6 months imprisonment for the 1st offence, 12 months for 2nd offence and life imprisonment for the 3rd offence! The Prayer Book was rejected by the Scots and at mass in St Giles' Cathedral, the Bishop of Brechin was forced to protect himself while reading from the book by pointing loaded pistols at the congregation! In 1645, the Prayer Book was outlawed by Parliament and replaced by the *Directory of Public Worship*, which was more a set of instructions than a prayer book. Following the restoration of the monarchy, a Conference, consisting of Presbyterians representatives and twelve bishops, was convened and the 1662 Prayer Book was produced. The Presbyterians had wanted an alternative service book saying that “*it was improper for lay people to take any vocal part in prayer (as in the Litany or Lord's Prayer), other than to say ‘amen’*” and that “*no set prayer should exclude the option of an extempore alternative from the minister*”—but the bishops rejected extempore prayer as apt to be filled with “*idle, impertinent, ridiculous, sometimes seditious, impious and blasphemous expressions.*”

Yes, religion will alienate people from God and we are foolish to make Christianity complicated when it is simple, settled and spiritual. As Mme. Guyon wrote: *All are capable of prayer. All who are desirous of prayer, may easily pray, enabled by those ordinary graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which are common to all men. You must, then, learn a species of prayer which may be exercised at all times; which does not obstruct outward employments; which may be equally practised by princes, kings, prelates, priests and magistrates, soldiers and children, tradesmen, laborers, women, and sick persons; it is not the prayer of the head, but **of the heart.*** Although we are using some of the old Puritan prayers, they are not a liturgy to be read as a ritual but a platform to prompt our own prayers—a launch-pad to stimulate our faith as we pray. Jesus said: *And when you come before God... Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace. 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, Reveal who you are...*^{Matt.6:5-9}

Let’s remember the lesson that Peter had to learn: *Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.*^{Acts.10:15} God has declared every person of special worth and dignity and the entire world (four corners of the sheet) needs to hear the good news—and they need to be able to understand the message for themselves so they can come to God with boldness and confidence. *So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.*^{Heb.4:16}

Jesus has made us clean by His Word: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain joined to me, and I will remain joined to you.”^{Jn.15:3-4} So we don’t need a human priest to intercede for us, because we have Jesus as our High Priest who has united us with God: *But because Jesus lives forever, his priesthood lasts forever. Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf.*^{Heb.7:24-25} And neither do we need a ritual in order to relate to God, because we have a relationship with Jesus: *the sheep recognize [the shepherd’s] voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*^{Jn.10:3-4;14} All we need is Jesus Himself—and because we have received Him, let’s live in fellowship with Him!

Sunday 27th January 2019 Ps.122 Acts 11

When did you last have a spiritual health check-up?

When Barnabas arrived at Antioch, he immediately recognised that the Believers were spiritually healthy because he saw the evidence of God’s grace. *When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*^{Acts.11:23} The Greek word “*charis*” translated “*grace*” means, “*to rejoice*” and is often used to describe a favour done without expectation of return. The Biblical use of the word “*grace*” usually refers to God’s gift of Jesus Christ to us as this was completely “*one-sided*”: *We love because he first loved us.*^{Jn.4:19} *But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*^{Rom.5:8} When we respond to God’s grace, we are not only forgiven but we are filled with appreciation, joy and gratitude (the other meanings of “*grace*”). [The word *charisma* is used to describe the gifts of the Holy Spirit and signifies the result of God’s grace—the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.] God’s grace—the gift of Jesus Christ to mankind—was (and is) all one-sided. The gift of Jesus as our Saviour was God’s idea, God’s planning and God’s administration, but when Jesus freely submitted to God’s plan, He rewarded Jesus by giving Him the highest honour: *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! 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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*^{Phil.2:6-11} [We **can’t** crown Jesus or make Him “**Lord**” because God the Father **has already** crowned Jesus and made Him Lord of all: *But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*^{Heb.2:9} When we became a Christian, we agreed with God that **Jesus is Lord** and believed that **God had raised Jesus from the dead**: *If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*^{Rom.10:9} Actually, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, our faith is worthless: *And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins... But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.*^{1Cor.15:17-20}]

We are quite used to regular check-ups in our daily life—our cars have an annual MOT and we go to the Doctor’s for a physical check-up—but when did you last have a spiritual check-up? It is a good practice to **regularly re-examine our faith**: *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} **If we can affirm that we are Believers**, (we have placed our trust in Jesus Christ) **then we know that Christ is in us. He is our hope of glory.**^{Col.1:27} **And we can also state with confidence that we know whom we have believed and are persuaded that He is able to keep what we have committed unto Him against that Day.**^{2Tim.1:12}

Any worthwhile check-up has to be measured by a recognised and accepted standard—an MOT is measured by Government standards; our physical health is measured against normal physical health standards. So we need a recognised and/ accepted standard to measure our spiritual health. The Bible has been described as “*God’s mind in a Book*” and it is the Bible that is our point of reference for our spiritual health check-up. If we don’t accept the Bible as trustworthy (and also God’s revelation of Salvation through Jesus Christ), we are just guessing about a spiritual standard, and your guess is as good as anyone else’s guess—a guess! Everything we know about God, including our faith, is based on what is contained in the Bible and as the Elim Statement of Faith says: *We believe the Bible, as originally given, to be without error, the fully inspired and infallible Word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.* Jesus said: *We know that Scripture is always true [or, Scripture can’t be discredited].*^{Jn.10:35} Besides the Bible, *God has also given us the Holy Spirit to guide us and as a **deposit to guarantee God’s promises:** He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*^{2Cor.1:21-22} The same Holy Spirit who guarantees our future is also the same Holy Spirit who gives us the desire to do God’s will. The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit is not a *Pentecostal Doctrine* but a *Christian Doctrine* and we ignore Him at our peril! His ministry is to counsel, comfort, encourage, help, befriend and guide—in fact everything that Jesus did for His first Disciples.^{Jn.14:16} And this Holy Spirit also empowers us to be Jesus’ witness.^{Acts1:8} Fellowship with the Holy Spirit gives us the assurance that God will keep His word about everything He has planned and purposed for us—especially our eternal home: *Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*^{2Cor.5:5} *When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.*^{Eph.1:13-14}

Our spiritual check-up does not involve any deep personal introspection or lengthy counselling session—a spiritual check-up needs only involve answering these 2 questions: **Are you a Believer?**^{Mat.16:16;Jn.11:25-26} and, **Do you love Jesus more than these?**^{Jn.21:15} If we can answer these 2 questions with a “**yes**”, we are spiritually healthy and God’s grace will be clearly evident in our lives! An important part of **being** healthy is **knowing** that we are healthy. **God has already done all that He needs to do in order to keep us spiritually healthy:** *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*^{2Pet.1:3-4} However, in the same way that there are advisory points when a car passes its MOT, so when we “pass” our spiritual health check, there are a few advisory points!

Advisory point 1. We should renew our minds: *be made new in the attitude of your minds.*^{Eph.4:23} This “*renewal of our minds*” is not a one-off experience but it is a process. Our minds are re-aligned by “*meditating*” on God’s Living Word (Jesus) and God’s Written Word (the Scriptures). *Meditate* means *contemplate, ponder, think, consider, reflect, ruminate; muse.* Christian meditation is **not** emptying our minds (that is what the Eastern pagan religions do). **Christian meditation is pondering on what God has accomplished through Jesus (as recorded in the Bible).** As we meditate on God’s Word, we fill our thoughts with God’s thoughts—which cleans our mind and feeds our spirit. *So if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don’t shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that’s where the action is. See things from his perspective.*^{Col.3:1-2} We should take time each day to re-align our thoughts then we will see our life (including its problems) from God’s perspective and view all things in the mirror of eternity as we wait for the coming of our Lord and listen for that last trumpet call to herald the new heaven and new earth: *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} *With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.*^{Rom.12:1-2}

Advisory point 2. We should meet with other Christians. Meeting with other Christians should be a delight because we share the same Father, Saviour, Spirit, Scriptures and destination. *I was very glad when they said to me, "Let us go up to the house of the LORD."*^{Ps.122:1} And joining with other Christians will lead us to the King! *Don't you know where to find the king? Follow the tracks the sheep make.*^{SofS.1:8} And loving someone who shares the same Spirit is evidence that we love our Heavenly Father. *If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life. But a person who has no love is still dead. Anyone who hates another brother or sister is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don't have eternal life within them. We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us.*^{1Jn.3:14-16} *Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born again because of what God has done. That person knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*^{1Jn.4:7-8}

As we take a spiritual health check-up, let's re-affirm our faith and declare that Jesus is both Lord and alive. And then, like the Church at Antioch, let's continue to evidence God's grace and *remain true to the Lord with all our hearts.*^{Acts.11:23}

February

And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ^{Colossians 1:10}

Sunday 3rd February 2019 Ps.122.

I am a Christian!

Believers were first called “**Christians**” in Antioch where Paul and Barnabas spent a whole year encouraging and teaching the Church. To be called a Christian in those days meant that you had left your old way of life to follow Christ—but today, being called a Christian means something very different. In 2010/11 just 5.5% of the UK were members of a Church but 59.3% of people in England and Wales called themselves “*Christian*”! So clearly today, for many people in the UK, being a “*Christian*” does not mean following Christ because they don’t meet together in His Name for spiritual edification. Jesus called His first disciples with the command: “*Come follow me*”^{Matt.4:19;9:9} and He gave the same instruction to “**Follow Me**” at least 3 more times. Jesus is still calling people to follow Him—and many people are following Him!

Being a follower of Jesus is not an optional extra for religious people but a basic requirement for being a Christian. To follow Jesus means losing your life (with all its selfish ways) in order to gain His life (with all its selfless ways); it means losing all your self esteem in order to gain God’s esteem; it means losing your pride in order to gain God’s grace: *If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father and will judge all people according to their deeds.*^{Matt.16:24-27} Jesus said we cannot

be His disciple unless we hate our family, carry our cross and follow Him: *If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*^{Lk.14:26-27}

Obviously Jesus did not mean for us to literally “*hate*” our family because that is out of character for God—and if we “*hate*” others we don’t really know God at all: *Anyone who says he loves God but in fact hates his brother or sister is a liar. He doesn't love his brother or sister, whom he has seen. So he can't love God, whom he has not seen. Here is the command God has given us. Anyone who loves God must also love his brothers and sisters.*^{1Jn.4:20-21}

What Jesus really meant was that we must love Him **more than** our family, friends and comfort: *Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*^{Matt.10:37-38}

We cannot serve 2 masters and if we don’t give total commitment to Jesus, we are not worthy of Him and neither have we really made any commitment to Him—Jesus is either Lord of all or He is not Lord at all! *No one can serve two masters. He will hate the first master and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and wealth. So I tell you to stop worrying about what you will eat, drink, or wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes?*^{Matt.6:24-25}

God asks us to choose—to obey Him or disobey Him; to serve Him or to serve ourselves; to please God or please ourselves: *Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.*^{1Jsh.24:14-15}

Wise people consider the long-term results and not just the short-term benefits—they see the spiritual and eternal dimension! *Moses thought it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ than to own the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to his great reward.*^{Heb.11:26} When Perpetua, who lived in Carthage, Tunisia in the C3rd became a Christian, she soon realised that to follow Christ meant taking up her cross—and like Moses, considered *it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ because she*

was looking ahead to her great reward. Refusing to offer incense to the Roman Emperor, Perpetua was arrested and sent to prison and during her incarceration she kept a journal. In this journal, Perpetua recorded how God spoke to her through prophetic dreams and how she and the other Christians encouraged each other to keep the faith. Perpetua's father was not a Christian and he came to the prison to plead with Perpetua to save herself by simply denying she was a Christian. She replied: "Father do you see this vase here? Could it be called by any other name than what it is? Well, neither can I be called anything other than what I am. **I am a Christian.**" Even though she was nursing her baby, Perpetua refused to deny Christ as her Lord and was taken to the arena where she was attacked by the animals and eventually hacked to death by a gladiator. But through it all, Perpetua experienced the reality of God's grace: *But he said to me, "My grace is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak."*^{2Cor.12:9}

When we experience opposition to our faith in the UK, it can rarely be defined as "persecution", but there are many across the world today who are experiencing persecution similar to Perpetua. "Open Doors" reported that last year 3,066 Christians were killed; 1,252 were abducted; 1,020 were raped or sexually harassed; and 793 churches were attacked. Every month: 255 Christians are killed; 104 are abducted; 180 Christian women are raped, sexually harassed or forced into marriage; 66 churches are attacked; 160 Christians are detained without trial and imprisoned. Paul wrote: *These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age. If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*^{1Cor.10:11-13} But whether we face slight opposition to our faith or outright persecution, we must be careful not to fall but to stand firm in our faith (our trust in God as our Master and in Jesus as our Saviour. *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9} Another translation reads: "Unless your faith is firm, I cannot make you stand firm." Our faith is in God and it is God who makes us stand firm—so all of us are able to stand and to overcome: *Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come... 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.1:21-24} *In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:3-5}

We are to *be on our guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.*^{1Cor.16:13-14} If we falter in times of trouble, our strength is very small!^{Prom.24:10} Our spiritual armour is Jesus (rather than what we do) and when we fellowship with Him we can stand firm: *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} So let's follow the example of Perpetua standing firm in our confession and affirm "**I am a Christian.**" Then like Moses, consider it is better to suffer for the sake of Christ because we are looking ahead to our great reward.

Sunday 3rd February 2019 Ps.32

As Dave Smethurst is with us this week, I have included an **Introduction to Colossians** and also a part of that Letter—read and be blessed!

Introduction to Colossians

Hardly anyone who hears the full story of Jesus and learns the true facts of his life and teaching, crucifixion and resurrection, walks away with a shrug of the shoulders, dismissing him as unimportant. People ignorant of the story or misinformed about it, of course, regularly dismiss

him. But with few exceptions, the others know instinctively that they are dealing with a most remarkable greatness.

But it is quite common for those who consider him truly important to include others who seem to be equally important in his company—Buddha, Moses, Socrates, and Muhammad for a historical start, along with some personal favourites. For these people, Jesus is important, but not central; his prestige is considerable, but he is not preeminent.

The Christians in the town of Colosse, or at least some of them, seem to have been taking this line. For them, cosmic forces of one sort or another were getting equal billing with Jesus. Paul writes to them in an attempt to restore Jesus, the Messiah, to the centre of their lives.

The way he makes his argument is as significant as the argument he makes. Claims for the uniqueness of Jesus are common enough. But such claims about Jesus are frequently made with an arrogance that is completely incompatible with Jesus himself. Sometimes the claims are enforced with violence.

But Paul, although unswervingly confident in the conviction that Christ occupies the centre of creation and salvation without peers, is not arrogant. And he is certainly not violent. He argues from a position of rooted humility. He writes with the energies of most considerate love. He exhibits again what Christians have come to appreciate so much in Paul—the wedding of a brilliant and uncompromising intellect with a heart that is warmly and wonderfully kind.

Col.1:3-10; 15-20; 3:1-4;12-17

Our prayers for you are always spilling over into thanksgivings. We can't stop thanking God our Father and Jesus our Messiah for you! We keep getting reports on your steady faith in Christ, our Jesus, and the love you continuously extend to all Christians. The lines of purpose in your lives never grow slack, tightly tied as they are to your future in heaven, kept taut by hope. The Message is as true among you today as when you first heard it. It doesn't diminish or weaken over time. It's the same all over the world. The Message bears fruit and gets larger and stronger, just as it has in you. From the very first day you heard and recognized the truth of what God is doing, you've been hungry for more. It's as vigorous in you now as when you learned it from our friend and close associate Epaphras. He is one reliable worker for Christ! I could always depend on him. He's the one who told us how thoroughly love had been worked into your lives by the Spirit. 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 look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body. He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross.

So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's

where the action is. See things from his perspective. Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. He is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you'll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ.

So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Sunday 17th February 2019. Ps.33:12-22. Acts 12

But the word of God continued to spread and flourish [or win many followers].^{Acts 12:24}

When difficulties arise, many Christians forget the incredible power of God's Word and they only see the natural—what can be understood by the five senses (taste, touch, hear, sight and smell). But we are spiritual people—people with a spirit. Actually we are a spirit, have a soul and live in a body—which is fairly obvious if you think about it. If we lose any part of our body or if we have any physical disability, we are not part-human, and if we have any personality (soul) issues, such as poor mental health or low I.Q. or even lack of maturity, we are still not any less human than “normal” people. Our human identity is our spirit, which is made in God's image^{Gen.1:27} and so it eternal and conscious of God—as well as being capable of worshipping God and accountable to God. Although animals have a soul (personality, emotions and will), they don't have a spirit—and it is our spirit that differentiates us from animals. Human life is precious because we are spirit and made in God's image—which is why we have an obligation to save and sustain human life, and why murder (including abortion) is so abhorrent. *Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.^{Gen.8:6} No man can pay for the life of anyone else. No one can give God what that would cost. The price for a life is very high. No payment is ever enough.^{Ps.49:7-8} And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father and will judge all people according to their deeds.^{Matt.16:26-27}*

Our spirit needs spiritual nourishment and God has provided His Word as our spiritual food: *Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.^{Matt.4:4}* The Word of God is unlike anything else—it is alive^{Heb.4:12} and has the intrinsic ability^{Lk.1:37} to meet our deepest need because it is spiritual: *Every word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making.^{Jn.6:63}* The Word of God can produce faith,^{Rom.10:17} give health,^{Prov.4:20-24} heal,^{Ps.107:20} stop us sinning,^{Ps.119:11} make us holy,^{Eph.5:26} and illuminate our path.^{Ps.119:105} God breathed His life into His Word and put His Spirit into them and those words still have the ability to help us today: *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} It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.^{Is.55:11}*

When we became a Christian, we were born-again by the Word of God and received the incorruptible seed of God's Word: *You have been born again by means of the living word of God. His word lasts forever. You were not born again from a seed that will die. You were born from a seed that can't die.*^{1Pet.1:23} God wrote His Word on our hearts: *But this is the promise that I will make to Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my teachings inside them, and I will write those teachings on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*^{Heb.8:10} The Word of God is Jesus: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*^{Jn.1:1} It is Jesus who is God's provision of help and it is Jesus who is at work within us: *when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*^{1Thes.2:13} So, believing God's Word is not too difficult for us because His Word is now in our heart and in our mouth. *Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.*^{Dent.30:11-14}

Some Christians live in fear and worry; their lives are full of cares and anxieties; they live embittered, struggling, stressful and defeated lives—but if they knew what God has provided, they could live in their true rights, privileges and potential in Christ. When we became a Christian, the old pattern of thinking, seeing, talking, acting, behaving and reacting based on our senses, was replaced with a new pattern of thinking, seeing, talking, acting, behaving and reacting based on our spirit and on God's Word. *If any man be in Christ Jesus he is a new creation old things are passed away behold all things have become new.*^{2Cor.5:17} If we don't realise that the old order of life has passed away and a new order has come in, we will never see beyond our sense-governed reasonings and can easily end up doubting God's Word. Sense-knowledge is faith's worst enemy, because it does not give the Word of God first place—it may admire the Word but it does not practice it. *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. Everything I have told you will come true. You can be sure of it.*^{Ez.33:31-33} Jesus said: *Everyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like a wise man... Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man...*^{Matt.7:24-26} Our defence against doubt and unbelief is our spiritual armour—which is faith plus truth, righteousness and peace. *Finally, receive your power from the Lord and from his mighty strength. Put on all the armour that God supplies. In this way you can take a stand against the devil's strategies.*^{Eph.6:10-11} *We must put on faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet.*^{1Thes.5:8} *This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:4-5}

God is a God of plan and purpose and this is seen in His strategy for our salvation. When God planned and implemented our salvation, His intention was not for us to continue to be controlled by our senses. God's intention was that we should be jointly controlled by our spirit and the Holy Spirit—we call this *fellowship*—and God planned that we should live in fellowship with Him **ALL** the days of our life: *He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside peaceful waters. He renews my soul. He guides me along the paths of righteousness for the sake of his name. Even though I walk through the dark valley of death, because you are with me, I fear no harm... Certainly, goodness and mercy will stay close to me all the days of my life, and I will remain in the LORD's house for days without end.*^{Ps.23:2-6}

The way we live in fellowship with God is by abiding in God's Word: *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*^{Jn.15:4-5}

God hasn't promised us a trouble-free life—in fact we are promised troubles in life: *I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.*^{Jn.16:33} But we are promised a prosperous life—if our soul prospers! *Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.*^{3Jn.3} (Prosperity literally means a good journey!) And our soul will prosper when we make it submit to our born-again spirit and to God's Word: *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.42:11} We will enjoy fellowship with God when we are inspired by God's Word and allow God's thoughts to replace our own sense-thoughts, when we make our lips do their duty by filling them with God's Word and not allowing them to say anything to the contrary. This is true prosperity because it is sharing our life's journey with God—and He makes it a good journey! *Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. 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. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*^{Josh.1:7-9}

So let us continue to allow God's Word spread and flourish in our lives and then, like the early Church, we will see God's Word win many followers.^{Acts 12:24}

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}

I'm going to keep on talking like God, feeding my body on His living Word.

Feeding my mind on what Jesus said, changing my weakness for His strength instead.

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

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

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

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

Sunday 24th February 2019. Ps.34:1-10 Acts 13.

When was the last time God spoke through you or to you?

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said...^{Acts.13:2}

Jesus told His Disciples that the Holy Spirit would speak to them, give them words, encourage them, lead them into truth so it was obvious that early Church would expect God to speak through them and to them. And because the Church is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, it was founded on God speaking to us: *You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord.*^{Eph.2:19-21} Apostle means “sent-one”: *There came a man who was **sent** [apostled] from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.*^{Jn.1:6-7} The Latin translation of *apostle* is “missionary” which has the same root as “missile”. Thus, apostles are “sent-ones” who are on a mission from God to testify about Jesus in order that others may believe in Him—and Jesus is our main Apostle: *Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him.*^{Heb.3:1-2} A prophet is a spokesperson—a person who speaks on behalf of someone else, as Aaron spoke for Moses: *What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you. He will be glad to see you. Speak to him.*

Put your words in his mouth. Tell him what to say. I will help both of you speak. I will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you. He will be like your mouth. And you will be like God to him.^{Ex.4:14-16}

When we speak on behalf of God, our words have a spiritual dimension that can achieve God's purposes: *My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.*^{Ps.119:28} *The Sovereign LORD has given me his words of wisdom, so that I know how to comfort the weary. Morning by morning he awakens me and opens my understanding to his will. The Sovereign LORD has spoken to me, and I have listened.*^{Is.50:4-5}

Christian prophets will always give a clear witness for Jesus: *I am a servant of God, just like you and your brothers and sisters who testify about their faith in Jesus. Worship only God. For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10} Thus, prophets are “spokespeople” for God who testify about Jesus in order that others may believe—and Jesus is our main Prophet: *Jesus has been appointed as the Christ for you. He must remain in heaven until the time when God makes everything new. He promised this long ago through his holy prophets. Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me. He will be one of your own people. You must listen to everything he tells you. Those who do not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.’*^{Acts.3:20-23}

In a general sense, we are all apostles and prophets because we are all on a mission from God to testify about Jesus so others may come to faith in Him. However, God has also given to the Church the **ministry** of apostles (missionaries at home and abroad) and prophets—along with evangelists, pastors and teachers. *The One who came down is the same as the One who went up higher than all the heavens. He did it in order to fill all of creation. He is the One who gave some the gift to be apostles. He gave some the gift to be prophets. He gave some the gift of preaching the good news. And he gave some the gift to be pastors and teachers.*^{Eph.4:10-11}

Any ministry position is not a status for us to achieve but a gift to equip us and bring us into maturity: *He did it so that they might prepare God's people to serve. If they do, the body of Christ will be built up. That will continue until we all become one in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son. Then we will be grown up in the faith [become mature]. We will receive everything that Christ has for us. We will no longer be babies in the faith. We won't be like ships tossed around by the waves. We won't be blown here and there by every new teaching. We won't be blown around by the cleverness and tricks of people who try to hide their evil plans. Instead, we will speak the truth in love. We will grow up into Christ in every way.*^{Eph.4:12-15}

Maturity is being complete, full and wanting in nothing. As Jesus was dying on the Cross, He declared: *It is finished, the debt has been paid in full!* The words “finished” and “maturity” have the same root and so spiritual maturity is realising that God has provided everything for us in Jesus’ death—and living in that provision. God’s provision is

Emmanuel—Christ in us: *God wanted his people throughout the world to know the glorious riches of this mystery—which is Christ living in you, giving you the hope of glory. We spread the message about Christ as we instruct and teach everyone with all the wisdom there is. We want to present everyone as mature Christian people.*^{Col.1:27-28}

Christians are complete in Christ and so spiritual maturity is living as complete Christians who lack no spiritual thing: *All of God lives in Christ's body, and God has made you complete in Christ. Christ is in charge of every ruler and authority.*^{Col.2:9-10} *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 seek the LORD lack no good thing.*^{Ps.34:8-10}

Building our life on Jesus is like building a house on a solid foundation: *As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built.*^{Lk.6:47-48}

And like an anchor attached to a rock stops a ship from drifting, so when our hope is firmly attached to Jesus we won’t drift or wander aimlessly: *you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.*^{1Pet.1:18-19}

Our trust in God and His provision is based on His promise **and** confirmed by His oath—a **double assurance**. *Those of us who have taken refuge in him hold on to the confidence we have been given. We have this confidence as a sure and strong anchor for our lives. This confidence goes into the holy place behind the curtain where Jesus went before us on our behalf. He has become the chief priest forever in the way Melchizedek was a priest.*^{Heb.6:18-20}

The early Church expected God to speak through the Believers and to the Believers: *Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, come and give it.*^{Acts 13:15} *He travelled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people.*^{Acts 20:2} *With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.*^{1Pet.5:12} The ministry of the Church is to facilitate faith (and the out-working of faith) through preaching, teaching, encouragement and exhortation: *Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*^{1Cor.14:12} *But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.*^{1Cor.14:3} *For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.*^{1Cor.14:31} However, we must remain firmly grounded in God's Word—both the Living Word (Jesus) and the written Word (Scriptures): *In the past, God spoke to our people through the prophets. He spoke at many times. He spoke in different ways. But in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one whom God appointed to receive all things.*^{Heb.1:1-2} *You study the Scriptures in detail because you think you have the source of eternal life in them. These Scriptures testify on my behalf.*^{Jn.5:39} Prophecy should edify, encourage and exhort: *But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.*^{1Cor.14:3} And prophecy or advice should be assessed by those hearing it: *Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should judge [evaluate; consider; weigh] what they say. If a message from God [or revelation] comes to another person who is sitting, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy one after the other. In this way all the people can be taught and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are under the control of the prophets themselves [unlike in pagan religions, where a spirit would seize control of a speaker, causing frenzy, mania or ecstasy]. For God is not a God of confusion or disorder but a God of peace.*^{1Cor.14:29-33} If we expect God to speak through us and to us, we must be ready to judge (discern) whether it is God motivating us (or the person speaking to us). Sometimes well-intentioned people genuinely believe that they have heard from God about a situation and after giving their “word from God”, it turns out that it came from their own good intention rather than God's intention! But even if the prophecy does appear to come from God, we are not under any obligation to act on it—especially if it doesn't settle well with our spirit or our understanding of general orthodox Christian teaching (c.f. the man of God from Judah^{1Kng.13}). Obviously, if someone is living outside the normal Christian standards of morality or doctrine, then we should discard their advice “prophecy”. *But that does not mean we want to dominate you by telling you how to put your faith into practice. We want to work together with you so you will be full of joy, for it is by your own faith that you stand firm.*^{2Cor.1:24} *Spiritual people evaluate everything but are subject to no one's evaluation.*^{1Cor.2:15} But although we should treat “prophecy” with some spiritual caution, we should not be resistant to God speaking to us through other Believers—even through immature Believers: *Don't put out the Holy Spirit's fire. Don't treat prophecies as if they amount to nothing. Put everything to the test. Hold on to what is good. Stay away from every kind of evil.*^{1Thess.5:19-22}

Yes, God does still speak through us and to us, so let's expect God to do so today.

Sovereign Lord, You awaken me each morning and open my understanding to Your will. Thank You for giving me Your words of wisdom so that I know how to comfort and sustain the weary.^{Is.50:4} Every meeting, conversation and activity that I engage in today will be ordered by You, so help me to respond in obedience to Your directions and choose the way of righteousness when faced with many paths of judgment. Trust me with opportunities to show Your glory and I will gladly take them. Thank You for using me. Amen. So let it be!!

March

being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience. *Colossians 1:11*

Sunday 3rd March 2019 Ps.34:11-22

When God Speaks, Listen, Respond and Obey.

Last week we saw that every Christian is on a mission because we are all sent by God to testify that Jesus Christ is the Son of God so that though Him all might believe—every Christian should be a spokesperson for God. We also saw that God has also given to the Church the ministry gifts of apostles, prophets and other ministries, so that we can live as complete, whole people, without any spiritual lack—we can become spiritually mature. If people are going to believe in Jesus, they must hear about Him; and if they are going to hear about Jesus someone has to go and tell them; and if someone is to go and tell them, they must be sent! *"Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."* But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, *"How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!"*^{Rom.10:13-15} Prophecy (speaking on behalf of God) is about giving a clear witness for Jesus: *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10} So unless we preach about Jesus, there is nothing of any spiritual value to listen to: *The point is, before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to.*^{Rom.10:17}

This week we are going to look at 3 people who heard God speak to them and then spoke for God.

Moses heard God speak to him when he was looking after sheep. Moses saw a bush that was burning yet it did not burn up—and when he went to look at it, God spoke to him. But when God asked Moses to go back to Egypt to speak to the Israelites and to Pharaoh, he made all these excuses: *Who am I? What should I tell them? What if they don't listen to me? I am not a good speaker! Please send someone else!* The result was that *the LORD's anger burned against Moses.*^{Ex.4:14} But God was gracious and allowed Moses' brother Aaron to speak on his behalf. Moses went onto be the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. *When there are prophets of the LORD among you, I make myself known to them in visions or speak to them in dreams. But this is not the way I treat my servant Moses. He is the most faithful person in my household. I speak with him face to face, plainly and not in riddles. He even sees the form of the LORD.*^{Nu.12:6-8} Moses was a foreshadow of Jesus: *He will send you Jesus, whom he has appointed to be the Christ. Heaven must receive Jesus until the time when everything will be restored as God promised through his holy prophets long ago. Moses said, 'The Lord your God will send you a prophet, an Israelite like me. Listen to everything he tells you.'*^{Acts.3:20-22} Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, beginning with a lamb sacrificed at the first Passover—Jesus led us out of spiritual slavery, beginning with the Himself as the Passover Lamb of God who died on the cross. *Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us.*^{1Cor.5:7} Moses later appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration: *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}

Samuel was only a young boy when God spoke to him and when he realised it was God speaking, Samuel listened: *The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"* Then Samuel said, *"Speak, for your servant is listening."*^{1Sam.3:10} Because Samuel was obedient, God honoured him and he became a great prophet in Israel: *As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him, and everything Samuel said proved to be reliable.*^{1Sam.4:19}

Paul was a devout Jew—but he was also one of the most anti-Christian people of his time. Whilst on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem, Jesus

spoke to Paul. *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*^{Acts.9:3-6} Later, Paul said that although he was not fit to be sent by God, it was God's grace (kindness) that had made him who he was: *I'm the least of the apostles. I'm not even fit to be called an apostle because I persecuted God's church. But God's kindness made me what I am, and that kindness was not wasted on me.*^{1Cor.15:9-10} Paul went on to be the greatest missionary the Church has ever had and he also wrote nearly half of the New Testament.

When God spoke to these people, they **listened, responded** and **obeyed** (even though Moses initially resisted and so he experienced God's anger). God also wants us to **listen** to Him, **respond** to Him and **obey** Him (do what He says). *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. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*^{Josh.1:8-9} Jesus willingly obeyed His Father. *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.'*^{Heb.10:5-7} And through Jesus' obedience, we are made holy: *And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*^{Heb.10:10;14} Now when we obey God, we can enjoy God's spiritual blessings—which is true prosperity: *If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land.*^{Is.1:19} *If they listen and obey God, they will be blessed with prosperity throughout their lives. All their years will be pleasant. But if they refuse to listen to him, they will cross over the river of death, dying from lack of understanding. For the godless are full of resentment. Even when he punishes them, they refuse to cry out to him for help. They die when they are young, after wasting their lives in immoral living. But by means of their suffering, he rescues those who suffer. For he gets their attention through adversity. God is leading you away from danger, to a place free from distress. He is setting your table with the best food. But you are obsessed with whether the godless will be judged. Don't worry, judgment and justice will be upheld. But watch out, or you may be seduced by wealth. Don't let yourself be bribed into sin.*^{Job.36:11-18} **God desires obedience more than anything else:** *Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams. Rebellion is as sinful as witchcraft, and stubbornness as bad as worshiping idols.*^{1Sam.15:22-23} *When I led your ancestors out of Egypt, it was not burnt offerings and sacrifices I wanted from them. This is what I told them: 'Obey me, and I will be your God, and you will be my people. Do everything as I say, and all will be well!' But my people would not listen to me. They kept doing whatever they wanted, following the stubborn desires of their evil hearts. They went backward instead of forward.*^{Jer.7:22-24}

But if we are going to listen to God, respond to Him and obey Him, how do we hear God speak? **God speaks to us through His Word**—both the Living Word (**Jesus**) and the written Word (**Scriptures**): *In the past, God spoke to our people through the prophets. He spoke at many times. He spoke in different ways. But in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one whom God appointed to receive all things.*^{Heb.1:1-2} *You study the Scriptures in detail because you think you have the source of eternal life in them. These Scriptures testify on my behalf.*^{Jn.5:39} Everything we need to know about God is recorded in the Scriptures—including clear instructions on how to get right with God: *The rich man said, 'Then let me ask you, Father: Send him to the house of my father where I have five brothers, so he can tell them the score and warn them so they won't end up here in this place of torment.' Abraham answered, 'They have Moses and the Prophets to tell them the score. Let them listen to them.' 'I know, Father Abraham,' he said, 'but they're not listening. If someone came back to them from the dead, they would change their ways.' Abraham replied, 'If they won't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they're not going to be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.'*^{Lk.16:27-31} So when we speak to others about God, we must base our information on what the Bible has recorded—especially about **God, man, Jesus, the cross** and

the final **resurrection**. Any other source of information is at best irrelevant and at worst an outright lie—and there is a lot of “*fake news*” around today (including on the internet and “*christian*” TV)! That is why Church is so important—not only for us to join together to worship God as a congregation but also to build one another up in our faith, with the security of the ministry gifts of apostles (sent-ones or missionaries), prophets (spokespeople), evangelists (messengers), pastors (spiritual-health workers) and teachers (qualified preachers who understand doctrine) as well as Church elders (reliable people who are spiritually mature and who are accountable to other Church leaders).

So, let’s continue the work of honouring God and spreading the good news of His Kingdom as we **listen** to God, **respond** to Him and **obey** Him. Remember, the most important instruction we have from God is to love Him with everything we have—which means to honour, respect and obey Him: ‘*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*’ *This is the first and greatest commandment.*^{^Matt.22:37-38} And the most important work for us to do, is to believe Jesus: “*What must we do to do the works God requires?*” *Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”*^{^Jn.6:28-29}

Sunday 10th March 2019. Ps.35:1-10. Acts 14

God has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.^{^Acts.14:17}

God has always had a remnant of Believers—a core of people who have remained true to Him: *Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”? And what was God's answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.*^{^Rom.11:2-4} Although the 7 Churches in Turkey received criticism from Jesus, they each had some who were loyal to Jesus. *Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{^Rev.3:4-6} And throughout Church history there has always been a remnant of Believers who have remained loyal to God. Even during the Middle Ages, when the Church was perhaps the most apostate, there were some faithful Believers—such as the Lollards under Wycliffe in England. The name “*lollard*” was derived from the Dutch “*lollaerd*” (*mumbler*) and was originally given to the Alexian Brothers who cared for the sick and dying (especially from 1347 to 1351 during the Black Death, where an estimated 75 to 200 million people died in Europe and the Mediterranean basin). Wycliffe and the Lollards taught that a person did not need the Church and its sacraments to attain salvation and that Christians should regard the Bible, not the Church, as the supreme source of spiritual authority. They completed the first translation of the Bible into English so that people could read the Bible in their own language. They attacked the privileged status of the clergy, the luxury and pomp of local parishes and their ceremonies, monasticism and the very existence of the Papacy. And they also publicly opposed many of the Catholic heretical teaching, including veneration of saints, requiem masses and the sacraments, including “*transubstantiation*, declaring that the “*bread remains in the same nature as before*”. (The magician’s/conjurer’s phrase “*hocus-pocus*” is derived from the liturgy of the Catholic Mass: “**Hoc est corpus meum**” meaning “*This is my body.*”) This statement from 1517 sums up the Lollards' position: “*Summe folys cummyn to churche thynckynge to see the good Lorde—what shulde they see there but bredde and wyne?*” Wycliffe was expelled from Oxford in 1382 for his reformist views and died 2 years later, aged 64. When Wycliffe was declared a heretic 30 years after his death, his writings were banned and his corpse exhumed and burnt. Although the

Church continued to persecute Lollards as heretics, Wycliffe's ideas spread across Europe and influenced other reformers. Anne of Bohemia (King Richard II's 1st wife) had supported Wycliffe and introduced his teachings to her home country where John Huss took up the "baton" of the Reformation in Europe. It was Huss' teachings that helped stimulate Luther, Zwingli to challenge the Church 100 years later and eventually break away from its apostasy. *God has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides with plenty of food and fills hearts with joy.*^{Acts.14:17} When these believers heard God speak through the Scriptures but also through creation, common sense and Believers' testimonies, they responded and then obeyed! None of them were perfect but they believed God and were counted righteous. *But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God freely and graciously declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood.*^{Rom.3:21-25}

Greg Koukl recently emailed: In the twilight of his years, the much-loved Fred Rogers, host of the long-lived TV series, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, posed a question. Reflecting on Jesus' judgment parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, this gentle and loving mentor to generations of preschool children wanted to know, "Am I a sheep?" It saddened me when I learned of the doubts of the decent, upright, conscientious Mr. Rogers. His wife, Joanne, had answered him, "Fred, if anyone is a sheep, you are." **It was not the right answer. Something vital was missing.** I am 68 years old, and the twilight of my own life is slowly approaching—not close, I trust, but within sight. I am nowhere near as noble, as self-sacrificial, as persistently and irrevocably loving as Mr. Rogers was. No matter. That is not what counts in the final reckoning. **Here is what matters:** *When the kindness of God our Saviour and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*^{Tit.3:4-7} Does this passage (and there plenty others—including *Eph.2:8-9*, *Heb.10:19-23* and *Col.1:13-14*) instruct your heart the way it does mine? Feast on these words. Regularly. There is life in them. Relief from self-doubt. The source of great hope, the only hope, for even the worst of us—and the best of us. And if God should mark our iniquities, then we are all done for. But Christ is a great Saviour. Never forget this. It is our only hope as darkness encroaches. God has left a testimony to Himself through Scripture and also through Creation: *From the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly observed in what he made. As a result, people have no excuse. They knew God but did not praise and thank him for being God. Instead, their thoughts were pointless, and their misguided minds were plunged into darkness. While claiming to be wise, they became fools. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for statues that looked like mortal humans, birds, animals, and snakes. For this reason God allowed their lusts to control them.*^{Rom.1:20-24} But whether through Creation, Christian or Scripture, the message is the same: **God** is Creator and Lord of all He has made. **Man** was made in His image and has an obligation to give his Creator respect, reverence and honour, but he has turned his back on God and rebelled against Him—it is called sin. **Jesus**, God's one and only Son, came to us to restore our relationship with God so we could again call God "our Father". Jesus did this by dying on the **Cross** in our place—once for all: *Jesus Christ has appeared once to remove sin by his sacrifice. People die once, and after that they are judged. Likewise, Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of humanity, and after that he will appear a second time. This time he will not deal with sin, but he will save those who eagerly wait for him.*^{Heb.9:26-28} Because of Jesus' death

on the cross, we can have life—eternal life with God—by simply believing Jesus (that is, placing our trust in Him), so at the final **Resurrection** we will have no outstanding debts to God because we have been forgiven **everything** that we have done wrong. But those who do not place their trust in Jesus, **will have to pay all their debts to God**—they will have to pay for everything that they have done wrong and God forgets nothing and overlooks nothing! No wonder Jesus' message was "*Change your mind (repent) and believe the good news*": *Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*^{Mk.1:14-15} God has made it easy to trust in Him but unless He opens our eyes we remain blind. *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.*^{Eph.1:18-19} Jesus came to open our blind eyes: "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me. He has anointed me to tell the good news to poor people. He has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners. He has sent me so that the blind will see again. He wants me to free those who are beaten down. And he has sent me to announce the year when he will set his people free.*" Then Jesus rolled up the scroll. He gave it back to the attendant and sat down. *The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were staring at him. He began by saying to them, "Today this passage of Scripture is coming true as you listen."*^{Lk.4:18-21} Jesus commissioned Paul to do the same: *I am sending you to them to open their eyes. I want you to turn them from darkness to light. I want you to turn them from Satan's power to God. I want their sins to be forgiven. They will be forgiven when they believe in me. They will have their place among God's people.*^{Acts.26:17-18} And Jesus has commissioned us to do the same: *Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.*^{Mk.16:15}

Yes! God has left himself with a testimony—you and me! *I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you.*^{1Cor.1:4-6} So let's continue to work and pray that God will enable those we meet to see His testimony in Creation, Scripture, Christians and **especially in us.**

Sunday 17th March 2019 Ps.16. Acts 15

Are you Glamping or Camping?

David's Tent. The early Church found the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant quite hard, especially when it came to the freedom from the regulations of their old religion. God had chosen the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be His people and they were "*holy*"—that is, separated unto God, so they could be like God. Their traditions (but not the Bible) forbade Jews from mixing with other races so when the New Covenant was introduced, they had to re-learn their religious rules: *You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.*^{Acts.10:27} This religious apartheid was so entrenched in the Jews that it was dividing the Church and so a Conference was convened. As the Church leaders met to discuss the matter, Peter explained how God had clearly shown him that God's chosen people were not a physical nation but a spiritual nation—people who were followers of Christ: *By giving the Holy Spirit to non-Jews, he showed that he accepted them. He did the same for them as he had done for us. He showed that there is no difference between us and them. He made their hearts pure because of their faith.*^{Acts.15:8-9} (Later, Peter was to write: *But God chose you to be his people. You are royal priests. You are a holy nation. You are a people who belong to God. All of this is so that you can sing his praises. He brought you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people. But now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy. But now you have received mercy.*^{1Pet.2:9-10}) Paul and Barnabas also shared how God was using them to bring non-Jews to faith in Jesus Christ. James summarised the discussion by saying: *Simon Peter has explained to us how God first showed his concern for those who aren't Jews. He chose some of them to be his very own people. The prophets' words agree with that. They say, 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. I will rebuild what was destroyed. I will make it what it used to be. Then the rest of the people*

can look to the Lord. This means all the non-Jews who belong to me. The Lord says this. He is the one who does these things.' The Lord does things that have been known for a long time.^{Acts.15:14-18} The quote about David's Tent was taken from Amos who had prophesied that the apostate Jews would be decimated and destroyed but that God would return and rebuild David's fallen Tent—which would include both Jews and non-Jews alike. For the early Church, the testimonies of Peter and Paul, together with the Scripture was sufficient for them to change their traditions and share the New Covenant with the whole world, not just their own race.

So what was David's Tent? God had instructed Moses to build a sanctuary where God would dwell with His people: *Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.*^{Ex.25:8-9} When the Israelites inhabited the Promised land they were to pitch this tent in the place of God's choosing: *The LORD your God will choose a place out of all your tribes to live and put his name. Go there and worship him.*^{Nu.12:5} God's Sanctuary was pitched at various locations around Jerusalem, including Bethel, Shiloh and Gibeon until David brought the Tent and the Ark to Jerusalem (the same place where Abraham worshipped God when he was asked to offer up his son Isaac). Moses' tent was for sacrifices and during David's time was pitched at Gibeon: *David left Asaph and his relatives to serve continually in front of the ark of the LORD's promise [at Jerusalem], as the daily work required... David left Zadok and his priestly relatives to serve in the LORD's tent at the place of worship in Gibeon. They were ordered to sacrifice burnt offerings to the LORD. This happened on the altar of burnt offerings continually, morning and evening, as written in the LORD's Teachings that he gave Israel.*^{1Chron.16:37-40} But David's Tent was for **Praise, Prayer and Prophecy** and was pitched in Jerusalem: *The ark of God was ... put in the tent David had set up for it... David wanted them to pray, give thanks and praise the LORD.*^{1Chron.16:1-4} *David ... set them apart to serve the LORD by prophesying while harps, lyres and cymbals were being played.*^{1Chron.25:1} Although David had wanted to build a more permanent Sanctuary where he could worship God, it was his son Solomon who eventually built the Temple. *My father David had his heart set on building a temple for the name of the LORD God of Israel. However, the LORD said to my father David, 'Since you had your heart set on building a temple for my name, your intentions were good. But you must not build the temple. Instead, your own son will build the temple for my name.' The LORD has kept the promise he made. I have taken my father David's place, and I sit on the throne of Israel as the LORD promised. I've built the temple for the name of the LORD God of Israel. I've made a place there for the ark which contains the LORD's promise that he made to our ancestors when he brought them out of Egypt.*^{1Kg.8:17-21}

The Church leaders at that Jerusalem Conference understood that the New Covenant Church was not a place of religious rules and regulations for Jews but a place of **Praise, Prayer and Prophecy for all people. We are the Tent where God dwells:** *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?*^{1Cor.6:19} Our body is called a "tent" because it is **temporary** and we will have to leave this mortal body someday and take up residence in our immortal body: *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.*^{2Cor.5:1} *So I will always remind you of these things. I'll do it even though you know them. I'll do it even though you now have deep roots in the truth. I think it is right for me to remind you. It is right as long as I live in this tent. I'm talking about my body. I know my tent will soon be removed. Our Lord Jesus Christ has made that clear to me. I hope that you will always be able to remember these things after I'm gone. I will try very hard to see that you do.*^{2Pet.1:12-15} But God's residency in us is **permanent** in this mortal body—and will be in our immortal body: *For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."*^{2Cor.6:16} *"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."*^{Rev.21:3} *God has said, "I will never leave you. I will never desert you." So we can say boldly, "The Lord helps me. I will not be afraid. What can a mere man do to me?"*^{Heb.13:5-6} **We are the "house of prayer"** that Jesus spoke of: *'My house will be a house of prayer' but you have*

made it 'a den of robbers.'^{Lk.19:46} **We are to Pray:** pray continually,^{1Thes.5:17} **We are to Praise:** Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.^{Heb.13:15} **We are to Prophecy:** eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy^{1Cor.14:1} (but remember, **Prophecy** is giving testimony about Jesus: *Worship only God! For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10})

Prayer: Prayer is not a *shopping list* of “please bless me with...!” The most basic level of Christianity is to be blessed because every Believer has **already** been abundantly blessed: *Give praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. Those blessings come from the heavenly world. They belong to us because we belong to Christ.*^{Eph.1:3} **The highest level of Christianity is to be a blessing.** God said: *I will bless you. I will make your name great. You will be a blessing to others.*^{Gen.12:2} Prayer is fellowshiping with the Father, aligning our thoughts and dreams with His, then listening to the response and guidance of His Word and of His Spirit. Prayer is interceding for the needs of fellow-believers, then listening for God’s ideas of what we can do about them—of ways we can be part of the answer. Prayer is never pleading or begging for divine favours. (see T.L.Osborn’s [The Winning Secret](#) available from our website.) That is why Jude writes: *Dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith. Let the Holy Spirit guide and help you when you pray.*^{Jude 1:19-20}

Praise: Hymns and spiritual songs are an important part of the encouragement, edifying and establishing of our faith. Most people’s theology (what they believe about God) is formed by the songs they sing—so it is imperative that we sing the Truth and not sentimental, emotional lyrics that have little relevance to New Covenant Truth. Elizabeth Pruitt Sloan says: “*Much of today's Christian songs don't do anything for me. They have no tune, no melody, and no anointing. But give me some of the old songs, or new ones that exalt the Blood of Jesus, and my spirit just soars!*” This has led Mel Montgomery to add *Songs of Inspiration* to his website (www.brothermel.org) so we can (re)learn some of the good old and new hymns. Our praise will be passionate when we express our *worship* of God!

Prophecy: this is not spiritual insight into other people’s lives (although this may occur) but simply giving testimony to Jesus: *For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*^{Rev.19:10} (*What Jesus taught is the very heart of prophecy.*^{NirV} *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{NLTse}) As we testify about Jesus (especially from the Scriptures) we find that have the same experience as the 1st Disciples: *They said to each other, “He talked with us on the road. He opened the Scriptures to us. Weren't our hearts burning inside us during that time?”*^{Lk.24:32} Sharing Jesus from the Scriptures leads to **Revelation and Godly Instruction:** *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.*^{Rom15:4}

Yes! We are the restored Tent of David and we are not just camping we are glamping because we have the luxury of God with us—so let’s make sure we live our life as a **House of Prayer** where **Jesus is Praised and Proclaimed as the Son of God.**

We are His church, we are all God’s own people.

We all proclaim that He is King, He is King.

Look and see the glory of the King, sense the presence of the Lord amongst His people.

Feel Him fill the temple of our lives as He sits upon the throne of our praise.

At God’s right hand, Jesus Christ is exalted.

His rule is now and shall be forever more.

Sunday 24th March 2019 Ps.36. Acts 16

Singing hymns to God: *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*^{Acts.16:25}

Last week we saw that the expansion of God's kingdom beyond the Jews to all people shook up the early Church. But when they realized what God was doing, they accepted it with joy and confirmed it in writing: *This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings! ... The messengers went at once to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.*^{Acts.15:23-31} We also saw that **we** are David's Tent that God is rebuilding—that **we** believers in Jesus Christ, are God's spiritual people who offer unending **prayer, praise and prophecy** to God. *God chose **you** to be his people. **You** are royal priests. **You** are a holy nation. **You** are a people who belong to God. All of this is so that **you** can sing his praises. He brought **you** out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once **you** were not a people. But now **you** are the people of God. Once **you** had not received mercy. But now **you** have received mercy.*^{1Pet.2:9-10} When Paul brought the message of salvation to Europe, he looked for people who were meeting for prayer and shared the Gospel with them first—but Paul didn't keep his **praying, praising and prophesying** within the services. Paul understood that **he** was David's Tent that God had rebuilt and so **prayer, praise and prophecy** became his lifestyle, not a liturgical exercise. When a demon-possessed young girl kept pestering him, Paul dealt with situation *in situ* and cast the demon out. And when Paul was in prison for his faith, he continued to pray, praise and prophecy audibly *in situ*: *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*^{Acts.16:25} (Prophecy is giving clear witness to Jesus: *For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10}) Paul and Silas' singing made a big impression on those in prison with them—however, they were not singing to the other prisoners **but they were singing to God.**

While some worship traditions have remained unchanged for centuries, many of our present traditions came about as Christians sought to improve the worship formats and styles they had inherited from previous generations. But there is a tendency today for “*temporal narcissism*”—thinking that anything more than 30 years old is irrelevant or boring. However, an understanding of history helps put things in proper context. Many who have gone before us were smarter, holier, more zealous for biblical truth, and more humble than we are. The hallowed halls of history are a powerful antidote to our usually narrow, self-focused viewpoint. Most, if not all, of the writers of much-loved hymns from the past had no clue that hundreds of years after they were gone, the church would be benefiting from their labours—they simply tried to be faithful to Scripture and their own generation. On the other hand, countless thousands of hymns which once seemed so relevant have drifted into obscurity! Singing hymns to God was integral to the early Church's worship. *Let Christ's word live in you like a rich treasure. Teach and correct each other wisely. Sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing with thanks in your hearts to God. Do everything you say or do in the name of the Lord Jesus. Always give thanks to God the Father through Christ.*^{Col.3:16-17} *Brothers and sisters, what should we say then? When you come together, every one of you brings something. You bring a hymn or a teaching or a word from God... All of those things must be done to make the church strong.*^{1Cor.14:26} The corporate worship of the early Church was never a lifeless routine or ritualistic event. *We worship God by the power of his Spirit.*^{Phil.3:3} *Be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Eph.5:18-20} When Nero's brother Britannicus attended a Church meeting, he was amazed at the beauty of the worship: *Nothing could have been more simple than the order of worship... They had no distinctive dress, but wore the ordinary tunic or cloak of daily life, though evidently the best and neatest that they could procure. In such a community, so poor, so despised, there could be no pomp of ritual, but the lack of it was more than compensated*

by the reverent demeanour which made each Christian feel that, for the time being, this poor granary was the house of God and the gate of heaven. They knelt or stood in prayer, as though the mud floor were sacred as the rocks of Sinai, and every look and gesture was happy, as of those who felt that not only angels and archangels were among them, but the invisible presence of their Lord Himself. First they prayed; and Britannicus had never before heard real prayers. But here were men and women, the young and the old, to whom prayer evidently meant direct communion with the Infinite and the Unseen; to whom the solitude of private supplication, and the community of worship, were alike admissions into the audience-chamber of the Divine... But a new and yet more powerful sensation was kindled in his mind, when at the close of the prayers they sang a hymn... Britannicus listened entranced to the mingled voices as they rose and fell in exquisite cadence. He had heard in theatres all the most famous singers of Rome; he had heard the chosen youths and maidens chanting in the temple processions; he had heard the wailing over the dead, and the chorus of the bridal song. But he had heard nothing which distantly resembled this melody and harmony of voices wedded to holy thoughts; and, although there were no instruments, the angelical, soft, trembling voices, seemed to him like echoes from some new and purer region of existence... When the hymn was over they sat down, and Linus rose to speak to them a few words of exhortation. He reminded them that they had been called from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. He told them that they had fled to the rock of Christ amid a weltering sea of human wickedness, and though the darkness was around them he bade them to walk in the light, since they were the children of light....

In the C2nd the pagan historian Pliny reported that Christians gathered at dawn to sing a hymn “to Christ as God.” Ignatius and Clement, from the same time period, encouraged the early Christians to sing with one voice as they met together.

In the C3rd Eusebius wrote about many sacred songs that had been written by the early church. But by the C4th the Council of Laodicea declared, “Besides the appointed singers who mount the ambo (lectern/pulpit) and sing from the book, others shall not sing in the church.” Formal liturgy developed and the congregation changed from active worshipers to passive spectators.

However, during the Reformation congregational singing began to be restored. Martin Luther was called the “father of congregational song,” and propagated the idea that the communal singing of Christian songs could be an integral part of public worship believing *that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise.* Luther wrote many hymns including “A Mighty Fortress is our God” and possibly “Away in a manger” and claimed that anyone who does not regard music “as a marvellous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being.” Although Luther believed that God’s people should sing hymns, Zwingli thought they should not sing at all, but Calvin took the middle ground—that they should sing but only directly from God’s Word *i.e.* Psalms.

By the end of the C17th most Protestant churches were singing Psalms set to verse. The young Isaac Watts (1674–1748) came home one Sunday complaining that the hymns were dull and lifeless. In a moment of providential brilliance, his father challenged, “Then write something better!” He did! That following Sunday the congregation sang a hymn that began, “Behold the Glories of the Lamb amidst his Father’s throne: Prepare new honours for his name, and songs before unknown.” This became the first of more than 650 hymns Watts would compose for the church. Later, Watts revised all but twelve of the 150 psalms “to make David speak like a Christian.” He was committed to New Testament truth always directing attention to the person and work of Jesus Christ and his hymns are full of wonder and awe. From the same era, Charles Wesley wrote more than 6500 hymns and, probably due to the influence from the Moravians, he attempted to draw out the present effects of truth upon the heart of the singer. His hymns are also wonderful examples of evangelical zeal, often inviting the sinner to respond to the truths being sung. His brother John counselled, “Sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continuously.”

The C19th evangelistic campaigns, especially in America, were dominated by congregational “Gospel Songs” with people like Ira Sankey and Fanny Crosby, a blind composer who wrote more than 8,500 hymns including “Blessed Assurance” and “Jesus, Keep Me near the Cross.”

In the late C20th congregational worship moved away from singing hymns interspersed by prayer and Bible readings (often called a “hymn-sandwich”) to a melody of shorter songs or choruses many of which were Bible verses (especially *Scripture in Song*).

But whatever our style of singing we should follow Paul and Silas’ example of singing our hymns **to God**. Our worship songs should reflect what God is worth to us because worship is worth-ship! We should ensure the songs that we sing are meaningful and every bit as truth-filled as the sermon because their purpose is to express our evaluation of God and articulate what we believe. Ultimately, we need to turn our eyes to God and away from ourselves. There are a lot of songs about our response to God, but songs that focus on Him should be our bread and butter. It is as we consider God’s glory that we are transformed—not as we focus on ourselves: *As all of us reflect [contemplate] the Lord's glory with faces that are not covered with veils, we are being changed into his image with ever-increasing glory. This comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*^{2Cor.3:18}

As we sing our hymns to God, we can catch a glimpse of heaven and enter into the atmosphere of heaven—where Jesus is the centre of attention and the focus of worship. The songs described in Revelation (and also in Isaiah and Ezekiel) have a sense of holiness and exude awe of God—they give us insight into that heavenly atmosphere: *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.*^{Rev.4:8} *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.*^{Rev.4:11} *Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise! To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!*^{Rev.5:12-13} *Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.*^{Rev.19:6-8} So whenever we sing hymns to God (whether we are by ourselves or whether we together as Church) let’s make every effort enter into the atmosphere of heaven—and then take heaven with us when leave!

Sunday 31st March 2019 Ps.37:1-11. Acts 17 Mothering Sunday

How open-mind are you?

The people of Berea were more open-minded than the people of Thessalonica. They were very willing to receive God's message, and every day they carefully examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true^{Acts.17:11}

There is no one quite like you (or me) because, regardless of how similar we may seem (even within a family), we all have our own individual personalities and it is our personality that makes us unique! Our personality is our soul and it is made up of our mind, will and emotions.

God created Adam and Eve innocent but when they chose to disobey God they died spiritually because they were separated from God (death is separation). *But the LORD God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."*^{Gen.2:16-17} *"You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil." ... The LORD God called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden. I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." "Who told you that you were naked?" the LORD God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?"*^{Gen.3:4-11} All Adam’s children inherited his “dead” spirit (sinful nature) and they in turn passed it on their children for perpetuity. *Sin came into the world through one person, and death came through sin. So death spread to everyone, because everyone sinned.*^{Rom.5:12} This means that **every human being is born spiritually dead and separated from God**. When we were born, we had done nothing wrong and were not able to discern between good and evil—we were innocent—but we all inherited our father’s (Adam) fallen

nature that is spiritually dead and naturally opposed to God. We call this the **Doctrine of Original Sin**: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.*^{Eph.2:1} *I know I've been a sinner ever since I was born. I've been a sinner ever since my mother became pregnant with me.*^{Ps.51:5} *Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.*^{Ecd.7:20} However, God has a remedy for original sin—the **New Birth**: *You must be born again (or born from above).*^{Jn.3:3} At conversion (*the New-Birth*), our old *dead* spirit received from Adam was replaced with a new *living* spirit received from Jesus—and this spirit is imperishable as well as incorruptible: *Adam is an image of the one who would come. There is no comparison between God's gift and Adam's failure. If humanity died as the result of one person's failure, it is certainly true that God's kindness and the gift given through the kindness of one person, Jesus Christ, have been showered on humanity.*^{Rom.5:14-15} *I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.*^{Ez.11:19-20} *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*^{1Pet.1:23}

Christians—people who follow Christ by placing their trust in Him—are no longer separated from God but united with God. *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... [and he has reconciled us] 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} We are no longer dead to God because we have been made alive to God through the Cross of Christ: *You were once dead because of your failures and your uncircumcised corrupt nature. But God made you alive with Christ when he forgave all our failures. He did this by erasing the charges that were brought against us by the written laws God had established. He took the charges away by nailing them to the cross.*^{Col.2:13-14}

Adam was made in God's image: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them,*^{Gen.1:27} And every human being is a descendant of Adam: *From one man he has made every nation of humanity to live all over the earth.*^{Acts.17:26} But all Adam's descendants are naturally biased against making the right choices because of their sinful nature. Our soul (personality) develops by responding to our environment—our mind thinks about our environment; our emotions like or dislike our environment; and our will makes choices about our environment—we react and respond to our environment. This process started within our mother's womb when we responded to her diet, her stress, her peace and even her love. The soul continues to develop after birth which is why we try to protect our children from negative influences, especially danger. As we grow from childhood to adulthood our soul (personality) grows and by training and discipline, we should develop into good citizens—which is why good parenting is so important. Parenting is not just the role of natural parents but it is also the responsibility of the wider community too. When we have a “*baby dedication*” service, we ask the congregation to take some responsibility for the child: *Do you, as members of this church, acknowledge and accept the responsibility, together with the parents, of teaching and training this child, so that, being brought up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, he/she may be led in due time to trust Christ as Saviour, and, confessing him as Lord in baptism, be made a member of his Church? If so, will you signify your acceptance of this responsibility by standing.* But even with good parenting from natural parents and the Church, there is no guarantee people will make the right choices because we are by nature opposed to God! *Those who are under the control of the corrupt nature can't please God. But if God's Spirit lives in you, you are under the control of your spiritual nature, not your corrupt nature.*^{Rom.8:8-9} Obviously, we are not all born with an equal start and some people are born with serious disadvantages such as poverty, abuse, poor expectations, etc. But there comes a point in our life when we are answerable for our own choices—when our soul (our mind, emotions and will) becomes our own responsibility. God has commanded us to choose Him above our own interests and turn to Him: *God commands*

everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.^{Acts.17:30-31} And even after conversion, we still have the ability to make wrong choices (sin), we still live in a sinful environment, and we still have memories of our old way of life. But like Solomon, we can ask God to help us: *Give me a heart that listens so that I can judge your people and tell the difference between good and evil.*^{1Kg.3:9}

The New Birth “package” is more than just a start to our spiritual life with God—it also includes God’s continual presence with us through the indwelling Holy Spirit: *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*^{2Pet.1:3-4} That doesn’t mean that life is easy or that we always make the right choices, but it does mean that we are never left isolated and helpless. And if we do make the wrong choices, there is a way back into fellowship with God: *My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin [make the wrong choices]. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.*^{1Jn.2:1-2}

Faith—the absolute trust in God and His Word—will enable us to consistently make the right choices, and bring us to maturity—it “save our soul”. *Though you have not seen [Jesus Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*^{1Pet.1:8-9} Maturity and making the right choices come from training our minds to honour God and giving Him the respect that He deserves. *We have a lot to explain about this. But since you have become too lazy to pay attention, explaining it to you is hard. By now you should be teachers. Instead, you still need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word. You need milk, not solid food. All those who live on milk lack the experience to talk about what is right. They are still babies. However, solid food is for mature people, whose minds are trained by practice to know the difference between good and evil.*^{Heb.5:11-14} Maturity develops through regularly reading the Scriptures, through meeting together for fellowship as Believers, and through **being** the “Re-built Tent of David” as we continually praise, pray and prophesy. This doesn’t happen from one big epic church service or even from a spectacular divine intervention—we **grow into maturity by faithfully fellowshiping with God through His Word and by faithfully fellowshiping with other Believers** (normally at our regular church services). We learn the Word, not from **one** bible study or from **one** sermon, but from **years** of study and **years** of sermons. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that the Word grows in us, *line after line, a little here, a little there.*^{Is.28:10} We may never receive recognition from people for making the right choices, **but we will receive recognition from God for making the right choices:** *Those who had respect for the LORD talked with one another. They cheered each other up. And the LORD heard them. A list of people and what they did was written on a scroll in front of him. It included the names of those who respected the LORD and honoured him. “They will belong to me,” says the LORD who rules over all. “They will be my special treasure. I will spare them just as a loving father spares his son who serves him. Then once again you will see the difference between godly people and sinful people. And you will see the difference between those who serve me and those who do not.*^{Mal.3:16-18}

The people of Berea were open-minded because they were willing to receive God's message through Paul but also because they carefully examined the Scriptures to see if what he said was true.^{Acts.17:11} Let’s make sure we remain open-minded, as we examine the Scriptures to check that we are on course and then keep on making the right choices. *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark. They will go from one place to another, weary and hungry. And because they are hungry, they will rage and curse their king and their God. They will*

look up to heaven and down at the earth, but wherever they look, there will be trouble and anguish and dark despair. They will be thrown out into the darkness.^{Is.8:20-22} *so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*^{Eph.4:12-13} **That is how we remain open-minded and reach maturity.**

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

Joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. Colossians 1:12

Sunday 7th April 2019 Ps.37:12-24.

Monuments

Throughout time people have set up monuments to help them remember important events. Probably our most famous Monument in England is Nelson's Column. This monument in Trafalgar Square, Westminster, London was built to commemorate Admiral Horatio Nelson, who died at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. The Battle of Trafalgar (21st October 1805) was a naval engagement in the during the Napoleonic Wars (1796–1815). The 27 British ships led by Nelson aboard HMS Victory defeated 33 French and Spanish ships in the Atlantic Ocean off the southwest coast of Spain, just west of Cape Trafalgar—they lost 22 ships and we lost none! Although Nelson died at the Battle of Trafalgar, his victory ensured our naval supremacy for generations to come. Nelson's Column monument, was constructed between 1840 and 1843 and the whole monument is 169 feet 3 inches (51.59 m) tall from the bottom of the pedestal to the top of Nelson's hat. The pedestal is decorated with four bronze relief panels, each 18 feet (5.5 m) square, cast from captured French guns. They depict the Battle of Cape St Vincent, the Battle of the Nile, the Battle of Copenhagen and the death of Nelson at Trafalgar. The four bronze lions on the base, designed by Sir Edwin Landseer, were added in 1867.

Nearer home, we have the Dover Memorial at St Margaret's at Cliffe—a granite memorial obelisk 75 feet (23m) high—built to remember the 2000 men of the Dover Patrol who died during WW1. The Dover Patrol was a discrete unit of the Royal Navy based at Dover and Dunkirk which was set up in 1914 and whose mission was to prevent enemy German shipping—chiefly submarines—from entering the English Channel *en route* to the Atlantic Ocean. Similar Memorials to the Dover Patrol are in France at Cap Blanc Nez, near Calais and in the USA at Fort Hamilton, overlooking New York harbour.

Last month we looked at 3 people who heard God speak to them and then spoke for God—Moses, Samuel and Paul. All 3 of them went on to be greatly used by God because they **listened, responded and obeyed**. This month we are going to look at **3 Monuments that were made to remind people of what God has done for them**.

Monument to God's Word: Moses told the Israelites to make a **Monument to remind them of God's Law**: *When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the LORD your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the LORD your God is giving you... And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.* Dent.27:2-8 The reason God gave His Word (the Scriptures) to us was because God's instructions are to be the basis of everything we do and when they are in writing, we can refer back to something tangible instead of having to rely on our memory. Peter wrote his letter so future generations could be sure of the facts of the Christian faith: *So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.* 2Pet.1:12-15 Peter said that he heard God affirm Jesus when He spoke from heaven saying, *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* 2Pet.1:17 But then Peter explained that Scripture is more reliable than our memory because it is a written record, for all people and for all time: *the word of the prophets [is] 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.1:19-21} **We should always remember that the Word of God is—as it says—God's Word.** God's Word carries God's authority and because it is inspired by God (*God-breathed*) it has a spiritual dimension that affects our whole person. *The teachings of the LORD are perfect. They renew the soul. The testimony of the LORD is dependable. It makes gullible people wise. The instructions of the LORD are correct. They make the heart rejoice. The command of the LORD is radiant. It makes the eyes shine. The fear of the LORD is pure. It endures forever. The decisions of the LORD are true. They are completely fair. They are more desirable than gold, even the finest gold. They are sweeter than honey, even the drippings from a honeycomb. As your servant I am warned by them. There is a great reward in following them.*^{Ps.19:7-11} *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. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*^{Josh.1:8-9}

Monument to God's Way: Joshua told the people to make a **Monument to remind them of God's miraculous intervention:** *Go back to the middle of the Jordan River. Go to where the ark of the LORD your God is. Each one of you must pick up a stone. You must carry it on your shoulder. There will be as many stones as there are tribes in Israel. The stones will serve as a reminder to you. In days to come, your children will ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' Tell them that the LORD cut off the flow of water in the Jordan River. Tell them its water stopped flowing when the ark of the covenant of the LORD went across. The stones will always remind the Israelites of what happened there. So the people of Israel did as Joshua commanded them. They took 12 stones from the middle of the Jordan River. There was one stone for each of the tribes of Israel. It was just as the LORD had told Joshua. The people carried the stones with them to their camp. There they put them down. Joshua piled up the 12 stones that had been in the middle of the river. They had been right where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are still there to this very day.*^{Josh.4:5-9}

God's power and ability is the basis of our faith—if God is not Omnipotent, He can't answer prayer, He can't save us and He can't help us! **We should always remember that God is a Miracle working God:** *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*^{Ps.77:14}

Monument to God's Will: Samuel made a **Monument to remind people that God answers prayer:** *Then Samuel said, "Gather all of the people of Israel together at Mizpah. I will pray to the LORD for you." The Philistine rulers came up to attack them. When the people of Israel heard about it, they were afraid. They said to Samuel, "Don't stop crying out to the LORD our God to help us. Keep praying that he'll save us from the powerful hand of the Philistines." But that day the LORD thundered loudly against the Philistines. He threw them into such a panic that the Israelites were able to chase them away. Then Samuel got a big stone. He set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer. He said, "**The LORD has helped us every step of the way.**"*^{1Sam.7:5-12} **We should always remember that God answers prayer.** However, prayer is not a spiritual shopping list but a spiritual fellowship with God Himself. We were made in God's image and we were made to praise Him. If we don't fellowship with God and don't praise Him, we will always be empty inside and feel frustrated because we are not doing what we were created for. *The people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.*^{Is.43:21} Our priority—and our primary duty—is to worship God: *You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.*^{Matt.22:37}

What Monument have you built to remind you of what God has done for you? Communion is a very practical Memorial, and so is Baptism—but there are other encounters with God to remember, especially encounters with His **Word**, His **Way** and His **Will**. It could be when God first spoke to you at your conversion, or a miraculous intervention to help you through a difficult time, or a direct answer to prayer. It may be a specific verse from the Bible that has sustained you, a verse of a hymn or something that someone said to you that

encouraged you in the Lord (a prophesy). Whatever memorable encounter you have had with God—either from Scripture, miraculous intervention or an answer to prayer—remember it. **Make a monument out of it**—not to worship it but to help you remember who God is and what He has done for you. **Then re-visit the monument—make a memorial out of it—think about it, talk about it, thank God for it and expect God to help you again. This marks the place where the LORD helped us!**^{1Sam.7:12} We are not irrelevant objects on earth: *Because you love me, I will rescue you. I will protect you because you know my name. When you call to me, I will answer you. I will be with you when you are in trouble. I will save you and honour you. I will satisfy you with a long life. I will show you how I will save you.*^{Ps.91:14-16} We are sons seated with Christ in heavenly places. *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.*^{Eph.2:6} We are precious to God and He will protect us: *Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.*^{Ps.17:7}

Sunday 14th April 2019 Ps.37:28-40. Matt.21

Is it time for a “Spring-Clean”!

Jesus was meticulous in the way He lived because He knew why He was here on earth and what He had come to do: *I haven't come from heaven to do what I want to do. I've come to do what the one who sent me wants me to do.*^{Jn.6:38} This was especially true in the way Jesus talked and taught because: *The one who sent me doesn't want me to lose any of those he gave me. He wants me to bring them back to life on the last day. My Father wants all those who see the Son and believe in him to have eternal life. He wants me to bring them back to life on the last day.*^{Jn.6:39-40} So when Jesus said something challenging or did something radical, like clearing the Temple or cursing the fig tree, He was not just “being human” or letting His emotions run away—and He was certainly not losing His temper! Jesus was teaching about God His heavenly Father, about God’s love and about God’s plan of Salvation. Everything Jesus did and said was deliberate and directed by His Father: *Jesus answered, “What I'm about to tell you is true. The Son can do nothing by himself. He can do only what he sees his Father doing. What the Father does, the Son also does. This is because the Father loves the Son. He shows him everything he does. Yes, you will be amazed! The Father will show him even greater things than these.”*^{Jn.5:19-20} *Jesus said, “You will lift up the Son of Man. Then you will know that I am the one I claim to be. You will also know that I do nothing on my own. I speak just what the Father has taught me. The One who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what pleases him.”*^{Jn.8:28-29}

God had caused people to write down many prophecies about the Messiah in the Scriptures and so when Jesus fulfilled those prophecies, it was very clear that He was the Messiah—God’s Son and God’s Deliverer from sin. *This took place to fulfil the prophecy that said, “Tell the people of Jerusalem, ‘Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt.’”*^{Matt.21:4-5} When Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, He came in peace but there is another prophecy (yet to be fulfilled) when Jesus will come on a horse and in judgement: *I saw heaven standing open. There was a white horse, and its rider is named Faithful and True. With integrity he judges and wages war. His eyes are flames of fire. On his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him, but only he knows what it is. He wears clothes dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven, wearing pure, white linen, follow him on white horses. A sharp sword comes out of his mouth to defeat the nations. He will rule them with an iron sceptre and tread the winepress of the fierce anger of God Almighty. On his clothes and his thigh he has a name written: King of kings and Lord of lords.*^{Rev.19:11-16} When Jesus entered Jerusalem in peace, the crowds responded by shouting their praise and declaring “peace in heaven”: *Then the whole crowd of disciples began to praise God for all the miracles they had seen. They shouted joyfully, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.”*^{Lk.19:37-38} But they did not recognise what would bring them peace: *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.19:41-42} They did not understand that peace only comes through personally knowing God and His Son Jesus: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} *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.*^{Eph.2:13-14} *I will listen to what God the LORD says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly.*^{Ps.85:8} But those who received Jesus, became God’s children: *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.1:11-13}

The New Covenant is a covenant of peace and is based on Jesus’ death, not the death of animals: *This cup is the new covenant in my blood. It is poured out for you.*^{Lk.22:20} This New Covenant superseded the Old Covenant and so it made the old obsolete: *By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:13} But actually, the Old Covenant could never remove or forgive sins because it only “atoned” for sins. The rituals of the Old Covenant were introduced to illustrate the sacrificial death of Jesus—which is the only way for us to have peace with God. The English word “atonement” literally means “at one-ment” i.e. *being in harmony with someone* and in the NT means *to be at one with God*. This atonement was made possible by the substitutionary death of Christ on our behalf. *but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation [KJV: received the atonement].*^{Rom.5:11} However, the Hebrew word translated as “atonement” is “*kipur*” and literally means “*to cover*”. So, under the Old Covenant, Israel’s sins were “covered” for another year on the *Day of Atonement* (*Yom Kipur*, which literally means the “*day of covering*”). But under the New Covenant, Jesus **removes** our sins: *Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*^{Jn.1:29} Jesus didn’t cover up our sins when He died on the cross—He **completely released us from our sins!** *The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness [remission or release] of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*^{Lk.24:46-47}

Jesus cleared the Temple twice—once at the beginning of His Ministry and again at the end of His Ministry. The first time was connected with turning the water into wine—this was to illustrate that the ceremonial cleansing by ritualistic washing was being superseded by true spiritual cleansing by the wine of the New Covenant in Jesus blood: *Six stone water jars stood nearby. The Jews used water from that kind of jar for special washings to make themselves pure. Each jar could hold 20 to 30 gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” So they filled them to the top. Then he told them, “Now dip some out. Take it to the person in charge of the dinner.” They did what he said. The person in charge tasted the water that had been turned into wine... “But you have saved the best until now.”*^{Jn.2:6-10}

¹⁰ Our cleanness (righteousness) is a gift from God and received when we place our trust in Jesus: *Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.*^{Jn.8:56} *Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham... So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. All who rely on observing the law are under a curse... Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” ...He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.*^{Gal.3:6-14}

The second time Jesus cleared the Temple, he said that His Father’s House was a House of Prayer: *Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer;’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”*^{Matt.21:12-13} This is a quote from Jeremiah who was condemning the people for not living out the reality of their religion: *Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” ...But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. You continue to steal and commit*

murder. You commit adultery and tell lies. You burn incense to Baal. You worship other gods you have not known anything about before. Then you come and stand in front of me. You keep coming to this house where I have put my Name. You say, 'We are safe.' You think you are safe when you do so many things I hate. My Name is in this house. But you have made it a den for robbers! I have been watching you!" announces the LORD.^{Jer.7:8-11} Even the Old Covenant was a covenant of peace but the leaders regularly rejected God's ways: *And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue,*" says the LORD Almighty. "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. 'For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,'" says the LORD Almighty.^{Mal.2:4-8} And in Jesus' time the ruling party of the Sanhedrim, (including the High Priest) were Sadducees who had no living faith in God: *The high priest and all his companions were Sadducees.*^{Acts.5:17} *The Sadducees say that people will not rise from the dead. They don't believe there are angels or spirits either.*^{Act.23:8} But most of the Pharisees opposed God as much as the Sadducees did! *John saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing. He said to them, "You are like a nest of poisonous snakes! Who warned you to escape the coming of God's anger? Produce fruit that shows you have turned away from your sins. Don't think you can say to yourselves, 'Abraham is our father.' I tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham even from these stones."*^{Matt.3:7-9} Jesus was warning them against what the Pharisees and Sadducees taught^{Matt.16:12} So, when Jesus cursed the fig tree, He was declaring that the Old Covenant (and empty religion) was finished—and cursed. *Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."* And his disciples heard him say it... *When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"*^{Mk.11:13-21} Fig leaves can be taken as representing religion—man's attempt to cover up his guilt before a holy God, as illustrated by Adam and Eve: *Then their eyes were opened, and they both realized that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and made clothes for themselves.*^{Gen.3:7} The New Covenant makes us right with God and is illustrated by God's clothes for Adam and Eve: *The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.*^{Gen.3:21} *For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*^{Is.61:10} *However, you were taught to have a new attitude. You were also taught to become a new person created to be like God, truly righteous and holy.*^{Eph.4:23-24} So when Jesus cleared the Temple of the animals prepared for the Old Covenant sacrifices, He was declaring that the Old Covenant (the Mosaic Law) was about to become obsolete—and they killed Him for it. Stephen and Paul preached the same message and got the same reception: *This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place. He also speaks against the law. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place. He says Jesus will change the practices that Moses handed down to us.*^{Acts.6:13-14} *When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all ardent observers of the law. They have been informed about you—that you teach all the Jews now living among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs."*^{Acts.21:20-21} Let's learn the lesson that Jesus was teaching—we must not resort to religion or rituals for our cleanness (righteousness) but trust God. It is not enough to go to Church and say our prayers—we must become a "House of Prayer" and reject obsolete rituals. Then we can live as New Covenant Believers and true children of God.

Sunday 21st April 2019 Ps.24. Luke 24 Easter Sunday

Christ, the unseen Guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation. *“What are you talking about as you walk along?” “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.*^{Lk.24:17-19}

Although Jesus is absolutely foundational to the Christian faith (and also to any relationship with God), it is His death and resurrection that is probably the most important part of our faith. *Brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the good news I preached to you. You received it and have put your faith in it. Because you believed the good news, you are saved. But you must hold firmly to the message I preached to you. If you don't, you have believed it for nothing. What I received I passed on to you. And it is the most important of all. Here is what it is. Christ died for our sins, just as Scripture said he would. He was buried. He was raised from the dead on the third day, just as Scripture said he would be.*^{1Cor.15:1-4} *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.*^{Rom.10:9} *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8}

When Jesus was born, very few people actually believed that He was the promised Messiah—even though He fulfilled the Messianic prophecies (both direct and indirect). This was because most of the religious leaders were completely disconnected from God and resisted Him at every opportunity. In Jesus’ time, the national government (Sanhedrim) was controlled by the Sadducees under the leadership of the High Priest but they did not even accept there was a spiritual dimension to life. *The high priest and all his companions were Sadducees.*^{Acts.5:17} *The Sadducees say that people will not rise from the dead. They don't believe there are angels or spirits either.*^{Act.23:8} *Jesus was warning them against what the Pharisees and Sadducees taught.*^{Matt.16:12} They so opposed God that they eventually had Jesus crucified out of envy—even though that they knew He was God’s Son, the promised Messiah: *At dawn the elders of the people met together. These included the chief priests and the teachers of the law. Jesus was led to them. “If you are the Christ,” they said, “tell us.” Jesus answered, “If I tell you, you will not believe me” ... They all asked, “Are you the Son of God then?” He replied, “You are right in saying that I am.”*^{Lk.22:66-70} *“Would you like me to release to you this ‘King of the Jews’?” Pilate asked. (For he realized by now that the leading priests had arrested Jesus out of envy.) But at this point the leading priests stirred up the crowd to demand the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus. Pilate asked them, “Then what should I do with this man you call the king of the Jews?” They shouted back, “Crucify him!”*^{Mk.15:9-13} Even the Believers were expecting a political Messiah who would deliver them from Rome’s oppression, rather than a spiritual Messiah who would deliver them from Satan’s oppression, so it was not surprising that the Disciples found it difficult to accept that Jesus would have to die, let alone rise from the dead. *Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead. As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples, then reprimanded Peter. “Get away from me, Satan!” he said. “You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s.”*^{Mk.8:31-33} ^{Lk.22:66-70} And after His resurrection, Jesus’ Disciples still expected a political kingdom: *So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, “Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?”*^{Acts.1:8} But Jesus’ Kingdom was (and still is) a spiritual kingdom—not a political or geographical kingdom. *My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.*^{Jn.18:36} *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} *I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.*^{Matt.26:29} God’s Kingdom is the reign of Christ in our hearts: *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} And Christ’s reign could not fully come until He had received authority from God His Father. *When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honour and gave*

him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.^{Phil.2:7-11}

The OT prophets spoke—either directly and indirectly—about Jesus’ death and resurrection and wrote it down in Scripture. *He was given a grave with those who were evil. But his body was buried in the tomb of a rich man. He was killed even though he hadn't harmed anyone. And he had never lied to anyone. The LORD says, "It was my plan to crush him and cause him to suffer. I made his life a guilt offering to pay for sin. But he will see all of his children after him. In fact, he will continue to live. My plan will be brought about through him. After he suffers, he will see the light that leads to life. And he will be satisfied."*^{Is.53:9-11} *That is why my heart is glad and my soul rejoices. My body rests securely because you do not abandon my soul to the grave or allow your holy one to decay.*^{Ps.16:9-10} *I know that my Redeemer lives. In the end he will stand on the earth. After my skin has been destroyed, in my body I'll still see God. I myself will see him with my own eyes. I'll see him, and he won't be a stranger to me. How my heart longs for that day!*^{Job.19:25-27} *A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*^{Mat.12:39-40} *"Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you." ... "Stay here with the donkey," Abraham told the servants. "The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back."*^{Gen.22:2-5} But because the Bible is a spiritual Book, these prophecies about Jesus were not understood or accepted by people in Jesus’ time—and it is the same today. Until our minds are opened, the Bible remains just like many other books—a book with great stories and great ideals. But when our spiritual eyes are opened, the Bible becomes a Book about God and His plan of Salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection: *He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness 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.24:44-49} In the Bible, at least 3 people were raised from the dead in the OT (1 through Elijah and 2 through Elisha and probably Jonah was too); and in the NT, Jesus raised 3 people, Paul raised 1 person and Peter raised another person but all these were “resuscitated”—their bodies were revived only to die again at a later date. But when Jesus rose from the dead, His body wasn’t revived—it was resurrected as an immortal body. Jesus’ resurrected body had flesh and bones and could be touched, yet He could appear through locked doors and then disappear again; He ate real food and yet did not need to eat; His clothes were real and yet not made of natural material; and He physically ascended to heaven in full view of those watching.

Because Jesus was seen after His resurrection by over 500 people at one time,^{1Cor.15:6} we base our faith in Jesus on verified fact rather than hearsay—and so we can know we are saved from our sins. *We have preached that Christ has been raised from the dead... And if Christ has not been raised, what we preach doesn't mean anything. Your faith doesn't mean anything either. More than that, we would be lying about God. We have given witness that God raised Christ from the dead... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith doesn't mean anything. Your sins have not been forgiven. 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.15:12-20} And Jesus’ resurrection also guarantees our future resurrection: *He is the first of all those who will rise... This is what Scripture says: "The first man, Adam, became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. I'm telling you a mystery. Not all of us will die, but we will all be changed. It will happen in an instant, in a split second at the sound of the last trumpet. Indeed, that trumpet will sound, and then the dead will come back to life. They will be changed so*

that they can live forever. This body that decays must be changed into a body that cannot decay. This mortal body must be changed into a body that will live forever. When this body that decays is changed into a body that cannot decay, and this mortal body is changed into a body that will live forever, then the teaching of Scripture will come true: "Death is turned into victory! Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?"^{1Cor.15:45-55}

After Jesus rose from the dead, He returned to His Father and sent the Holy Spirit to continue His ministry. As Jesus opened the Scriptures to His Disciples, so the Holy Spirit opens the Scriptures for us; as Jesus listened to the Disciples' conversation, so the Holy Spirit listens to our conversation. *What are you talking about as you walk along?* "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.^{Lk.24:17-19} And including God in our conversation is an essential part of Christian fellowship—it also has a feel-good factor! *My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned.*^{Ps.39:3} *Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*^{Lk.24:32} **Yes, Christ is the unseen Guest at every meal and the silent listener to every conversation, so let's welcome Him as our Risen Lord and give Him the reverence that He is due.**

Keep me walking steadfastly towards the country of Everlasting Delights, that Paradise-land which is my true inheritance. Support me by the strength of heaven that I may never turn back or desire false pleasures that will disappear into nothing. As I pursue my heavenly journey by Your grace, let me be known as a person with no aim but that of a burning desire for You, the good of others and their salvation. Amen. *LORD, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be pleasing in your eyes. You are my Rock and my Redeemer.*^{Ps.19:14}

Sunday 28th April 2019 Ps.40:1-9. John 21

Jesus said: Do you truly love me?^{Jn.21:16}

There have been some phenomenal accomplishments throughout history. The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World were incredible achievements: Great Pyramid (the only one that still exists), Colossus of Rhodes, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Lighthouse of Alexandria, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. And there are also some modern great achievements that are probably even greater than those ancient Wonders—achievements such as electricity, radio, television, space travel and the internet. But none of these achievements, regardless of how great and incredible are, can compare with loving God respectfully, personally, purposefully, passionately and powerfully. To love God is the greatest accomplishment that anyone can achieve: *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"* Jesus replied: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*^{Matt.22:36-40} Moses had commanded the people to love God, and to help them remember this instruction he told them to talk about it, write it on their doors and teach it to their children for generations to come: *Israel, listen to me. The LORD is our God. The LORD is the one and only God. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength. The commandments I give you today must be in your hearts. Make sure your children learn them. Talk about them when you are at home. Talk about them when you walk along the road. Speak about them when you go to bed. And speak about them when you get up. Write them down and tie them on your hands as a reminder. Also tie them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses. Also write them on your gates.*^{Deut.6:4-9}

But what does it mean to "love" God? Love can have many meanings, such as: to love your spouse; to love your children; to love your friends; to love your enemies. These "loves" all use different meanings of the word "love". To love your spouse means to cherish, honour, respect and to give yourself unreservedly to your spouse—to seek their very best. To love your children means to provide and care for them, to help them to be the very best they can be, and to be

there when they need you. To love your friends means to support them and befriend them because you enjoy their company. To love your enemies means to forgive them and be kind to them—even though you may not enjoy their company. We can also love our pets; love our home; love our work; love our hobbies; love our food—and these “loves” all use different meanings of the word “love”, as well as having different degrees of emotion and commitment. Even though loving God will involve similar attributes of love as those other loves, to love God surpasses all other loves.

The 2 Bible references mentioned previously state that we should **love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength**. This means that we are to **love God respectfully** (because He is God), **passionately** (from our heart), **personally** (with our soul), **purposefully** (with our mind) and **powerfully** (with our strength)—and of course, love is an emotion and so we will love God joyfully, cheerfully and willingly.

To love God means that we will respect God. Some of the modern Versions of the Bible translate “fear” as “respect”: *Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.*^{Ps.34:9} [*You people of God, have respect for the LORD. Those who respect him have everything they need.*] True love for God does not make us afraid of God. We will love God as “Our Father, who is in heaven” but we will always respect Him as “Almighty God”. The closest example of God’s love for us (and of our love for God) is the relationship of marriage. *Husbands, love your wives. Love them just as 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. In the same way, husbands should love their wives. They should love them as they love their own bodies. Any man who loves his wife loves himself. After all, people have never hated their own bodies. Instead, they feed and care for their bodies. And that is what Christ does for the church. We are parts of his body. As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.*^{Eph.5:25-32} In the Marriage Service, the bride is asked: *will you live together in marriage according to God’s laws? Will you respect him, love him, comfort him, honour and keep him, in sickness and in health and, forsaking all other, keep only unto him as long as you both shall live?* In the Marriage Vows, to love means *to respect, comfort (communicate with, speak kind words), honour and be together (as prescribed by God’s Word)*. So, to “love God” means *to respect God, to communicate with God (through prayer and praise), to honour God and to share your life with Him—as prescribed by God’s Word*. And of course, we will do this joyfully, cheerfully and willingly, as well as respectfully, passionately, personally, purposefully and powerfully.

To love God means that we will love others. Loving God puts us under an obligation to love others. *Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbour, you will fulfil the requirements of God’s law. For the commandments say, “You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet.” These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfils the requirements of God’s law.*^{Rom.13:8-10} To love God is to love God’s family and we will enjoy being with God’s people as they honour Him. *You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ’s faithful servant, and he is helping us on your behalf. He has told us about the love for others that the Holy Spirit has given you.*^{Col.1:7-8} When we love God, we will enjoy seeing others grow in their faith (their trust) and we will do all we can to help them become mature Christians—we will feed and shepherd God’s sheep. *“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.” “Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him. Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.” “Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said. A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Jesus said,*

"Then feed my sheep."^{Jn.21:15-17} This means that we will care for Christian brothers and sisters by feeding and taking care of them. We will feed and care for others practically as we are able, but we will especially feed and care for others spiritually by praying for them and encouraging them to trust God and grow into mature Believers. A mature Christian will trust God in difficult times because they have learnt to trust Him in the good times, but they will also help others to trust God. *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}

To love God means that we will not hate our brother. We love God because He first loved us—and His love drives out any fear. *No fear exists where his love is. Rather, perfect love gets rid of fear, because fear involves punishment. The person who lives in fear doesn't have perfect love. We love because God loved us first.*^{1Jn.4:18-19} God poured His love into our hearts when He made us right with Him: *God has poured his love into our hearts. He did it through the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us. At just the right time Christ died for ungodly people. He died for us when we had no power of our own. It is unusual for anyone to die for a godly person. Maybe someone would be willing to die for a good person. But here is how God has shown his love for us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The blood of Christ has made us right with God.*^{Rom.5:5-9} When we know that God loves us and that God's love is in our hearts, we will reciprocate His love—both to God and to God's creation. *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*^{1Jn.4:20-21} We may not like what people say or do, but we dare not hold any grudges against anyone: *If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.*^{Matt.6:14-15}

To love God means that we will follow Jesus. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me."^{Jn.21:19} Jesus called most of His Disciples with the invitation, "Come follow Me". *One day Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee. There he saw two brothers. They were Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. They were throwing a net into the lake. They were fishermen. "Come. Follow me," Jesus said. "I will make you fishers of people." At once they left their nets and followed him.*^{Matt.4:18-20} However, there is a price to following Jesus—we must deny our self, or own desires and our own wants in preference to Jesus, His desires and wants—but the gain is eternal life: *Then Jesus spoke to his disciples. He said, "If anyone wants to follow me, he must say no to himself. He must pick up his cross and follow me. If he wants to save his life, he will lose it. But if he loses his life for me, he will find it."*^{Matt.16:24-25}

Yes, to love God respectfully, personally, purposefully, passionately and powerfully is the greatest achievement of mankind—but it is also achievable by any of us—regardless of our upbringing or education. All it takes is a pure heart and a new spirit. If you don't love God like that yet, do what David did and ask God to: *Create a pure heart in me. Give me a new spirit that is faithful to you.*^{Ps.51:10}

May

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. *Colossians 1:13-14*

Sunday 5th May 2019 Ps.40:9-17. John 20

You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. *Matt.22:29*

“Ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise” comes from Thomas Gray's poem, *“Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”* (1742). This is often misinterpreted as saying that it is a good thing to be uneducated, but that is not what Gray meant. Instead, he was summarising everything that has gone before in this poem to say that misfortunes will come in their own good time and it would be cruel to inflict them on young people before they are ready to bear them. Whilst this may be true (and especially today when the government is intent on brainwashing young children with *“social relationships”* education), when it comes to spiritual matters, we dare not stay in ignorance because if we get it wrong there are eternal consequences. Paul did not want us to be ignorant about death of a Christian: *Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.* *1Thes.4:13-14* These verses have brought comfort and hope to millions of Christians since he wrote it because we are no longer ignorant. Some people distort Scripture to mean anything but what God intended, and these people are called ignorant. *Paul's letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.* *2Pet.3:16* However, even Believers can act like ignorant people if they are embittered or ignore what God has recorded in Scripture for our benefit. *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* *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant;* *Psa.73:21-22* *I am the most ignorant of men; I do not have a man's understanding. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.* *Prov.30:2-3* But God doesn't want us to be ignorant and He has made a way for us to understand spiritual matters—it is called repentance: *Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.* *Acts.17:29-31*

Five Common Mis-quotes of the Bible.

Adam and Eve ate an apple—they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: *The LORD God gave the man a command. He said, “You can eat the fruit of any tree that is in the garden. But you must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you can be sure that you will die.”* *Gen.2:16-17*

Elijah went up to heaven in a chariot of fire—he went up in a whirlwind: *As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.* *2Kgs.2:11*

The lion will lay down with the lamb—the wolf will lie down with the lamb: *The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.* *Is.11:6;65:25*

Mary travelled to Bethlehem on a donkey and gave birth to Jesus in a stable—there is no mention of a donkey and no mention of a stable: *So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.* *Lk.2:2-7*

Jesus' Last Supper was on a Thursday—there was not enough time between Thursday night and Friday Crucifixion. Passover meal did not end till at least 12.00midnight. The Sanhedrin rules were: *In capital cases the trial must be held during the daytime and the verdict must also be reached during the daytime. In capital cases a verdict of acquittal may be reached on the same day, but a verdict of conviction not until the following day.*

However, none of these **five common misquotes** are doctrinal and they will not affect your relationship with God. But these **five “3:16s” of the Bible** are doctrinal and will affect your relationship with God:

John 3:16: *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. [Genesis 3:15 is also worth remembering—it is called the protoevangelium—the 1st mention of the Gospel: And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.^{Gen.3:15}]*

1John 3:16: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.*

Colossians 3:16: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

2Timothy 3:16: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

Malachi 3:16: *Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honoured his name.*

And these **Five Elements of Reality** are also doctrinal and will affect your relationship with God—they describe *how the world began, how it ends and everything that happens in between*. Like every good story there is the **Beginning** (creation); the **Problem** (the fall); the **Solution** (redemption); and the **Resolution** (the final resurrection).

God: In the beginning God...^{Gen.1:1;Jn.1:1} God is holy, pure and righteous. He created everything and so everything belongs to Him and is His domain—the domain of the King (God's Kingdom).

Man: God created man in His image and with the ability to make moral choices—man used that moral freedom to rebel against his King, his Maker. That resulted in a rift in the kingdom, which made the beneficent King angry because His subjects broke His law, and those subjects came under His judgment for their crimes. So that's the **conflict**.

Jesus: The **solution** is that God acted to become a man Himself in Jesus to rescue man.

Cross: Jesus gave Himself as a payment for the crimes man committed—and He did this by dying on the cross. This is what Theologians call *substitutionary or vicarious atonement*. God paid, in the person of Jesus, to rescue man. And those who respond to the offer of pardon by putting their trust in Jesus the **God-Man**, receive a complete pardon which they didn't deserve—and that's an act of mercy and grace.

Resurrection: However, the story does not end there because there is the **resolution** to the Story, which is **the final Resurrection**. **The good news** about the **final resurrection** is that **everyone lives for ever!** And **the bad news** about the **final resurrection** is that **everyone lives for ever!** Our story of reality does not end with: *“they all lived happily ever after?”* because there is a coming day of judgement where the righteous will rise to eternal life and peace—and the unrighteous will rise to eternal death and punishment. Those who humble themselves, surrender to God and submit to the Righteous King will receive **perfect mercy** because they have accepted God's forgiveness. It will be as God had originally intended for us to live – in perfect harmony, peace and joy, for ever and for ever. But those who those who refuse God's forgiveness and continue in their rebellion will receive **perfect justice** in their punishment for

every sin they have committed against their rightful owner. Now immortal human beings, they will be banished forever to a place of punishment, torment, and interminable isolation from God for their crimes - and the torment is real and terrible. Both conditions—peace or punishment—last for eternity, for ever and for ever. These are the two options that we are faced with in the **final resurrection: perfect mercy or perfect justice** but the choice is made now!

Sunday 12th May 2019 Ps.41. Acts 17

The Reality of Religion—the Fervency and Fantasy of Faith: *I see that in every way you are very religious [take your religion seriously].*^{Acts 17:22}

Religion is the worship of someone or something as a deity—and the object of worship can be God or an object (such as a statue or painting) or even something in a person's imagination. Religion has dominated every culture since the beginning of time—which is not surprising since God made man in His own image—but, any-one or any-thing that is venerated other than the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), is a false “god”, a pretence, and a lie. *We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone knows that. Some people still think that statues of gods are real gods.*^{1Cor.8:4-7} The Bible also says that: *Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.*^{Jon.2:8}

People naturally want to worship something but **natural religion** worships a “god” of people's own making—and even though they may take their religion seriously, they are seriously mistaken: *I see that you take your religion seriously... Now I am going to tell you about this ‘unknown god’ that you worship. He is the God who made the world. He also made everything in it. He is the Lord of heaven and earth.*^{Acts 17:22-24} In his poem “Natural Religion”^{see below} Kipling shows the stupidity of a “natural religion” that blames “god” for man's self-made problems! But although true faith in Jesus is a religion but it is also much, much more than a religion—it is a credible and confirmed relationship with Jesus Christ. Unlike Jones from Dad's Army who was always getting accused of “getting into the realm of fantasy”, Believers in Jesus Christ have a world view that is credible and conforms to facts not fantasy. True faith in Jesus Christ confirms that He is God's Son and confidently trusts Him as Saviour. True faith in Jesus Christ acknowledges that He died and rose from the dead. This faith in Jesus Christ was verified by many first-hand witnesses and has since been confirmed by millions of people who have personally experienced the reality of Jesus and the new life He has given them.

However, over the 2000 years the Church's existence, the religion of true faith became more and more regulated and ritualised so that the organised worship of the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), is often the exact opposite of what Jesus taught. And so for many of us, religion has become a dirty word because it epitomises the useless rituals that kill any real relationship with God. *Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts [from useless rituals] that lead to death and of faith in God.*^{Heb.6:1} Jesus taught: *Do not call anyone on earth ‘father.’ You have one Father, and he is in heaven. You shouldn't be called ‘teacher.’ You have one Teacher, and he is the Christ.*^{Matt.23:9-10}—and yet some religious people insist on calling their ministers “Father” (or “Pastor”!). Paul said that some will forbid marriage and certain foods (meat!!) in the name of religion—and that this teaching was demonic! *The Spirit says clearly that in later times some believers will desert the Christian faith. They will follow spirits that deceive, and they will believe the teachings of demons. These people will speak lies disguised as truth. Their consciences have been scarred as if branded by a red-hot iron. They will try to stop*

others from getting married and from eating certain foods. God created food to be received with prayers of thanks by those who believe and know the truth. Everything God created is good. Nothing should be rejected if it is received with prayers of thanks. The word of God and prayer set it apart as holy.^{1Tim.4:1-5} Some Churches even conduct inter-faith Services—and God has strong words about this: *I will punish those who dress up like foreign priests and priestesses, who introduce pagan prayers and practices; and I'll punish all who import pagan superstitions that turn holy places into hellholes.*^{Zeph.1:8-9}

Karl Marx wrote: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." (An opiate is something that dulls, blinds, desensitizes, but gives a sense of well-being.) And religion without God's revelation really is an opiate, a superstition and a fantasy—because religion (faith in anything other than Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Saviour) can never get you right with God. Actually, it would be easier to pull yourself up by your own shoelaces than to get right with God by yourself. Adam tried to make himself right before God by making clothes of fig leaves—but it didn't work. Adam still **felt** guilty because he **was** guilty, so God gave him clothes made from animals. (These clothes represent our righteousness that God gives us and is a direct result from Jesus' death as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*^{Jn.1:29}) Faith is trusting God to make us right with Him even though we can never be good enough by ourselves. *The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd. By faith, we see the world called into existence by God's word, what we see created by what we don't see. 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.11:1-4} Everyone who attempts to cover themselves in front of God by their religion is living in the realm of fantasy, not faith—like Adam, their fig leaves of religion will never cover their spiritual nakedness and will leave them feeling guilty (if their consciences are not seared) because they are still guilty! And those who rely on the rituals of religion soon become superstitious because their focus is on the method instead of the Master: *Earlier, before you knew God personally, you were enslaved to so-called gods that had nothing of the divine about them. But now that you know the real God—or rather since God knows you—how can you possibly subject yourselves again to those paper tigers? For that is exactly what you do when you are intimidated into scrupulously observing all the traditions, taboos, and superstitions associated with special days and seasons and years. I am afraid that all my hard work among you was for nothing.*^{Gal.4:8-11}

But faith without action is dead: *It is the same with faith. If it doesn't cause us to do something, it's dead... Our father Abraham offered his son Isaac on the altar. Wasn't he considered to be right with God because of what he did? So you see that what he believed and what he did were working together. What he did made his faith complete. That is what Scripture means where it says, "Abraham believed God. God accepted Abraham because he believed. So his faith made him right with God."*^{Jas.2:14-23} And so real religion (true faith with action) is good and godly as well as being pious and practical: *If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*^{Jas.1:26-27} *But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.*^{1Tim.5:4} But sometimes fervency can disguise the distinction between faith and fantasy. Paul was extremely fervent in his religion and believed that he was actually serving God by killing the very people who knew God personally and loved God—but in reality, Paul was persecuting Jesus! "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.^{Acts.9:4-5} *I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to*

their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.^{Acts.22:3-4} And no matter how fervent we are in our religion, if we are not doing what God requires, we are wasting our time—or even worse, we are busy killing ourselves (doing things that will produce death instead of life). *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts [from useless rituals] that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!*^{Heb.9:14} Fervency is not the same as faith and if we don't **do** what God requires, we end up **trying** to make ourselves righteous rather than **submitting** to God's righteousness. *Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*^{Rom.10:1-3} God deserves the very best—including the best of our passion—and so fervour is a great quality: *In addition, we are sending with them our brother [Titus] who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you.*^{2Cor.8:22} But fervour is only good if the purpose is good and godly: *Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you [from us], so that you may be zealous for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you.*^{Gal.4:17-18} So let's *take our religion seriously*^{Acts 17:22} and maintain our fervency but ensure that our faith is based on fact so we don't get into the realm of fantasy. *God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.*^{Acts.17:30-31}

Natural Theology

Primitive

I ate my fill of a whale that died And stranded after a month at sea—
 There is a pain in my inside. Why have the gods afflicted me?
 Ow! I am purged till I am a wraith! Wow! I am sick till I cannot see!
 What is the sense of Religion and Faith: Look how the gods have afflicted me!
We had a kettle: we let it leak: Our not repairing it made it worse.
We haven't had any tea for a week—The bottom is out of the Universe!

Pagan

How can the skin of rat or mouse hold Anything more than a harmless flea?
 The burning plague has taken my household. Why have my gods afflicted me?
 All my kith and kin are deceased, Though they were as good as good could be,
 I will out and batter the family priest, Because my gods have afflicted me!

Medieval

My privy and well drain into each other After the custom of Christendie—
 Fevers and fluxes are wasting my mother. Why has the Lord afflicted me?
 The Saints are helpless for all I offer—So are the clergy I used to fee.
 Henceforward I keep my cash in my coffer, Because the Lord has afflicted me.

Material

I run eight hundred hens to the acre They die by dozens mysteriously—
 I am more than doubtful concerning my Maker, Why has the Lord afflicted me?
 What a return for all my endeavour—Not to mention the L.S.D!
 I am an atheist now and for ever, Because this God has afflicted me!

Progressive

Money spent on an Army or Fleet Is homicidal lunacy—
My son has been killed in the Mons retreat, Why is the Lord afflicting me?
Why are murder, pillage and arson And rape allowed by the Deity?
I will write to the Times, deriding our Parson Because my god has afflicted me.

Conclusion

This was none of the good Lord's pleasure, For the spirit He breathed in Man is free;
But what comes after is measure for measure, And not a God that afflicteth thee.
As was the sowing so the reaping Is now and evermore shall be.
Thou art delivered to thine own keeping. Only thyself hath afflicted thee!

Rudyard Kipling

N.B.

wraith = ghost, spirit.

privy and well drain into each other = latrine or toilet contaminates the water supply.

Christendie = a poetic version of 'Christendom'.

L.S.D. = Pounds, Shillings and Pence (the old currency of the UK).

Sunday 19th May 2019 Ps.42. Acts 18

He taught them God's Word. Acts 18:11

There has never been so much information available to so many people as there is today and we hear so many “experts” talking with “authority” about everything—but most are contradicted by the next “expert” who comes along! Knowledge is **information** that we **know** and with information instantly available from our smart-phones, tablets and computers, we don't need to actually **learn** much at all nowadays—we can just look up what we need when we need it! But as Einstein said: *Once you stop learning, you start dying* and this is especially true of spiritual matters.

William Tyndale once said that if God spared his life, he would cause the boy that drives the plough in England to know more of the Scriptures than the pope himself! Tyndale was so committed to helping people learn about God from the Scriptures that he risked his life to translate the Bible into English and paid the ultimate price. In 1531 Henry VIII decreed that *the translation of the Scripture corrupted by William Tyndale should be utterly expelled, rejected, and put away out of the hands of the people*. Tyndale was tried on a charge of heresy and condemned to the stake. He was strangled, but regained consciousness, and finally was burned alive on 6 October 1536. Tyndale's final words, “*spoken at the stake with a fervent zeal and a loud voice*” were: “*Lord, open the King of England's eyes.*” Within 4 years, Henry VIII had ordered a vernacular Bible in every Parish Church in the land!

Today we have so many translations of the Bible available to us and also in so many different formats, such as print, audio, video, electronic, etc. and yet many Christians are still Biblically illiterate. Some are able to quote a few verses or recall a few Bible stories but few are able to “*rightly divide the Word of God*” i.e. discern between the prose, prophecies, praises and promises of God's Word, between the Old Covenant and New Covenant; between what is past, present or future. Although we don't need to be theologians we do need to understand what God has given to read in the Scriptures. *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*^{2Tim.2:15} With a basic understanding of the Bible we can understand what it means to be right before God and what God want for us today. We can also understand the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant—how people

related to God before Jesus was born and how they relate to Him now. The Cross is the great divide between the righteous and unrighteous and between the O/C and the N/C. The O/C was based on a future fulfilment of the Christ who had yet to come, whereas the N/C is based on the finished work of the Christ who has already come and was born in Bethlehem. The O/C was based on a physical place (the Tabernacle and then the Temple in Jerusalem), whereas the N/C is based on a spiritual place (God's residence in heaven where Christ resides and also God's residence in hearts where Christ resides). The O/C was conducted with elaborate ceremonies by a priest, whereas the N/C has no formal ceremonies because Jesus completed His work on the Cross. The O/C was based on the repeated animal sacrifices that never actually forgave sin or cleared the people's conscience whereas the N/C is based on the single sacrifice of Jesus which removes sin and clears the conscience. Although the O/C required faith in God, it was only temporary until the N/C was introduced. *When God speaks of a "new" covenant, it means he has made the first one obsolete.*^{Heb.8:13} *For that old system deals only with food and drink and various cleansing ceremonies—physical regulations that were in effect only until a better system could be established. So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.*^{Heb.9:10-12}

God's Christ **has already** come to earth in the form of Jesus, God's Son and our Saviour;^{Jn.6:51} He **has already** defeated the devil at Calvary;^{Col.2:15} He **is already** Lord (reigning) now;^{Rom.10:9} He **has already** established His (spiritual) Kingdom;^{Mk.9:1} He **has already** blessed us with every spiritual blessing;^{Eph.1:3} He **has already** given us everything we need for life and godliness.^{2Pet.1:3} If we don't understand these basic truths, we will have a distorted view of Scripture and end up confused, frustrated or even worse, because we will be trying to get God to do what He has already done. Jesus' teaching at the beginning of His ministry was so simple and yet most people are not yet living it: *Don't ever worry and say, 'What are we going to eat?' or 'What are we going to drink?' or 'What are we going to wear?' Everyone is concerned about these things, and your heavenly Father certainly knows you need all of them. But first, be concerned about his kingdom and what has his approval. Then all these things will be provided for you. So don't ever worry about tomorrow. After all, tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*^{Matt.6:31-34} When Jesus came, He established the Kingdom of heaven here on earth BUT His Kingdom is a **spiritual** Kingdom and His rule is in people's **hearts**. Jesus said, *"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."*^{Jn.18:36} *People can't observe the coming of the kingdom of God. They can't say, 'Here it is!' or 'There it is!' You see, the kingdom of God is within you.*^{Lk.17:20-21} The Bible contains everything we need to know about Jesus and God's Kingdom—how to enter it and how to live in it. *Don't ever think that I came to set aside Moses' Teachings or the Prophets. I didn't come to set them aside but to make them come true.*^{Matt.5:17} *Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures. He began with Moses and all the Prophets.*^{Lk.24:27} *From morning till evening he [Paul] explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.*^{Acts.28:23} *You have known the Holy Scriptures ever since you were a little child. They are able to teach you how to be saved by believing in Christ Jesus. 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.3:15-17} Although the Bible contains passages that are hard, it is the ignorant people who distort them. *Some things in [Paul's] 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.3:16} And because we Believers have the Holy Spirit, **we are able to understand** what God had given us: *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... But we have the mind of Christ.^{1Cor.2:12-16}

God's primary concern is for our spiritual health—that we stay in fellowship with Him. Because we are re-born of an incorruptible seed, we can have good spiritual health: *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*^{1Pet.1:23} But in order to stay spiritually healthy, we need to eat spiritual food (the Word of God^{Matt.4:4}), take spiritual exercises (pray^{Jude20}) and take spiritual rest (faith or trust). However, God is also concerned about our mental (soul) health—He wants our soul to prosper: *Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*^{3Jn.1:2-4} If we do feel depressed or low, praising God will lift us up: *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.*^{Ps.42:5} *To provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.*^{Is.61:3} What we think, say and do will affect our physical health and God has made provision for that too: *My child, pay attention to what I say. Listen carefully to my words. Don't lose sight of them. Let them penetrate deep into your heart, for they bring life to those who find them, and healing to their whole body. Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life. Avoid all perverse talk; stay away from corrupt speech. Look straight ahead, and fix your eyes on what lies before you.*^{Pron.4:20-25} *[Jesus] drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."*^{Matt.8:16-17}

Let's never stop learning, so that instead of stagnating (or worse, start dying) we live contented, fulfilled and blessed lives. As we learn about God and His kingdom, and then apply that information, we will change the knowledge into wisdom—which is epitomised in Jesus. *Because of what God has done, you belong to Christ Jesus. He has become God's wisdom for us. He makes us right with God. He makes us holy and sets us free.*^{1Cor.1:30} *My father taught me. He said, "Hold on to my words with all your heart. Keep my commands. Then you will live. Get wisdom. Get understanding. Don't forget my words. Don't turn away from them. Stay close to wisdom, and she will keep you safe. Love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is best. So get wisdom. No matter what it costs, get understanding. Value wisdom, and she will lift you up. Hold her close, and she will honour you. She will set a beautiful crown on your head. She will give you a glorious crown."*^{Pron.4:4-9}

Sunday 19th May 2019 Ps.42. Acts 18

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William Tyndale once said that if God spared his life, he would cause the boy that drives the plough in England to know more of the Scriptures than the pope himself! Tyndale was so committed to helping people learn about God from the Scriptures that he risked his life to

translate the Bible into English and paid the ultimate price. In 1531 Henry VIII decreed that *the translation of the Scripture corrupted by William Tyndale should be utterly expelled, rejected, and put away out of the hands of the people*. Tyndale was tried on a charge of heresy and condemned to the stake. On 6 October 1536, he was strangled to death, but regained consciousness and so was burned alive. Tyndale's final words—spoken with a fervent zeal and a loud voice—were: “*Lord, open the King of England's eyes.*” Within 4 years, God had answered his prayer—Henry VIII had ordered a vernacular Bible in every Parish Church in the land

Today we have so many translations of the Bible available to us and also in so many different formats, such as print, audio, video, electronic, etc. and yet many Christians are still Biblically illiterate. Some are able to quote a few verses or recall a few Bible stories but few are able to “*rightly divide the Word of God*” *i.e.* discern between the prose, prophecies, praises and promises of God's Word, between the Old Covenant and New Covenant; between what is past, present or future. Although we don't need to be theologians, we do need to understand what God has given to read in the Scriptures. *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*^{2Tim.2:15} With a basic understanding of the Bible we can understand what it means to be right before God and what God want for us today. We can also understand the difference between the Old Covenant (O/C) and the New Covenant (N/C)—how people related to God before Jesus was born and how they relate to Him now. The Cross is the great divide between the righteous and unrighteous and between the O/C and the N/C. The O/C was based on a future fulfilment of the Christ who had yet to come, whereas the N/C is based on the finished work of the Christ who has already come and was born in Bethlehem. The O/C was based on a physical place (the Tabernacle and then the Temple in Jerusalem), whereas the N/C is based on a spiritual place—God's residence (in heaven where Christ resides and also in human hearts where Christ resides). The O/C was conducted with elaborate ceremonies by a priest, whereas the N/C has no formal ceremonies because Jesus completed His work on the Cross. The O/C was based on the repeated animal sacrifices that never actually forgave sin or cleared the people's conscience whereas the N/C is based on the single sacrifice of Jesus which removes sin and clears the conscience. Although the O/C required faith in God, it was only temporary until the N/C was introduced. *When God speaks of a "new" covenant, it means he has made the first one obsolete.*^{Heb.8:13} *For that old system deals only with food and drink and various cleansing ceremonies—physical regulations that were in effect only until a better system could be established. So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.*^{Heb.9:10-12}

God's Christ **has already** come to earth in the form of Jesus, God's Son and our Saviour;^{Jn.6:51} He **has already** defeated the devil at Calvary;^{Col.2:15} He **is already** Lord (reigning) now;^{Rom.10:9} He **has already** established His (spiritual) Kingdom;^{Mk.9:1} He **has already** blessed us with every spiritual blessing;^{Eph.1:3} He **has already** given us everything we need for life and godliness.^{2Pet.1:3} If we don't understand these basic truths, we will have a distorted view of Scripture and end up confused, frustrated—or even worse, deceived and in error—because we will be trying to get God to do what He has already done. Jesus' teaching was so simple and yet most people are not yet living it: *Don't ever worry and say, 'What are we going to eat?' or 'What are we going to drink?' or 'What are we going to wear?' Everyone is concerned about these things, and your heavenly Father certainly knows you need all of them. But first, be concerned about his kingdom and what has his approval. Then all these things will be provided for you. So don't ever worry about tomorrow. After all, tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*^{Matt.6:31-34} When Jesus came, He established the Kingdom of heaven here on earth BUT His Kingdom is a **spiritual** Kingdom and His rule is in people's **hearts**.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."^{Jn.18:36} People can't observe the coming of the kingdom of God. They can't say, "Here it is!" or "There it is!" You see, the kingdom of God is within you.^{Lk.17:20-21} The Bible contains everything we need to know about Jesus and God's Kingdom—how to enter it and how to live in it. Don't ever think that I came to set aside Moses' Teachings or the Prophets. I didn't come to set them aside but to make them come true.^{Matt.5:17} Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures. He began with Moses and all the Prophets.^{Lk.24:27} From morning till evening he [Paul] explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.^{Acts.28:23} You have known the Holy Scriptures ever since you were a little child. They are able to teach you how to be saved by believing in Christ Jesus. 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.3:15-17} Although the Bible contains passages that are hard, it is the ignorant people who distort them. Some things in [Paul's] 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.3:16} But because we are Believers, we have the Holy Spirit and **we are able to understand** what God had given us: 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... But we have the mind of Christ.^{1Cor.2:12-16}

God's primary concern is for our spiritual health—that we stay in fellowship with Him. Because we are re-born of an incorruptible spiritual seed, we can have good spiritual health: For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.^{1Pet.1:23} But in order to stay spiritually healthy, we need to eat spiritual food (the Word of God^{Matt.4:4}), take spiritual exercises (pray^{Jude20}) and take spiritual rest (faith or trust). However, God is also concerned about our mental (soul) health—He wants our soul to prosper: Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.^{3Jn.1:2-4} If we do feel depressed or low, praising God will lift us up: 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.^{Psa.42:5} To provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.^{Is.61:3} And God is also concerned about our physical health as well.

[Jesus] drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."^{Matt.8:16-17} Our physical health is affected by what we think, say and do—so we should take God's instruction seriously and put them into practice: My child, pay attention to what I say. Listen carefully to my words. Don't lose sight of them. Let them penetrate deep into your heart, for they bring life to those who find them, and healing to their whole body. Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life. Avoid all perverse talk; stay away from corrupt speech. Look straight ahead, and fix your eyes on what lies before you.^{Prom.4:20-25}

Let's never stop learning, so that instead of stagnating (or worse, start dying) we live contented, fulfilled and blessed lives. As we learn about God and His kingdom—and then apply that information—we will change the knowledge into wisdom. **And wisdom is epitomised in Jesus.** Because of what God has done, you belong to Christ Jesus. He has become God's wisdom for us. He makes us right with God. He makes us holy and sets us free.^{1Cor.1:30} My father taught me. He said, "Hold on

to my words with all your heart. Keep my commands. Then you will live. Get wisdom. Get understanding. Don't forget my words. Don't turn away from them. Stay close to wisdom, and she will keep you safe. Love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is best. So get wisdom. No matter what it costs, get understanding. Value wisdom, and she will lift you up. Hold her close, and she will honour you. She will set a beautiful crown on your head. She will give you a glorious crown. ¹Prov.4:4-9

Sunday 26th May 2019. Ps.42:5-11. Acts 19

Paul spoke boldly, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. ^{Acts 19:8}

Last week we saw that Paul **taught the Word of God**. He spent nearly 2 years at Corinth preaching and teaching the Word of God in what was one of the most depraved cities of the Roman Empire. Corinth was renowned for its immorality and the temple of Aphrodite boasted of over 1,000 prostitutes—which obviously influenced the culture of the area! But notwithstanding the immorality of Corinth, when the Gospel was proclaimed, people were converted, and a Church was established—and it was during his time in Corinth that Paul wrote to the Churches in Galatia and Thessalonica.

When Paul returned to his home church in Antioch, he went via Ephesus where he left Priscilla and Aquilla who met an enthusiastic young preacher named Apollos. Apollos was a great evangelical but not yet a Pentecostal—he knew how to arrive heaven when he died but didn't know how to experience heaven before he died; he knew about the forgiveness of sins but not yet about the fellowship of Spirit—so Priscilla and Aquilla explained to him about the baptism of the Holy Spirit! *Apollos was an eloquent speaker and knew how to use the Scriptures in a powerful way. He had been instructed in the Lord's way and spoke enthusiastically. He accurately taught about Jesus but knew only about John's baptism.* ^{Acts.18:24-25} When Apollos left Ephesus and crossed over the Aegean Sea to Corinth the Believers in Ephesus had only heard Apollos' earlier preaching, so when Paul returned to Ephesus, he asked: *"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They answered him, "No, we've never even heard of the Holy Spirit." Paul asked them, "What kind of baptism did you have?" They answered, "John's baptism." Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. John told people to believe in Jesus, who was coming later." After they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came to them, and they began to talk in other languages and to speak what God had revealed.* ^{Acts.19:2-6}

Paul then spent 2 years at Ephesus, establishing the Church and **speaking boldly, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God**. *Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.* ^{Acts.19:8-10} And it was from Ephesus that Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth to advise on their difficulties (which had developed into disputes) and to bring some order to this new Church. In this letter, Paul mentions the Kingdom of God in 4 different passages.

To live in God's Kingdom is to live an empowered life: *The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk. It is a matter of power.* ¹Cor.4:20 Talk is easy and cheap and if our faith is to be credible, our theology must be more than theory—it must be backed up by reality. When we say that Jesus is our Saviour, we should know that our sins really are forgiven—and be living with the assurance that we really do have peace with God. *But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.* ¹Jn.1:9 When we pray to God, we should know that God hears our prayers—and then pray with assurance and confidence. This does not mean that God does everything we tell Him to do because prayer is NOT giving God instructions. No! Prayer is reporting for duty. Prayer is fellowshiping with God as our heavenly and committing our self and loved ones to His care. Prayer builds us up in our faith ^{Jd.1:20} and enables

us to trust God better so that we don't doubt His love or become anxious. *Worry is a vote of no confidence in God.* When we became a Christian, God not only changed us but He made His home with us. Christ is not just with us, but He is actually **within** us^{Col.1:27} in the Person of the Holy Spirit. *And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.*^{Rom.8:10-11} Because God gives the Holy Spirit without limit,^{Jn.3:34} we will not become spiritually empty. Jesus told them, *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never become hungry, and whoever believes in me will never become thirsty."*^{Jn.6:35} We don't need **more of God coming in to us**—but we do need **more of God coming out of us!**

If you are born again, you are a son of God. And for you to tear yourself out of your sonship, your relationship and the righteousness of God and put yourself over in the reality of death and tell God you are dirty, unclean, that His blood has not cleansed you, and His life has not been delivered to you—it is a monstrous thing. It is alright to sing that as an unregenerate, but it is not the experience of the sons and daughters of God.^{J.G.Lake}

To live in God's Kingdom is to live an ennobled life: *Don't you know that evil people will not receive God's kingdom? Don't be fooled. Those who commit sexual sins will not receive the kingdom. Neither will those who worship statues of gods or commit adultery. Neither will men who are prostitutes or who commit homosexual acts. Neither will thieves or those who always want more and more. Neither will those who are often drunk or tell lies or cheat. People who live like that will not receive God's kingdom. Some of you used to do those things. But your sins were washed away. You were made holy. You were made right with God. All of that was done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*^{1Cor.6:9-11} God has set a high standard for His subjects because we are not only citizens of heaven but also His family, we have an obligation to maintain those standards. If we really understand what God has done for us, we will want to live holy, pure, clean and respectable lives that honour Him. Our past has been erased and removed—it's gone!^{2Cor.5:17} Living off dirt is the devil's domain: *You will crawl on the ground. You will eat dust all of the days of your life.*^{Gen.4:14} We are better than that and instead of living in the gutter, we should be enjoying heaven now: *God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.*^{Eph.2:6}

There should be a development of God and His nature in you, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. This process of re-making and re-moulding should change your nature and life and dissolve difficulties out of your soul.^{J.G.Lake}

To live in God's Kingdom is to live a submitted life: *Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*^{1Cor.15:24-25} This world will continue in its opposition to God until Jesus has destroyed all opposition—and so it behoves us to live our lives in submission to Him. When we yield to Jesus and His authority, we gain His approval and enjoy the blessings of God's Kingdom. Because Jesus has already done everything He can to do for us, now all we need to do is yield to Him and say: *"Yes Lord"*. This means that grumbling and complaining should be eradicated from our vocabulary. *And don't grumble as some of them did, and then were destroyed by the angel of death. These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age. If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*^{1Cor.10:10-13}

It is a sad thing when you hear Christians with a groan. The secret of Christianity is the secret of Christ possessing the heart of a person, a person being yielded to Him so that His victory, His consciousness and His power possesses your spirit and mind.^{J.G.Lake}

To live in God's Kingdom is to live a spiritual life: *I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*^{1Cor.15:50} Although it is our spirit that inherits God's Kingdom, we still have a mind or personality (soul) and a body. Until our spiritual life dominates our soul life, we are not spiritual (no matter how religious we may seem) and we remain undeveloped in our faith and immature. If our spirit does not dominate our personality and mind (soul) we will live oppressed and frustrated lives, but if focus on God's goodness and love it is easy to make our soul (our mind and personality) praise God (say good things about Him). *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}

It is not the words you say that is going to bless them. They need something greater—they need the thing in your soul. When they receive it, then their soul will open and there will be a divine response. Give it to them—it is the love of God.^{J.G.Lake}

As subjects of Jesus the King of kings, let's live by the values of His Kingdom and live **empowered lives, ennobled lives, submitted lives and spiritual lives.** *God's kingdom 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}

June

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

Sunday 2nd June 2019 Ps.43.

You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. ^{Matt.22:29}

Last month we looked at 5 common mis-quotes from the Bible—and because none of these were doctrinal, they won't really affect our relationship with God. And we also looked at 5 “chapter 3 verse 16”s in the Bible, followed by 5 *elements of reality*—these are doctrinal and if we remain ignorant of them, they **will** affect our relationship with God. We saw that the cliché “Ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise” is not true when it comes to spiritual matters because our eternal destination is at stake. God doesn't want us to be ignorant of reality and so He has given us the Scriptures to read for ourselves—now it is up to us to know about the facts of life as God has defined them. Jesus told people that they were in error because they *do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.* ^{Matt.22:29} If we are to live in the benefits and blessings of God's Kingdom, we must know **both** the **Scriptures** **and** the **power of God**—and so this month we are going to look at the basic essentials of the **Power of God**.

The **Power of God** and the **Kingdom of God** are intrinsically connected: *I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.* ^{Mk.9:} *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.* ^{1Cor.4:20} The OT Prophets anticipated the **Kingdom of God** but realised that it was still future because the Messiah had not yet come: *The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them... But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.* ^{Matt.13:11-17} *Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.* ^{Jn.12:41} *Your father Abraham was filled with joy at the thought of seeing my day. He saw it and was glad.* ^{Jn.8:56} *You are receiving the salvation of your souls. It is the result of your faith. The prophets searched very hard and with great care to find out about that salvation. They spoke about the grace that was going to come to you. They wanted to find out when that salvation would come. The Spirit of Christ in them was telling them about the sufferings of Christ that were going to come. He was also telling them about the glory that would follow. It was made known to the prophets that they were not serving themselves. Instead, they were serving you when they spoke about the things that you have now heard. Those who have preached the good news to you have told you those things. They have done it with the help of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.* ^{1Pet.1:9-12}

But Jesus said that the **Kingdom of God** was now here: *Once the Pharisees asked Jesus when God's kingdom would come. He replied, “The coming of God's kingdom is not something you can see just by watching for it carefully. People will not say, ‘Here it is.’ Or, ‘There it is.’ God's kingdom is among you.* ^{Lk.17:20-21}

However, the entrance to the **Kingdom of God** (the **King's domain**) is the **Gospel** which can save us from our sin, set us right with God and enable us to live for God: *God's kingdom 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} And so it is the **Gospel** that is the **Power of God**: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”* ^{Rom.1:16-17} The message of the **Gospel** is the **Cross of Christ** which saves us from the wrath of God that is coming on all who reject Him. *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.* ^{Lk.3:7-8}

Without the **Cross of Christ** there can be no remission of sins and no redemption of souls. (By the *Cross of Christ* we mean the facts about Jesus Christ God's Son dying in our place and taking the punishment for our sin.) When we take our place at the **Cross of Christ** in repentance and in humility ask Jesus to forgive us, He really does forgive us! But although we are made

spiritually clean at conversion, we still have to keep focused on Jesus and His Kingdom or we will slide back into the old lifestyle that we have been redeemed from. *Since you were brought back to life with Christ, focus on the things that are above—where Christ holds the highest position. Keep your mind on things above, not on worldly things. You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Christ is your life. When he appears, then you, too, will appear with him in glory. Therefore, put to death whatever is worldly in you: your sexual sin, perversion, passion, lust, and greed (which is the same thing as worshiping wealth). It is because of these sins that God's anger comes on those who refuse to obey him. You used to live that kind of sinful life. Also get rid of your anger, hot tempers, hatred, cursing, obscene language, and all similar sins. Don't lie to each other. You've gotten rid of the person you used to be and the life you used to live, and you've become a new person. This new person is continually renewed in knowledge to be like its Creator.*^{Col.3:1-10} Our new way of life has a different logic from the world's logic—and people (especially religious people) find both the cross of Christ and our Christian values, offensive and foolish. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... The world with its wisdom was unable to recognize God in terms of his own wisdom. So God decided to use the nonsense of the Good News we speak to save those who believe. Jews ask for miraculous signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but our message is that Christ was crucified. This offends Jewish people and makes no sense to people who are not Jewish. But to those Jews and Greeks who are called, he is Christ, God's power and God's wisdom. God's nonsense is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*^{1Cor.1:18-25} However, God is always right—and His ways are always right!

The purpose of the Jewish religious Feasts was to illustrate the Gospel—God's plan of salvation! The very first Passover was held in Egypt and the Israelites had to kill a lamb, paint its blood on the door posts of their house and then go inside and eat the lamb. When God's judgement came on the Egyptians the Angel of death “passed over” all those “under the blood”. The was the start of their emancipation and the next day they left Egypt as free people. This illustrated God's plan to emancipate mankind from their slavery to sin when another Lamb would be killed at the Passover Feast—Jesus the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*^{Jn.1:29} Fifty days after Passover was the Feast of Pentecost when God wrote the Law on tablets of stone and gave them to Moses. This was an illustration of the coming Holy Spirit who would write God's laws on people's hearts instead of tablets of stone. The Law was a schoolmaster to lead people to Christ. *Wherefore the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be made righteous by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.*^{Gal.3:24-25} But the Law's ministry has now been superseded by the Holy Spirit's ministry—and He now leads us to Christ: *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.*^{Jn.16:13-15} When the Law was given, 3000 people died because they had rebelled against God—but when the Holy Spirit was given 3000 people were saved because they received Christ. *You make it clear that you are a letter from Christ. You are the result of our work for God. You are a letter written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You are a letter written not on tablets made out of stone but on human hearts. Through Christ, we can be sure of this because of our faith in God's power. In ourselves we are not able to claim anything for ourselves. The power to do what we do comes from God. He has given us the power to serve under a new covenant. The covenant is not based on the written Law of Moses. It comes from the Holy Spirit. The written Law kills, but the Spirit gives life.*^{2Cor.3:3-6} The Feast of Tabernacles also illustrated the gift of the Holy Spirit. At the moment when the Priests were pouring water onto the steps of the Temple, Jesus explained that when the Holy Spirit came, He would gush out of Believers like a river: *On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood up and spoke in a loud voice. He said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Does anyone believe in me? Then, just as Scripture says, streams of living water will flow from*

inside him.” When he said this, he meant the Holy Spirit. Those who believed in Jesus would receive the Spirit later. Up to that time, the Spirit had not been given. This was because Jesus had not yet received glory.^{Jn.7:37-39}

Yes, the **power of God** is about the **Kingdom of God**. Although God’s power is certainly dramatic and God’s intervention is always a blessing, the purpose of God’s power is not to make life easy for us but to give us new life and to empower us to live that life. Even after God cleans us up, we still have the memory of our old life and if we aren’t pro-active in our faith we can easily slip into our old way of thinking—we need God’s power to prevent our old way of life from dominating us. The early Disciples were timid and afraid—some even denied knowing Jesus—but then Jesus sent Holy Spirit who came as a mighty rushing wind and with the appearance of fire. Those timid and fearful Disciples were totally immersed (baptised) with the Holy Spirit and were transformed into bold and fearless Believers! Peter explained that this was the beginning of a new era and that this gift of the Holy Spirit was also for them and for all people for the rest of time: *All of you must turn away from your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then your sins will be forgiven. You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children. It is also for all who are far away [or and to people far in the future]. It is for all whom the Lord our God will choose.*^{Acts.2:38-39} So let’s keep preaching, teaching, witnessing and living in the light of the **knowledge of Scripture** **AND** of the **power of God**—which not only saves us but also protects us: *Through faith you are kept safe by God’s power. Your salvation is going to be completed. It is ready to be shown to you in the last days.*^{1Pet.1:5} **Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.**^{Heb.12:28-29}

Sunday 9th June 2019 Ps.44:1-8. Acts 20

I’ve started so I’ll finish!

But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.^{Acts.20:24}

In the BBC’s Quiz Show “*Mastermind*”, contestants have 2 minutes to answer questions on their specialized subject and also on general knowledge, but if the time runs out while a question is being read, the questioner will finish it and allow the contestant to answer—which led to the programme’s catchphrase, “*I’ve started so I’ll finish.*” Even though Paul the apostle did not actually use the exact phrase “*I’ve started so I’ll finish*” he talked about his faith in the same way: *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} Paul used competition sport (probably the Olympic Games) as an illustration of his determination to live his Christian life within God’s rules so he could complete his “*race*” without being disqualified: *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.9:25-27} It was this determination that drove Paul to endure hardship, discomfort and discouragement: *Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. 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.12:8-10} Even though Paul was striving with all his might to gain the “*prize*”, he did not become complacent but acknowledged that he had not achieved perfection and his “*race*” would continue to the end of his life. *I have not yet received all of those things. I have not yet been made perfect. But I move on to take hold of what Christ Jesus took hold of me for. Brothers and sisters, I don’t consider that I have taken hold of it yet. But here is the one thing I do. I forget what*

is behind me. I push hard toward what is ahead of me. I move on toward the goal to win the prize. God has appointed me to win it. The heavenly prize is Christ Jesus himself.^{Phil.3:12-14} We are in that same faith “race” and are pressing towards our goal—which is the salvation of our souls. *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*^{1Pet.1:6-9} And if we don’t compete within the rules set out by God we may end up becoming disqualified.

But even when we run our race according to the rules, we must stay spiritually healthy if we are to finish well. We are bombarded with ideas and information that are opposed to God’s values because the world’s system is opposed to God. *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*^{1Jn.5:19} *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.*^{Jas.4:4} In Noah’s day, the state of the world’s rebellion and evil grieved God: *The LORD saw how bad the sins of man had become on the earth. All of the thoughts in his heart were always directed only toward what was evil. The LORD was very sad that he had made man on the earth. His heart was filled with pain.*^{Gen.6:5-6} The world is still in rebellion against God! In our country 1 in 3 women will have had an abortion in their lifetime. In 2016 over 200,000 abortions were carried out legally in Great Britain—and over 8 million since 1967. The pagan nations surrounding Israel killed their children in the name of Molech, but today the nations are killing children in the name of convenience—and God’s condemnation is the same: *Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.*^{Lev.18:21} However, God is a God of grace and His compassion overflows in Jesus: *God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*^{Rom.5:20-21} We need to continually be cleaned by God’s Word if we are to stay spiritually healthy. *Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.*^{Eph.5:25-27} *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.12:2} Spiritual health comes from **eating spiritual food**—the Word of God: *Man doesn't live only on bread. He also lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God,*^{Matt.4:4} by **exercising spiritually**—prayer: *But you, dear friends, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit.*^{Jude.20} and by **resting spiritually**—trusting not trying: *God's promise of enjoying his rest still stands. So be careful that none of you fails to receive it... Those who enjoy God's rest also rest from their work. So let us make every effort to enjoy that rest.*^{Heb.4:1;10-11} Although our spiritual food is the Word of God, we must “digest” it by putting it into practice: *Jesus told them, “My food is to do what the one who sent me wants me to do and to finish the work he has given me.”*^{Jn.4:34} *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} *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says... But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.*^{Jas.1:22-25} Also with prayer—if we only recite the words instead of relating to God, we will never build ourselves up in the faith. Prayer is fellowship with God not following a ritual, and as in any intimate relationship, it is the *connection* that makes it work not just the words spoken—sometimes we don’t need to use words, but we always need connection! Spiritual rest

has always been integral to God's plan for mankind—the physical rest of the Sabbath was an illustration of our spiritual rest. Although we *rest from our works* of gaining merit with God, there is still much work to do. Our primary work is to believe in Jesus: *“What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”*^{Jn.6:28-29} But we must also work at obeying God (making the right choices): *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.*^{Phil.2:12-13} Another translation says: *“Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear.”* But this “work” is not wearisome and carries none of the “painful toil” and “sweat of your brow” that came from Adams sin. Our spiritual work is easy and restful because God's Presence is with us: *The LORD replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”*^{Ex.33:14} *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*^{Matt.11:28-30}

Jesus has redeemed us from the spiritual effects of the curse of sin: *Christ set us free from the curse of the law. He did it by becoming a curse for us... Christ Jesus set us free so that the blessing given to Abraham would come to non-Jews through Christ. He did it so that we might receive the promise of the Holy Spirit by believing in Christ.*^{Gal.3:13-14} So now, like Jesus, when we do the work of God (which for us is: *telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God*^{Acts.20:24}), we are refreshed instead of becoming tired: *Jesus told them, “I have food to eat that you don't know about.” The disciples asked each other, “Did someone bring him something to eat?” Jesus told them, “My food is to do what the one who sent me wants me to do and to finish the work he has given me. “Don't you say, ‘In four more months the harvest will be here’? I'm telling you to look and see that the fields are ready to be harvested. The person who harvests the crop is already getting paid. He is gathering grain for eternal life. So the person who plants the grain and the person who harvests it are happy together. In this respect the saying is true: ‘One person plants, and another person harvests.’ I have sent you to harvest a crop you have not worked for. Other people have done the hard work, and you have followed them in their work.”*^{Jn.4:32-38} And so, let's continue to obey the Great Commission of spreading the good news of God's grace—and like Paul, finish our race with honour: *But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.*^{Acts.20:24}

Sunday 16th June 2019 Ps.45:1-7. Acts 21

The Profit of Prophets! *Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem... When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord's will be done.”*^{Acts.21:4,14}

People often think of a prophet as someone who forth-tells (preaches) or else someone who fore-tells (prophesies)—actually, a prophet does both. The first mention of a prophet in the Bible is in Genesis where God said that Abraham was a prophet who would pray to open closed situations (release healing): *He is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live... Then Abraham prayed to God. And God healed Abimelech. He also healed his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again.*^{Gen.17:7;17} True prophets release God's solution to spiritual, emotional and physical needs. *The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.*^{Is.50:4} *When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams.*^{Nu.12:6} Prophets in the OT who presumed to hear from God were called to account: *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. But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death.*^{Deut.18:18-20} So when Saul prophesied it caused some

concern: *When Saul and his party got to Gibeah, there were the prophets, right in front of them! Before he knew it, the Spirit of God came on Saul and he was prophesying right along with them. When those who had previously known Saul saw him prophesying with the prophets, they were totally surprised. "What's going on here? What's come over the son of Kish? How on earth did Saul get to be a prophet?" One man spoke up and said, "Who started this? Where did these people ever come from?"*^{1Sam.10:10-12}

God speaks to us through Jesus: *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.*^{Heb.1:1-2} And God speaks to us through Jesus predominately through the Scriptures. As God's Word was written down and collated into the Scriptures, there was less need of a person to mediate God's Word directly as they could read God's Word from themselves: *'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 be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'*^{Lk.16:29-31} Even though Scripture is complete and readily available to us, the gift of the prophet and prophesy is still part of the Church's ministry today. God does still speak to us through other means than the Scripture—He also speaks through prophecy, dreams and even circumstances (including sickness): *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*^{Acts.2:17-18} *God speaks in one way and then another. We might not even realize it. He might speak in a dream or in a vision at night. That's when people are sound asleep in their beds. He might speak in their ears. His warnings might terrify them. He warns men in order to turn them away from sinning. He wants to keep them from being proud.*^{Job.33:14-17}

Jesus Christ has given to the Church the gift of prophets and so they (along with other ministry gifts) are an important part of the Church. *Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.*^{Eph.4:11-13} This list of “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers” is not a list of titles of status but a list that describes the function of ministries—a prophet is a person who prophesies. When someone prophesies (has a word from God), they are not speaking “*ex cathedra*” (with authority) but they are offering God's counsel and wisdom—we should weigh what they say but we not under an obligation to do what they say. Neither the Church as an organisation nor the Church as individual ministries and leaders can take away our own individual responsibility to make decisions, especially in personal matters such as where we live, what we do, who we meet, etc. **Christianity is a heart religion where we obey God willingly, not under compulsion.**

Actually, the Church doesn't even have authority over our faith: *But that does not mean we want to dominate you by telling you how to put your faith into practice. We want to work together with you so you will be full of joy, for it is by your own faith that you stand firm.*^{2Cor.1:24} We are each personally responsible for our own faith, for the way we live and for the choices that we make. *As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to Me, and every tongue will give praise to God. So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.*^{Rom.14:11-12} *But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.*^{Matt.12:36} *For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will reward each according to what he has done.*^{Matt.16:27} However, the Church does have a responsibility to proclaim God's standards of faith and morality—and the Church has a responsibility for maintaining those standards in people who profess to follow Christ. Although prophets have no jurisdiction over us, they do release God's solution to our situation and

confirm what God has told us. Occasionally they may even say the opposite of God is saying to us—as with Paul going to Jerusalem! When Paul the apostle was converted, God explained that he would have to suffer for the Kingdom’s sake: *I will show him how much he must suffer for My name!*^{Acts.9:16} God told him through the Holy Spirit directly, and also through prophecy, that great suffering awaited him in Jerusalem. However, Paul was determined to complete the mission Jesus had given him no matter what the price: *And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.*^{Acts.20:22-24} So Paul disregarded the “prophecies” and continued to Jerusalem: *Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem... When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord's will be done.”*^{Acts.21:4,14}

If someone—even a prophet—presents us with a message that is different from the good news of God’s grace preserved in Scripture, **we must reject both the message and the messenger.** *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*^{Gal.1:6-9} This principle was true even in the OT: *I've received a message from the LORD. He told me, ‘Do not eat bread or drink water there. Do not return the same way you came.’”*

The old prophet answered, ‘I'm also a prophet, just like you. An angel gave me a message from the LORD. The message said, ‘Bring the man of God back with you to your house. Then he can eat bread and drink water with you.’” But the old prophet was telling him a lie. The man of God returned with him. He ate and drank in his house. They were sitting at the table. The LORD gave a message to the old prophet who had brought the man of God back. He cried out to the man who had come from Judah. He told him, “The LORD says, ‘You have not done what I told you to do. You have not obeyed the command I gave you. I am the LORD your God. You came back here and ate bread and drank water. You did it in the place where I told you not to. So your body will not be buried in your family tomb.’”^{1Kg.13:17-22}

Prophecy is presenting the living Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit so that it conveys the Presence of Christ and releases His solution into a situation. *I am a servant of God, just like you and your brothers and sisters who testify about their faith in Jesus. Worship only God. For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.*^{Rev.19:10} Of course this may well happen (and should happen) through preaching but is more likely to happen in a one-to-one encounter and often without the person realising that they are giving a prophecy. And because prophecy is communicating God’s word and presence to others, not every detail has to be exactly accurate in a scientific way—for instance, Agabus prophesied that the Jews would bind Paul and hand him over to the Romans: *Then a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. He came over to us. Then he took Paul's belt and tied his own hands and feet with it. He said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘This is how the Jews of Jerusalem will tie up the owner of this belt. They will hand him over to people who are not Jews.’”*^{Acts.21:10-}

¹¹ But actually, it was the Romans who rescued Paul from the Jews, not the Jews who handed Paul over to the Romans! *As they were trying to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman regiment that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately called out his soldiers and officers and ran down among the crowd. When the mob saw the commander and the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander arrested him and ordered him bound with two chains.*^{Acts.21:31-33}

Yes, the profit of the prophet (the primary purpose of prophecy) is to assist people to believe (trust) that Jesus is the Christ and to release God’s solution into the situation—God’s answer to the spiritual, emotional or physical need. Six times in John’s Gospel Jesus said: ***I have told you... so that.***

I am telling you now, before it happens. When it does happen, you will believe that I am he.^{Jn.13:19}

I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe.^{Jn.14:29}

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.^{Jn.15:11}

I have told you these things so that you won't abandon your faith.^{Jn.16:1}

I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you.^{Jn.16:4}

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.^{Jn.16:33}

So let's heed Paul's advice and *Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy... But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.*^{1Cor.14:1-3}

Sunday 23rd June 2019 Ps.45:10-17. Acts 22

But I was born a citizen.^{Acts.22:28}

Once upon a time, if you were a British citizen you could go anywhere in the world in safety and without hindrance—because we were looked up to as the model democracy and “*an Englishman's word was his bond.*” Times have changed and our reputation and influence has waned but our democracy, although not perfect, is still the best in the world (probably). As Churchill once said: ‘*Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.*’^{Churchill 1947} However, our democracy did not just appear—it is based on the **Magna Carta** and has taken many centuries and many mistakes to get where we are today. In 1215 there was a revolt by the English barons against King John and in order to bring peace, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, drafted the **Magna Carta Libertatum** (Latin for “*Great Charter of the Liberties*”), commonly called **Magna Carta**. This *Great Charter* promised the protection of church rights, protection for the barons from illegal imprisonment, access to swift justice, and limitations on feudal payments to the Crown. Stephen Langton based the Magna Carta on the *Charter of Liberties* (or *Coronation Charter*), which was a written proclamation by Henry I upon his accession to the throne in 1100. This *Coronation Charter* sought to redress the abuses of royal power by his predecessor and brother, William II and incorporated the *Laws of Edward the Confessor*, (a collection of English laws, that were based on the Bible-based Saxon codes of Alfred the Great)—but the Charter was not enforceable. These Saxon legal codes ensured that kings were subject to the law and their subjects had rights which the State could not override. King John abrogated the Magna Carta almost immediately after he signed them, but a year later the “*Great Charter*” was re-issued as part of the Coronation of his son, King Henry III. The Magna Carta was confirmed or re-issued on 40 other occasions (the last by Henry VI in 1423) and is described by Lord Denning as: ‘*The greatest constitutional document of all times—the foundation of the freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot.*’ And from the moment it was signed, the Magna Carta held out the promise of freedom—freedom from arbitrary rule, freedom from oppression, freedom from tyranny: *no free man being imprisoned except by the judgment of his peers or due process of law.* However, our democracy has taken a long time to mature—over 800 years since the original signing of the Magna Carta 1215. And it has been a costly journey too, with injustice, unrest, riots, rebellions (including the Monmouth Rebellion 1685 and the Glorious Revolution 1688) and the Civil War in the 1640s, when Charles I usurped Parliament's authority! A major landmark in the evolution of our democracy was in 1772 (60 years before Wilberforce's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833) when the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield delivered a judgment pronouncing: “*Every man who comes to England is entitled to the protection of English law, whatever oppression he may heretofore have suffered, and whatever may be the colour of his skin, whether it is black or whether it is white.*” So the democracy that we enjoy today is based on the Magna Carta, which had its roots in Alfred the Great's commitment to put God's law first and

man's law second because he recognised that law is not simply what we choose to make it, but is answerable to a higher moral standard based on, and derived from, the Bible.

Although the Roman law was not based on the Bible, it did follow due process and Paul used his Roman citizenship to benefit from the Roman judicial system. In Philippi, Paul was condemned and beaten without trial, so he embarrassed the city officials into apologising to him for their illegal and inhumane treatment: *"The city officials have said you and Silas are free to leave. Go in peace." But Paul replied, "They have publicly beaten us without a trial and put us in prison—and we are Roman citizens. So now they want us to leave secretly? Certainly not! Let them come themselves to release us!" When the police reported this, the city officials were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. So they came to the jail and apologized to them.*^{Acts.16:36-38} (Note: Paul did not sue for wrongful arrest, harassment, or even compensation! Whilst we should let the law follow due process, we should not pursue justice in a vindictive way or for vengeance: *Is it possible that no one among you is wise enough to judge matters between believers? Instead, one believer goes to court against another. And this happens in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you take another believer to court means you have lost the battle already. Why not be treated wrongly? Why not be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong. And you do it to your brothers and sisters. Don't you know that evil people will not receive God's kingdom? Don't be fooled.*^{1Cor.6:5-9}) In Caesarea, Paul appealed to the highest court (to Caesar) because he knew that the local courts were corrupt: *Festus talked with the king about Paul's case... "the Jewish chief priests and the elders brought charges against the man. They wanted him to be found guilty. I told them that this is not the way Romans do things. We don't judge people before they have faced those bringing charges against them. They must have a chance to speak up for themselves... Paul claimed Jesus was alive. I had no idea how to look into such matters. So I asked Paul if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem. There he could be tried on these charges. But Paul made an appeal to have the Emperor decide his case. So I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar."*^{Acts.25:14-21} Paul used the available judicial system to his advantage but remained calm when confronting injustice: *Paul said to the officer standing there, "Is it legal for you to whip a Roman citizen who hasn't even been tried?" When the officer heard this, he went to the commander and asked, "What are you doing? This man is a Roman citizen!" So the commander went over and asked Paul, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I certainly am," Paul replied. "I am, too," the commander muttered, "and it cost me plenty!" Paul answered, "But I am a citizen by birth!" The soldiers who were about to interrogate Paul quickly withdrew when they heard he was a Roman citizen, and the commander was frightened because he had ordered him bound and whipped.*^{Acts.22:25-29} Because of the Magna Carta, everyone in our Country (even illegals!) are subject to the law and are guaranteed the right to justice and the right to a fair trial. And we should use our rights as British citizens to our own advantage—yet without being vindictive or bitter.

Although Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, he was also a Heavenly citizen—by his spiritual new-birth. And like Paul, we are Heavenly citizens by our new-birth. We cannot buy our Heavenly citizenship like the Officer who bought his Roman citizenship. No amount of good works or even religious works can make us a citizen of heaven—we must be born from above by the Word of God: *I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*^{Jn.3:3} *You have been born again, not from a seed that can be destroyed, but through God's everlasting word that can't be destroyed.*^{1Pet.1:23} Christians are citizens of heaven: *But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior.*^{Phil.3:20} And so we have access to the very highest authority—higher than any courts of our country. But like our natural citizenship, our Heavenly citizenship brings both privileges and responsibilities. Being a citizen of heaven means that we have personal access to Almighty God because He is our Father: *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. 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.2:18-22} And because we belong to God, we have an obligation—to respect God and His values: But God chose you to be his people. You are royal priests. You are a holy nation. You are a people who belong to God. All of this is so that you can sing his praises. He brought you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people. But now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy. But now you have received mercy. Dear friends, you are outsiders and strangers in this world. So I'm asking you not to give in to your sinful longings. They fight against your soul. People who don't believe might say you are doing wrong. But lead good lives among them. Then they will see your good works. And they will give glory to God on the day he comes to judge.^{1Pet.2:9-12}

Our spiritual forefathers recognised the duality of being citizens of earth and heaven and so they lived as strangers here on earth because they were longing for their true home—the place that Jesus is preparing for us: *All those people were still living by faith when they died. They didn't receive the things God had promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a long way off. They openly said that they were outsiders and strangers on earth. People who say things like that show that they are looking for a country of their own. What if they had been thinking of the country they had left? Then they could have returned to it. Instead, they longed for a better country. They wanted one in heaven. So God is pleased when they call him their God. In fact, he has prepared a city for them.^{Heb.11:13-16} Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's household has many rooms [abodes]; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.^{Jn.14:1-4}*

So let's keep our minds on the eternal, but without losing sight of the here-and-now—we should not be so “*spiritually*” minded that we are no earthly good!

May we view all things in the mirror of eternity, waiting for the coming of our Lord and listening for that last trumpet call to herald the new heaven and new earth. Let us keep walking steadfastly towards the country of Everlasting Delights, that Paradise-land which is our true inheritance. Let us never turn back or desire false pleasures that will disappear into nothing. And by God's grace, let us pursue our heavenly journey and be known as people with no aim save that of a burning desire for God, the good of others and their salvation.

Sunday 30th June 2019 Ps.46. Acts 23

I have faith in the miracle of the resurrection from the dead.^{Acts.23:6}

Tales of the *Fountain of Youth* (where the youth of anyone is restored if they drink or bathe in its waters) have been around for thousands of years—but it doesn't exist! A bad diet with an unhealthy lifestyle can age people prematurely and good diet with a healthy lifestyle can help people enjoy life but *People have to die once. After that, God will judge them.*^{Heb.9:27} *What person can live and not die? Who can escape the power of the grave?*^{Psa.89:48} There are quite a few accounts in the Bible of people who died and came back to life—3 in the OT (1 through Elijah, 2 through Elisha and probably Jonah as well); 5 in the NT (3 through Jesus, 1 through Paul and 1 through Peter). There are also other credible accounts throughout history of people being raised from the dead through prayer, as well as tens of thousands of people who have been technically dead (their hearts stopped beating for a period of time) but after medical intervention, they were resuscitated and went on to live out their natural life. [And to facilitate this valuable first-aid, we have a **PAD** (public access defibrillator) by the main entrance of our Church and many of our congregation have had **CPR** (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) training—remember **DRABC**? check for **D**anger; check for **R**esponse; check the **A**irway; check for **B**reathing;

perform CPR.] However, everyone who has been brought back to life—either naturally resuscitated through medical intervention or miraculously revived through prayer—all lived to die another day! But when Jesus came back from the dead, He wasn't resuscitated or revived—He was resurrected!

When Jesus rose from the dead, His body was changed into an immortal body that had flesh and bones which could be touched, yet He could appear through locked doors—and then disappear again! His body was selectively renewed and restored (identifying scars from the crucifixion nails and the Roman spear wound remained). The torturing events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion greatly marred His appearance but as a result of Jesus' resurrection, His body's restoration gave Him a slightly different appearance. This explains why the two followers of Christ on the road to Emmaus did not immediately recognise the resurrected Jesus. *Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.*^{Lk.24:15-16} Jesus ate food and yet did not need to eat; He had clothes that were tangible and yet not made of physical material (those clothes were left in the grave).

God is Omnipotent and He created the world through Jesus, the Word of God: *Christ is the exact likeness of God, who can't be seen. He is first, and he is over all of creation. things were created by him. He created everything in heaven and on earth. He created everything that can be seen and everything that can't be seen. He created kings, powers, rulers and authorities. Everything was created by him and for him. Before anything was created, he was already there. He holds everything together.*^{Col.1:15-17} So, as Paul asks, **why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?**^{Acts 26:8} And especially why should anyone consider it incredible that God should raise Jesus from the dead! Because Jesus was seen after His resurrection by many different people (including over 500 people at one time^{1Cor.15:6}) and a written record of their encounters with the resurrected Jesus was made during their lifetime, we can be sure that Jesus' resurrection is a verified fact rather than mere hearsay. After Christ ascended (best understood as “translated”) to heaven, He was then glorified. The New Testament teaches that Christ's resurrection was the first (often called “the firstfruits”) of the resurrections of all those who come into right standing with God. *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep... But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at His coming those who belong to Christ.*^{1Cor.15:20;23} Yes, the resurrection of Jesus is absolutely pivotal to our Christian faith and the Gospel that we preach. *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8}

We are created in God's image and so, like God, we are eternal. Our spirit does not cease to exist after physical death but will always exist—either in right standing with God or in rebellion to God. But there are 2 kinds of death—physical and spiritual—and 2 kinds of resurrection—spiritual and physical. When Adam disobeyed God, he lived physically for another 930 years—but died spiritually straight away: *But you must never eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because when you eat from it, you will certainly die.*^{Gen.2:17} At physical death, a person's spirit is separated from their body. *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead.*^{Jas.2:26} And to be spiritually dead is to be spiritually separated from God because of sin. *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins.*^{Eph.2:1} *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.*^{Col.2:13}

Jesus came to give us life in all its abundance, but it took His death to give us life and it took His punishment to give us forgiveness. The moment we believe Jesus (trust Him) we have eternal life and our spirit is resurrected from the dead (we are united with God). This is called “born from above” and is a real miracle. *Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.*^{Jn.5:24-25} And because Jesus has been raised from the dead, we can know we that our sins are

forgiven, and we have peace with God. *We have preached that Christ has been raised from the dead... And if Christ has not been raised, what we preach doesn't mean anything. Your faith doesn't mean anything either. More than that, we would be lying about God. We have given witness that God raised Christ from the dead... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith doesn't mean anything. Your sins have not been forgiven. 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.15:12-20} *Because of what Christ has done, you believe in God. It was God who raised him from the dead. And it was God who gave him glory. So your faith and hope are in God.*^{1Pet.1:21}

But Jesus also promised a physical resurrection for us—eternal life for Believers and eternal death for Unbelievers: *Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.*^{Jn.5:28-29} And Jesus' resurrection that guarantees our future physical resurrection: *He is the first of all those who will rise... This is what Scripture says: "The first man, Adam, became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. I'm telling you a mystery. Not all of us will die, but we will all be changed. It will happen in an instant, in a split second at the sound of the last trumpet. Indeed, that trumpet will sound, and then the dead will come back to life. They will be changed so that they can live forever. This body that decays must be changed into a body that cannot decay. This mortal body must be changed into a body that will live forever. When this body that decays is changed into a body that cannot decay, and this mortal body is changed into a body that will live forever, then the teaching of Scripture will come true: "Death is turned into victory! Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?"*^{1Cor.15:45-55} *The Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you. So the God who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your bodies, which are going to die. He will do this by the power of his Spirit, who lives in you.*^{Rom.8:11} So when we are "born-again" (take part in the 1st resurrection), we have no fear of being separated from God for eternity at the final resurrection: *Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him.*^{Rev.20:6}

Although the "fountain of youth" where youth is restored if people drink or bathe in its waters is myth, there is a spiritual fountain of life where our spiritual life is restored when we drink from its water—and that is no myth but a very real miracle. *How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.*^{Ps.36:7-9} *The instruction of the wise is like a life-giving fountain; those who accept it avoid the snares of death.*^{Ps.13:14} *Anyone who shows respect for the LORD has a strong tower. It will be a safe place for his children. Respect for the LORD is like a fountain that gives life. It turns you away from the jaws of death.*^{Prov.14:26-27} This fountain of life is Jesus Himself: *but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*^{Jn.4:14} *And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.*^{Rev.21:6-7}

So let's thank God for the joy of knowing Him and the peace He brings—and drink from this fountain of life now, so that we partake of *the miracle of the resurrection from the dead.*^{Acts.23:6} *Come, all of you who are thirsty. Come and drink the water I offer to you. You who do not have any money, come. Buy and eat the grain I give you. Come and buy wine and milk. You will not have to pay anything for it. Why spend money on what is not food? Why work for what does not satisfy you? Listen carefully to me. Then you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the richest food there is. Listen and come to me. Pay attention to me. Then you will live.*^{Is.55:1-3}

July

For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.
Ephesians 1:4

Sunday 7th July 2019 Ps.47. Lk.15: Family Service

Are you a Looker, a Seeker, or a Finder?

Have you ever lost something and searched until you found it? *Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. She will light a lamp and sweep the house. She will search carefully until she finds the coin. And when she finds it, she will call her friends and neighbours together. She will say, 'Be joyful 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.^{Lk.15:8-10} [This chapter is about our salvation—us seeking a treasure with the Holy Spirit's help; us, a lost sheep/sinner being sought and found by Jesus the Shepherd; us coming to our senses and being welcomed by our heavenly Father.] But if you lost something that wasn't very important, you would soon give up because the time and effort of searching would be more than the object was worth. Our eternal future depends on being part of God's Kingdom (the rule of Christ in our heart): *I can guarantee this truth: No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*^{Jn.3:3} So the Kingdom of God is of great value and worth gaining: *Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it.*^{Matt.13:45-46} No wonder Jesus said that we should make every effort to enter His Kingdom: *Someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" He said to them, "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.' Then you will say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will reply, 'I don't know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God."*^{Lk.13:23-29} The great **Commission** of Jesus is our **Go-Mission**: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*^{Matt.28:18-20} Not everyone will be converted: *For many are invited, but few are chosen.*^{Matt.22:14} Indeed, many will choose to turn away: *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."*^{Acts.17:32} But with Jesus Himself giving us our commission, we must obey God regardless of what others say: *They commanded them not to speak or teach at all in Jesus' name. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves. Which is right from God's point of view? Should we obey you? Or God? There's nothing else we can do. We have to speak about the things we've seen and heard."*^{Acts.3:18-20}

In 1949 Billy Graham went to Los Angeles for what became an historic evangelistic crusade. The Crusade was held in a circus tent that held 6,000 people and was so well attended that the tent was enlarged to hold 9,000 (but was still too small) and lasted for 8 weeks. As part of the publicity of the Crusade, Billy Graham went on a radio show hosted by Stuart Hamblen and invited him to attend the crusade. When Stuart Hamblen announced on air that he had been converted, there was a lot of interest in the local and national newspapers. Hamblen's conversion was followed by that of former Olympian and prisoner of war Louis Zamperini; Jim Vaus, a friend of Mickey Cohen (a Mafia gangster from Chicago who had moved to Los Angeles); and the celebrity actor, Harvey Fritz. Jim Vaus had set up a continental wire-tap that would rig horse races for illegal off-track gamblers, but happened upon Evangelist Billy Graham's revival tent and heard him say: "*What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but*

loses his soul? There's a man in the audience tonight who has heard this message many times before, but he's never given his life to Christ, and this may be his last opportunity." This was not a gimmick that Billy Graham used and was something he only said on that night. Jim Vaus didn't want to lose his soul and went from Looker, to Seeker, to Finder—and was soundly converted. After Jim Vaus became a Christian, Billy Graham met his old boss Mickey Cohen—who in an interview for *Time Magazine* said, "I am very high on the Christian way of life. Billy came up, and before we had food he said—What do you call it, that thing they say before food? Grace? Yeah, grace. Then we talked a lot about Christianity and stuff." Although sympathetic to Christianity, Cohen did not change his lifestyle, saying: "Christian football players, Christian cowboys, Christian politicians; why not a Christian gangster?" BGEA's World Wide Pictures produce "*The Wire Tapper*" (1955) about Jim Vaus' conversion and in 2015 produced "*Captured by Grace*" about Louis Zamperini. Other films about Zamperini include: "*Unbroken*" (2014 and directed by Angelina Jolie) and "*Unbroken: Path to Redemption*" (2018 a Christian film by *Pure Flix*). Stuart Hamblen was a popular singer, songwriter, poet, radio personality and actor. He starred in films with Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and John Wayne and wrote several chart-topping country songs, becoming radio's first singing cowboy. After Hamblen's conversion, he met up with John Wayne who asked him about the rumour that he'd changed his ways. Hamblen replied that it was no secret what God had done for him and that he could do it for Wayne too. Wayne said it sounded like a song and suggested he write one—the result was: *It is no secret what God can do, what He's done for others, He can do for you...*

Although just praying a "prayer of commitment" does not make someone a Christian, it is often the sign of their intention to **seek** God rather than "just looking". Jesus said: *Ask, and it will be given to you. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks will receive. He who searches will find. The door will be opened to the one who knocks.*^{Mat.7:7-8} What value do you place on your soul and on your eternal destiny? Don't leave it to chance or hope that it will be alright. Examine the Scriptures yourself and see if what I am saying is right—unless of course you have a closed-mind and you want to wait and see! *The people here were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, since they welcomed the message with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.*^{Acts.17:11} We have notes of the sermons available, we have Bible Studies and we are always available to answer questions. God has made it easy for all of us to reach out to Him and find Him—actually He is only a prayer away: *The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.*^{Acts.17:24-28}

So, are you a Looker, or a Seeker, or a Finder? The Bible is clear: "*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,*" declares the LORD.^{Jer.29:13-14} Jesus left heaven to find us: *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?*^{Lk.15:4} Now it is time for you to find Him: *When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'* So he got up and went to his father.^{Lk.15:17-20} Whatever your relationship with God, seek Him with all you heart and continue to pray for one another that we may all know Him better: *I have not stopped thanking God for you. I always remember you in my prayers. I pray to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is the glorious Father. I keep asking him to give you the wisdom and understanding that come from the Holy Spirit. I want you to know God better. I also pray that your mind might see more clearly. Then you will know*

the hope God has chosen you to receive. You will know that the things God's people will receive are rich and glorious. And you will know his great power. It can't be compared with anything else. It is at work for us who believe. It is like the mighty strength God showed when he raised Christ from the dead.^{Eph.1:16-20}

Sunday 14th July 2019 Ps.48. Acts 24

Righteousness—What we are; Self-control—How to live; Judgment—What is coming.

Paul spoke about faith in Christ Jesus... about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.^{Acts.24:24-25}

To have faith in Jesus Christ requires an understanding about righteousness, self-control and judgement to come. Unless there is an awareness of sin, there will be no need of a Saviour, which is why the Holy Spirit's ministry includes convicting people of their guilt regarding sin, righteousness and judgement: *Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.*^{Jn.16:7-11}

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

character. There is no flaw in God's character and He makes no mistakes. *He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment.*^{Is.11:4-5} *The LORD sees it, and he's angry because there's no justice. He sees that there's no one to help. He's astounded that there's no one to intercede. So with his own power he wins a victory. His righteousness supports him. He puts on righteousness like a coat of armour and a helmet of salvation on his head. So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance.*^{Is.59:15-17} **No one is naturally righteous** (right with God) because we all inherited Adam's sinful nature: *No one is right with God, no one at all. No one understands. No one trusts in God. All of them have turned away. They have all become worthless. No one does anything good, no one at all.*^{Rom.3:10-12} *Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the Lord's wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right. He will bring me out into the light; I will see his righteousness.*^{Mic.7:9}

But at conversion **God exchanged Jesus' righteousness for our sin:** *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^{2Cor.5:21} And so righteousness is not **what we do** but **who we are—righteousness is our new God-given nature.** Abraham was **counted** righteous (right with God) because he **believed** God (note: Abraham did not earn his righteousness): *Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith.*^{Gen.15:6} As this verse is quoted 3 times in the NT^{Rom.4:3;Gal.3:6;Jas.2:23} we can be sure that it has significance for us today—and Abraham is actually called the Father of Believers: *Abraham is the father of all believers... Those who have the same faith that Abraham had are also included. He is the father of us all. It is written, "I have made you a father of many nations."*^{Rom.4:11-17} *Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father.*^{Is.51:1-2}

Our righteousness comes by faith in Jesus Christ: *This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "The righteous will live by faith."*^{Rom.1:17} *But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law... We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from*

the penalty for our sins.^{Rom.3:21-24} I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.^{Phil.3:9-10} Even though this righteousness is credited to us because of faith and our born-again spirit is righteous by nature, we must continue to live according to our new nature and not lapse back into the old way of living—we must live by faith (complete trust in God—who He is, what He has said and what He does): *But the one who is right with God will live by faith.*^{Hab.2:4} This verse is also quoted 3 times in the NT^{Rom.1:17;Gal.3:11;Heb.10:38} showing that this too has significance for us today. (N.B. some Versions translate it: *He who is righteous by faith shall live.*) So we can never be more righteous than we are right now. *For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.*^{Rom.5:17-19} However, we should have an **appetite for righteousness** and strive to live in a **right relationship** with God: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*^{Matt.5:6} *But you are a man of God; so run from all these evil things. Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness.*^{1Tim.6:11} *Run from anything that stimulates youthful lusts. Instead, pursue righteous living, faithfulness, love, and peace. Enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts.*^{2Tim.2:22} **Our right-with-God behaviour should be as visible as our clothes:** *I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.*^{Is.61:10} *be made new in the attitude of your minds and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*^{Eph.4:23-24} Because righteousness is our new nature, we have become slaves to righteousness, but instead of degrading us, this slavery liberates us and we become gentle, peaceable and confident. *Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living... Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy.*^{Rom.6:18-19} *The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.*^{Is.32:17} An essential part of maturing in our faith is talking about being right with God—aligning our conversation with our doctrine: *for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child (literally a non-speaker). But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*^{Heb.5:13-14} *that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*^{Phile.1:6}

How to live: Self-control. Self-control is part of the Christian's new nature of **righteousness** and a fruit of the Spirit: *But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!*^{Gal.5:22-23} Actually, for the Christian, our self-control is a spirit dominated (*sanctified*) self-control because we are led by the Spirit.^{Rom.8:14} When our self (soul) dominates us, we usually end up despondent but when our new, holy, spirit dominates us, we praise God and trust Him.^{Ps.42:5} This is not “*mind-over-matter*” or just positive thinking but the result of the miracle of New Birth and part of the package of salvation—of following Christ and confessing *Jesus is Lord.*^{Rom.10:9-10} Repentance means “*change your thinking*” and we change our thinking by renewing our minds. *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*^{Rom.12:2} God has given us a sound mind—now it is up to us to use it! *For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline [or sound mind]*^{2Tim.1:7}

What is coming: Judgement to come. God has set a day when He will judge the world—and this judgement will include everyone who has ever lived. God's standard is perfection and anyone who fails to meet that standard is guilty of missing the target—the fact that we inherited

a bias against God will not let us off! *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*^{Rom.3:22-23} The only way to escape our punishment is to plead guilty now and accept God's forgiveness. Yet God freely and graciously declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood.^{Rom.3:24-25} But even for us Believers who have been forgiven, there is still a day of reckoning where we will have to give an account for every word we have spoken. *A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*^{Matt.12:35-37} This should motivate each of us to live righteous lives: *You ought to live holy and godly lives as you wait eagerly for the day of God to come.*^{2Pet.3:11-12} For a more complete study on Judgement please see Mike Petzer's booklet [Miracle of Judgement](#) (available to download from our website). Because we have pleaded "guilty" to our sin and accepted God's pardon, we are privileged to address Almighty God as *our Heavenly Father*. So let's continue to discourse about *righteousness, self-control and judgement to come.*^{Acts24:25} and make sure we hear God say "*well done good and faithful serant*"^{Matt.25:21} not "*well! what have you done?*"

Sunday 21st July 2019 Ps.48:9-14. Acts 25

"I appeal to Cæsar"^{Acts25:11}

Life isn't fair—and most of us have experienced some unfairness in life—sometimes it is just the way it is (what the world calls "*bad luck*"), sometimes it is human error, and sometimes it is human intention (and all of us are capable of making life difficult for others)! Last month we saw how the Magna Carta is foundational to our British way of life and also to other democracies across the world. The Magna Carta was based on Alfred the Great's Christian ideals of fairness and justice for all and was more concerned with our duty than our rights. When Stephen Langton became Archbishop of Canterbury and realised the extent of King John's wrong doing, he already knew the Bible's teachings on obedience to the ruler and that in certain circumstances there is a duty to obey God rather than men: "*We gave you strict orders never again to teach in this man's name!*" he said. "*Instead, you have filled all Jerusalem with your teaching about him, and you want to make us responsible for his death!*" But Peter and the apostles replied, "*We must obey God rather than any human authority.*"^{Acts.5:28-29} Today's Human Rights legislation does not recognise that a human being has any human rights until birth. *The need to assert in law a right to life, rather than requiring compliance with a duty to sustain life, means that the beneficiary of the right must have the status in law to claim it. And an unborn child does not have that status. The person who commits suicide cannot be released from his duty to God to continue to live by the consent of those who might be adversely affected by his suicide, even if they could all be identified and were able to give their consent (and some may be yet unborn). So it is better to recast the "right to life" as a duty to God, and a duty in law, to sustain life.* (Freedom and the State, John Scriven) But however good or just a system is, it will always be imperfect because it is administered by people—and people are flawed! So even with the best intentions, sometimes things go wrong (and with the bad intentions of corrupt people, they will certainly go wrong).

So what should we do when life is unfair or goes wrong for us? Obviously our first response should be to **pray**—but we should always pray whether things go wrong or go right! Our first communication with God should be praise—to say good things about God and to God. The Greek word for **praise** is *eulogy*, which means to say good words. Jesus taught us to pray: '*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name (may Your Name be honoured).*' Too often we want to tell God all our problems (as if He doesn't know them already!) before we have spent time appreciating Him. Praise and worship is not only the right thing to do but it prepares the way for God to

release His solution to our problems: *He who sacrifices thank offerings honours me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.*^{Ps.50:23} 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 the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.^{2Chron.20:21-22} Esther put on 2 banquets for the king before she asked for his help—but when she did ask for help, the problem (the Jews were about to be annihilated!) changed from a "mountain" to "molehill" and was quickly resolved. Like Esther, when we spread out a banquet of praise and worship for God, our worry withers and usually the actual problems is resolved as well! However, worship is not just singing songs—worship is obedience! 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." ...The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven and said "...through your seed all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have **obeyed** me."^{Gen.22:5;18}

But prayer is more than praise—prayer is communion with God. **Communion** is also translated **fellowship, partnership** and **participation**: They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.^{Acts.2:42} I always pray with joy because of your **partnership** in the gospel from the first day until now.^{Phil.1:4-5} Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a **participation** in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a **participation** in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.^{1Cor.10:16-17} Prayer has many different facets, but all biblical prayers include thanksgiving and joy because in prayer we commit our situation to God Almighty, the Creator and Sustainer of the world. 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.4:6-7} In prayer we cast our cares on Him—and then leave those cares with Him, because He cares for us: Be humbled by God's power so that when the right time comes he will honour you. Turn all your anxiety over to God because he cares for you. Keep your mind clear, and be alert. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion as he looks for someone to devour. Be firm in the faith and resist him, knowing that other believers throughout the world are going through the same kind of suffering. God, who shows you his kindness and who has called you through Christ Jesus to his eternal glory, will restore you, strengthen you, make you strong, and support you as you suffer for a little while. Power belongs to him forever. Amen.^{1Pet.5:6-11}

God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom not a physical (geographical) kingdom, Jesus answered, "My kingdom doesn't belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. My kingdom doesn't have its origin on earth."^{Jn.18:36} But God has given the rulership of the geographical kingdoms of this world to us human beings—to rule righteously and with justice for all, irrespective of a person's personal trust in God. Even though many rulers rebel against God and rule unrighteously, God still expects justice to be administered—and He expects us to pray for those rulers: The first thing I want you to do is pray. Pray every way you know how, for everyone you know. Pray especially for rulers and their governments to rule well so we can be quietly about our business of living simply, in humble contemplation. This is the way our Saviour God wants us to live.^{1Tim.2:1-3} God also expects us to submit to the authority of human rulers: Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.^{Matt.22:21} Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished... The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience... Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honour to those who are in authority.^{Rom.13:1-7} (Paul wrote this letter when Nero was Emperor!)

But when there is a conflict between God's values and this world's values, we must make a choice and take the consequences. Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.^{Acts.4:19-20} However,

we can and should, use this world's systems to promote justice and even confront injustice. Paul used his Roman citizenship to confront the injustices against him in Philippi: *But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out. The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city."*^{Acts.16:37-}

⁴⁰ Paul also used the privilege of his Roman citizenship to bypass the weak and corrupt local courts at Cæsarea: *Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"* After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: *"You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"*^{Acts.25:10-12}

This world (including its governments) is focused on the physical and the tangible, on the here and now, (what can be experienced by our 5 senses) and so the world rarely takes into account the facts of the spiritual and eternal dimensions. But we must make God's kingdom our priority and take into account the spiritual realm of the eternal: *So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.*^{Matt.6:31-33} *Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever.*^{1Jn.2:15-17} When Jesus told a parable about accountability, He said that we should use natural resources to promote spiritual good: *Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Then, when your earthly possessions are gone, they will welcome you to an eternal home.*^{Lk.16:9}

Remember, we belong to Jesus Christ.

I am created by God, I am His.

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

I belong to Jesus Christ.

God defends me, I am His.

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

I belong to Jesus Christ.

I am my Beloved's and He is mine.

No-one else possesses any right or power over me. All that is mine is His.

I belong to Jesus Christ.

All my sin, weakness and shortcomings, I give to Him.

He has taken all my condemnation, misery and fear.

I belong to Jesus Christ.

His strength is my strength, His righteousness, my righteousness.

His wisdom, my wisdom and His holiness, my holiness.

I belong to Jesus Christ.

He is my God. He is my Father.

His family is my family and His heaven is my home.

I belong to Jesus Christ

Yes we belong to Jesus Christ, so let's keep our mind alert and learn how to use this world's resources to our advantage but also keep our heart alert and learn how to use God's resources too. *Don't you know that to be a friend of the world is to hate God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Don't you know what Scripture says? The spirit that God caused to live in us wants us to belong only to God. Don't you think Scripture has a reason for saying that?*^{2Jas.4:4-5}

Sunday 28th July 2019 Ps.50:1-6. Acts 26

I'm appointing you to be a servant and witness of what you have seen and of what I will show you.^{Acts.26:16}

Paul had a special calling for a special work—he wrote most of the NT and probably evangelised more places and more people than anyone else of the early Church. But the message Jesus gave him to preach is the same message He gives to all of us to preach: *I am sending you to them to open their eyes. I want you to turn them from darkness to light. I want you to turn them from Satan's power to God. I want their sins to be forgiven. They will be forgiven when they believe in me. They will have their place among God's people.*^{Acts.26:18} Paul, like Moses before him, had a privileged upbringing and God used their academic training in the work that He had called them to. Moses was brought up as Pharaoh's adopted grandson with the best education of his day, but when he had an encounter with God, that training helped him lead the Israelites out of Egypt and equipped him to write 5 books of the Bible: *He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.*^{Heb.11:26-27} Likewise, Paul's education and training enabled him to write 13 books of the NT with such clear and coherent theology—but only after he had an encounter with Jesus: *Then Paul said: 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.'*^{Acts.22:3-11} Although God inspired all Scripture, when the individual books were written most of their authors were not aware that they were writing Scripture—they were writing history or letters to give encouragement and advice. But it soon became apparent that their writings were more than just letters—they were Scripture and God's Word: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*^{1Thes.2:13} *Think of our Lord's patience as an opportunity for us to be saved. This is what our dear brother Paul wrote to you about, using the wisdom God gave him. He talks about this subject in all his letters. 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.*^{2Pet.3:15-16}

But most of us don't come from privileged backgrounds like Moses and Paul—which is probably to our advantage: *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when God chose you. Not many of you were considered wise by human standards. Not many of you were powerful. Not many of you belonged to important families. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. He chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the things of this world that are common and looked down on. He chose what is not considered to be important to do away with what is considered to be important. So no one can*

boast to God. Because of what God has done, you belong to Christ Jesus. He has become God's wisdom for us. He makes us right with God. He makes us holy and sets us free. It is written, "The one who boasts should boast about what the Lord has done."¹Cor.1:26-31 Most of us are like Peter who did not have a University education. When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.^{Acts.4:13} But the message Jesus gives to us is the same as He gave to Paul: *I'm appointing you to be a servant and witness of what you have seen and of what I will show you. I will rescue you from the Jewish people and from the non-Jewish people to whom I am sending you. You will open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from satan's control to God's. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and a share among God's people who are made holy by believing in me.*^{Acts.26:16-18}

1 Jesus appoints us as Servants and Witnesses of what we have seen and of what He shows us.

Whatever our ministry or role in society and in the Church, we are first and foremost Servants of Jesus Christ and Witnesses of what we have experienced of Him: *I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.*^{Eph.3:7} *We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way.*^{2Cor.6:3-4} *You will be My Witnesses...*^{Acts.1:8}

2 Jesus sends us to the world.

We are not living haphazard lives—we are on a Mission, sent by Jesus Christ Himself—with His authority, yet under His authority: *Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations... And remember that I am always with you until the end of time."*^{Matt.28:18-20} Jesus not only sends us but He stays with us. Hudson Taylor, after his visit to China, was walking in England and a voice said: *"If you will walk with Me, we will evangelize inland China."* He looked and there was no one there. An unseen angel had spoken to him. Then his heart caught the vision and said, *"Lord, we will do it."* Taylor spent 51 years in China and founded the China Inland Mission (CIM, now OMF International) which was responsible for bringing over 800 missionaries to the country who began 125 schools, as well as the establishment of more than 300 stations of work with more than 500 local helpers in all eighteen provinces.

3 We are to open people's eyes and turn them from darkness to light.

Our Mission is to open people's eyes to see the Light of the world. Spiritual eyes are opened when people turn to Jesus—then their hearts are changed, the Bible makes sense and they have a touch of heaven on their lives! *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} We belong to the kingdom of light: *He has made you fit to share with all his people. You will all receive a share in the kingdom of light. He has saved us from the kingdom of darkness. He has brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. Because of what the Son has done, we have been set free. Because of him, all of our sins have been forgiven.*^{Col.1:12-14} So we must live like children of the light: *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.*^{Eph.5:8-9}

4 We are to turn people from satan's control to God's control.

At conversion, we confess that Jesus is Lord^{Rom.10:9} because there is a change of ownership in our lives—ownership from satan to the Saviour, from the devil to the Divine. As we yield to

God's control, we start to work **for** God and **with** God instead of against God. We are citizens of a heavenly kingdom where *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*^{Rom.14:17} are our characteristics and where our lives match our lips: *For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God's power.*^{1Cor.4:20}

5 People will then receive forgiveness for their sins.

Until people realise that they are sinners, they don't realise that they need a Saviour! But most of what we call "*sins*" are a manifestation of **unbelief**—which is the greatest sin of all. Unbelief is the unforgiveable sin because we are saved by belief (faith)^{Eph.2:8}—*without faith we cannot please God.*^{Heb.11:6} Unbelievers are condemned already but once we believe, we are forgiven and so are no longer unbelievers—therefore **unbelief** cannot be forgiven!! *God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save the world. Those who believe in him won't be condemned. But those who don't believe are already condemned because they don't believe in God's only Son. This is why people are condemned: The light came into the world. Yet, people loved the dark rather than the light because their actions were evil. People who do what is wrong hate the light and don't come to the light. They don't want their actions to be exposed. But people who do what is true come to the light so that the things they do for God may be clearly seen.*^{Jn.3:17-21}

6 People will then receive a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus.

We are not only called to live a holy life, we are actually called a **holy people**—we are **saints** and declared by God to be **sanctified**: *To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.*^{1Cor.1:2} A "*saint*" is not someone that the Church has designated "*blessed*" years after they died but *sainthood* is the status of every believer—here on earth and also in heaven: *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, 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 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.*^{Eph.1:15-19} The place where we belong (our home) is with our Saviour and with those who believe in Jesus and are in fellowship with Jesus (saints) are. *So tell me where you take care of your flock. Tell me where you rest your sheep at noon... Don't you know where to find the king? Follow the tracks the sheep make.*^{SofS.1:7-8} God never intended us to live isolated lives but to share our lives together—not in communism, where the state owns everything and everyone, but in communion where we share our lives in faith and encourage each other in the faith. *All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.*^{Acts.2:42}

So let's continue to **GO**—with Jesus authority, yet under Jesus' authority—doing the work that He has commissioned us to do and in the safety and security of Christian fellowship. **Then we will be His obedient servants and also faithful witnesses of what we have seen and of what He has shown us.**^{Acts.26:16}

August

In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will. Ephesians 1:5

Sunday 4th August 2019 Ps.51:1-9. Jn.4:1-42.

See what God can do for you! *It is no secret what God can do, what He's done for others He'll do for you. And you will be my witnesses from one end of the earth to the other.*^{Acts.1:8}

Last family Service we looked at the Billy Graham's Los Angeles Crusade in 1949 and how the Crusade was extended to 8 weeks after 4 celebrities were converted. We listened to two of them share their testimonies—Stuart Hamblin (Country and Western Radio host) and Louis Zamperini (Olympic athlete and Japanese POW survivor). However, most of us are not famous or come from privileged backgrounds—actually most people (including Christians) come from ordinary backgrounds like you and me: *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when God chose you. Not many of you were considered wise by human standards. Not many of you were powerful. Not many of you belonged to important families. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. He chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the things of this world that are common and looked down on. He chose what is not considered to be important to do away with what is considered to be important. So no one can boast to God. Because of what God has done, you belong to Christ Jesus. He has become God's wisdom for us. He makes us right with God. He makes us holy and sets us free. It is written, "The one who boasts should boast about what the Lord has done."*^{1Cor.1:26-31} Christians are followers of Christ and to follow Him we must deny ourselves: *If anyone wants to come after me, he must say no to himself. He must pick up his cross and follow me. If he wants to save his life, he will lose it. But if he loses his life for me and for the good news, he will save it. What good is it if someone gains the whole world but loses his soul? Or what can anyone trade for his soul? Suppose you are ashamed of me and my words among these adulterous and sinful people. Then the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.*^{Mk.8:34-38}

Those who think that the price is too high have never really considered the facts! God exchanges our **Punishment** for His **Forgiveness**; our **Rejection** for His **Acceptance**; our **Shame** for His **Glor**y; our **Death** for His **Life**; our **Sin** for His **Righteousness**; our **Poverty** for His **Riches**; our **Sickness** for His **Health**; our **Curse** for His **Blessing**. Our natural advantages have no spiritual value and neither do they give us any favour with God. In fact the gospel is primarily for the poor: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*^{Lk.6:20} *Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him?*^{2as.2:5} Paul considered his privileged background and natural achievements as worthless compared to knowing Christ: *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.3:7-11} Jesus said that the least in God's Kingdom is greater than all of the OT saints. *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} The reason we are greater than the OT saints is because we have peace with God NOW and God dwells within us through the Holy Spirit—He abides with us and will never leave us: *I serve the church. God appointed me to bring all of his word to you. That word contains the mystery that has been hidden for many ages. But now it has been made known to God's people. God has chosen to make known to them the*

glorious riches of that mystery. He has made it known among those who aren't Jews. And here is what it is. Christ is in you. He is your hope of glory.^{Col.1:25-27}

This week we will hear the testimony of a watch-mender's daughter, who was just an ordinary person, who did extra-ordinary things because she accepted the Word of God and saw it work in her life: *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*^{1Thes.2:13}

Her name is Corrie ten Boom and she became internationally known because her faith was tried and tested—and was proved to be real: *You may have had to suffer sadness in all kinds of trouble. 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.*^{1Pet.1:6-7}

Here are some quotes from Corrie ten Boom:

This is what the past is for! Every experience God gives us, every person He puts in our lives is the perfect preparation for the future that only He can see.

If you look at the world, you'll be distressed. If you look within, you'll be depressed. If you look at God you'll be at rest.

Hold everything in your hands lightly, otherwise it hurts when God pries your fingers open.

Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you.

We are also going to hear from some ordinary people who took God at His Word and saw His Word work in their lives—people who are members of our congregation. And, as we saw last week, the message Jesus gave to Paul, He gives to all of us: *I'm appointing you to be a servant and witness of what you have seen and of what I will show you. I will rescue you from the Jewish people and from the non-Jewish people to whom I am sending you. You will open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from satan's control to God's. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and a share among God's people who are made holy by believing in me.*^{Acts.26:16-18}

Our testimony is “bait” to entice people to hear the Gospel: *We no longer believe just because of what you said. We have now heard for ourselves. We know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.*^{Jn.4:42} And the Gospel has the power to save: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.*^{Rom.1:16} The Gospel saves because it is Good News about Jesus Christ—and faith comes by hearing the Word of God: *So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ. [The point is, Before you trust, you have to listen. But unless Christ's Word is preached, there's nothing to listen to.]*^{Rom.10:17}

So let's keep sharing our faith (what we believe about Jesus Christ), then we will **grow** the Kingdom of God (sinners will be saved) and **grow in** the Kingdom of God (saints will be mature): *I pray that you will be active in sharing what you believe. Then you will completely understand every good thing we have in Christ. [That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.]*^{Phile.1:6} And keep your message simple because the Gospel is Simple, Settled and Spiritual. **See what God can do for you!** *It is no secret what God can do, what He's done for others He'll do for you. And you will be my witnesses from one end of the earth to the other.*^{Acts.1:8}

The chimes of time ring out the news, another day is through. Someone slipped and fell, was that someone you? You may have longed for added strength, your courage to renew. Do not be disheartened, for I have news for you:

It is no secret what God can do, what He's done for others He'll do for you. With arms wide open He'll pardon you. It is no secret what God can do.

There is no night; for in His light you never walk alone. Always feel at home, wherever you may go. There is no power can conquer you while God is on your side. Take Him at His promise, don't run away and hide:

Sunday 11th August 2019 Ps.52. Acts.27

Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me. Acts.27:23

Angels & demons, spirits & spooks, ghosts & ghoulies, hobgoblins & foul fiends—the nether-world has always fascinated people but most of the books written about them should be regarded fiction as they are little more than superstitious folklore. Even Christians get caught up in the mystic of the spirit world and many of them let their over enthusiastic imaginations overtake their theology. (If you want a good book about Angels, Billy Graham wrote one that is sensible, sound and Scriptural!) Angel mythology has developed over millennia because all religions have a belief in the unseen but the only reliable source of information about angels is the Bible (as it is about God and His Kingdom). So we must resist the temptation to accept ideas and practices that are based people's experiences (or even prophetic utterances) and ensure that all our teaching and practices come from a sound study of the Scriptures rather than extra-biblical sources. We must go to God's Word and His Testimony—not to the writings and testimonies of men and women. *Some will tell you to ask for advice from people who get messages from those who have died. Others will tell you to ask for advice from people who talk to the spirits of the dead. But those people only whisper. Their words are barely heard. So shouldn't you ask for advice from your God? Why should you get advice from dead people to help those who are alive? Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.* Is.8:19-20

The Bible was written to point us Jesus and to give us encouragement to endure: *The Scriptures you study give witness about me.* Jn.5:39 *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 **ALL** Scripture is inspired by God and totally trustworthy: *Every Scripture passage is inspired by God. All of them are useful for teaching, pointing out errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God's approval. They equip God's servants so that they are completely prepared to do good things.* 2Tim.3:16-17 *We know that Scripture is always true.* Jn.10:35 However, the OT rules and regulations for worship and living holy lives were for those under the Old Covenant. God works differently with us today because we are under the New Covenant and so those rules and regulations are not applicable for us today—the Old Covenant has been superseded by the New Covenant (which made the Old obsolete): *A new day is coming, says 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 of long ago... This is the covenant I will make with Israel after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds. I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God. And they will be my people... 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.* Heb.8:8-13 For instance, the ministry of the Holy Spirit changed after Jesus died, ascended to heaven and was glorified—today the Holy Spirit resides in Believers whereas He only visited people under the Old Covenant. *Jesus stood up and spoke in a loud voice. He said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Does anyone believe in me? Then, just as Scripture says, streams of living water will flow from inside him." When he said this, he meant the Holy Spirit. Those who believed in Jesus would receive the Spirit later. Up to that time, the Spirit had not been given. This was because Jesus had not yet received glory.* Jn.7:37-39 **However**, the principles of God's Kingdom do not change and, like God Himself, those principles are eternal: *I am the LORD. I do not change.* Mal.3:6 *Your statutes stand firm; holiness adorns your house for endless days, O LORD.* Ps.93:5

The mystic of the spirit world has always been a distraction, and even some in the early Church were deceived by so-called “revelations” of angels—which prompted Paul to give these clear instructions: *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} Only the Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is pre-existent and eternal—everything else (including angels) has been created by God and for God: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*^{Jn.1:1-3} *Christ is the exact likeness of God, who can't be seen. He is first, and he is over all of creation. All things were created by him. He created everything in heaven and on earth. He created everything that can be seen and everything that can't be seen. He created kings, powers, rulers and authorities. Everything was created by him and for him. Before anything was created, he was already there. He holds everything together.*^{Col.1:15-17}

Angels are God’s servants and they do God’s bidding: *Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.*^{Ps.103:20} *As I watched, thrones were set in place. The Eternal God took his seat. His clothes were as white as snow. The hair on his head was white like wool. His throne was blazing with fire. And flames were all around its wheels. A river of fire was flowing. It was coming out from in front of God. Thousands and thousands of angels served him. Millions of them stood in front of him. The court was seated. And the books were opened.*^{Dan.7:9-10} Angels were available for Jesus’ support: *Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?*^{Matt.26:53} *Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*^{Matt.4:11} But angels also care for Believers: *The LORD will command his angels to take good care of you.*^{Ps.91:11} *Beware that you don't look down on any of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels are always in the presence of my heavenly Father.*^{Matt.18:10} *The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.*^{Ps.34:7} Angels even help us before we become Christians (they care for those who **will** inherit salvation): *All angels are spirits who serve. God sends them to serve [care for] those who will receive salvation.*^{Heb.1:14} There are many accounts of angels in the NT who helped and encouraged people like Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, Peter and Paul: *Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah. The angel was standing at the right side of the incense altar... But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid...”*^{Lk.1:11-13} *God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth... The angel went to Mary and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.”*^{Lk.1:26-28} *An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”*^{Matt.1:20} *As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. “Don't be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”*^{Mk.16:5-7} *But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out.*^{Acts.5:19} *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road...”*^{Acts.8:26} *Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.*^{Acts.12:7} *Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul.’*^{Acts.27 :23-24} *This is the revelation that God gave to Jesus Christ. Jesus shows those who serve God what will happen soon. God made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.*^{Rev.1:1}

Angels seem to have had a more prominent role before the Church was founded on the Day of Pentecost. (This may have been because the Scriptures were not completed then, or because the Holy Spirit did not reside in Believers then as He does today under the New Covenant.) However, angels still have an important role to play today (just read the book of Revelation to see how prominent angels are—and will be!). The Greek word for *gospel* is *evangel* (*eu=good,*

angel=message) and so an evangelist is literally a good angel or good messenger. *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news [gospel] to the poor.*^{Lk.4:18} Some of the “angels” in the Bible were human “messengers” such as the “angels” overseeing the Churches in Asia—Jesus would not refer to a spiritual angel as “dead” and neither would He tell him to repent! *To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent.*^{Rev.3:1-3} Also John’s “messengers” (the Greek word is “angels”) were obviously humans not spirits: *When the messengers [angels] of John had left, He began to speak to the crowds about John.*^{Lk.7:24} However, even if we have never seen spirit angels or been aware of them, they are real and relevant, and because they worship God and serve Him, they are important—and holy: *But you have come to Mount Zion. You have come to the Jerusalem in heaven. It is the city of the living God. You have come to a joyful gathering of angels. There are thousands and thousands of them. You have come to the church of God's people. God's first and only Son is over all things. God's people share in what belongs to his Son. Their names are written in heaven. You have come to God. He is the judge of all people. You have come to the spirits of godly people who have been made perfect. You have come to Jesus. He is the go-between of a new covenant. You have come to the sprinkled blood. It promises better things than the blood of Abel.*^{Heb.12:22-24} **BUT!!!!** However fascinating or awesome angels are, we must always keep our focus on Jesus! If we focus on the created instead of the Creator we will get distracted, or worse, we may become proud and arrogant—or even disconnected from Jesus! *So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality. Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud, and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.*^{Col.2:16-19} **So let's listen to the angel's instructions and worship God:** *Here is what the angel told me to write. “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” Then he added, “These are the true words of God.” When I heard this, I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Don't do that! I serve God, just as you do. I am God's servant, just like other believers who hold firmly to what Jesus has taught. Worship God! What Jesus taught is the very heart of prophecy.”*^{Rev.19:9-10} *I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. After I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel. He is the one who had been showing me these things. But he said to me, “Don't do that! I serve God, just as you do. I am God's servant, just like the other prophets and all who obey the words of this book. Worship God!”*^{Rev.22:8-9} And maybe, as we serve God by caring for others, we might meet an angel—and probably without even realizing it! *Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!*^{Heb.13:1-2}

Sunday 18th August 2019 Ps.54. Acts.28

Shake the snake into the fire! *But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects.*^{Acts.28:5}

Last week we looked at the subject of angels and saw that they continually serve God in worship—but they also serve Him by caring for Christians (even before they are born-again). Angels are part of the spirit-world that God created. However, not all spirit-beings serve God—the devil and his angels oppose God and do all they can to bring chaos, evil, death and destruction. The devil is also called “satan” which means “opposer” but this word is also used for anyone who is an adversary or who opposes. The angel of the Lord *opposed* (the word is “satan”) Balaam and his donkey on their way to curse Israel: *But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary [satan]... Behold, I have come out as an adversary [satan], because your way was contrary to me.*^{Nu.22:22;32} Although everything God created was

good, it did not stay that way for long and there was a rebellion amongst the angels with possibly a 1/3 of them being thrown out of heaven. *Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth... Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*^{Rev.12:3-9} The “dragon” (the leader of the rebellious angels) was called “morning star” or “lucifer” (*lucifer* means *shining one*): *How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, “I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God.*^{Is.14:12-13} This was because he **was** an angel of light before his rebellion—but now he only **masquerades** as an angel of light: *Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.*^{2Cor.11:14} Morning Star is also a name of Jesus who is the light of the world: *I see him, but not here and now. I perceive him, but far in the distant future. A star will rise from Jacob; a sceptre will emerge from Israel.*^{Nu.24:17} I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. *I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.*^{Rev.22:16} Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, *“I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.”*^{Jn.8:12} We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, 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.^{2Pet.1:19}

The devil is sometimes referred to as a “serpent” or “snake” because he appeared to Eve as a snake in the Garden of Eden: *The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the LORD God had made. One day he asked the woman, “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?” “You won't die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.” The woman was convinced.*^{Gen.3:1-6} After satan deceived Eve, God pronounced his demise: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.*^{Gen.3:15} And the devil’s demise is seen throughout the OT in prophesy and type: *You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.*^{Ps.91:13} *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} Judah found Adoni-Bezek there. *They fought against him... Judah chased him and caught him. Then they cut off his thumbs and big toes... The men of Judah brought Adoni-Bezek to Jerusalem. That's where he died.*^{Jdg.1:5-7} Those prophesies about satan’s demise were fulfilled when Jesus died on the cross: *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.*^{1Jn.3:8} *But God gave you new life together with Christ. He forgave us all of our sins. He wiped out the written Law with its rules. The Law was against us. It opposed us. He took it away and nailed it to the cross. He took away the weapons of the powers and authorities. He made a public show of them. He won the battle over them by dying on the cross.*^{Col.2:13-15}

When Jesus died, He was the Victor—not the victim! Although the devil motivated the Romans and Jews to murder Jesus, He died as a willing sacrifice for our sin, not as a martyr: *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} *He was arrested and sentenced to death. Then he was taken away. He was cut off from this life. He was punished for the sins of my people... The LORD says, “It was my plan to crush him and cause him to suffer. I made his life a guilt offering to pay for sin.”*^{Is.53:8-10} When Jesus defeated satan, He disarmed him and He broke satan’s power over people—including the fear of death: *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in*

slavery by their fear of death.¹ *Heb.2:14-15* When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "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."² *Rev.1:17-18* Jesus' death destroyed death and Jesus' resurrection brought life: *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.*³ *2Tim.1:9-10* Although Jesus' death was vicarious—He died on our behalf—His death was also our model and Jesus gave us an example of true love—for us to emulate: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.*⁴ *1Jn.3:16*

The devil's nature is corrupt and so when lies, kills, steals and destroys, he is behaving naturally: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*⁵ *Jn.10:10* Why aren't my words clear to you? Because you can't really hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil. You want to obey your father's wishes. "From the beginning, the devil was a murderer. He has never obeyed the truth. There is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his natural language. He does this because he is a liar. He is the father of lies."⁶ *Jn.8:43-44* And although the devil has been defeated, he is still very much alive—and he will continue to be active (although restrained) until Jesus returns to destroy death itself when He hands the Kingdom back to His Father: *Because of Adam, all people die. So because of Christ, all will be made alive. 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. Christ must rule until he has put all his enemies under his control. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.*⁷ *1Cor.15:22-26* The reason the devil is still alive and active is because he is a spirit-being. God is Spirit and all spirits are made in His image (i.e. they are eternal and so they cannot be destroyed). This means that although the devil and his angels are described as being "destroyed" and "dead", they are not annihilated—and neither can they be annihilated—but they are separated from God and have no sovereign power. God has prepared hell as a place of containment for the devil and his angels—but God will also send to hell all those who have not aligned themselves with Jesus Christ: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."⁸ *Matt.25:41-46* However, God keeps His children safe and the devil can't harm us: *We know that those who are children of God do not keep on sinning. The Son of God keeps them safe. The evil one can't harm them. We know that we are children of God. We know that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We also know that the Son of God has come. He has given us understanding. Now we can know the One who is true. And we belong to the One who is true. We also belong to his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God. He is eternal life.*⁹ *1Jn.5:18-20*

When Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects¹⁰ *Acts.28:5* it confirmed the literal meaning of Jesus' words: *Here are the miraculous signs that those who believe will do. In my name they will drive out demons. They will speak in languages they had not known before. They will pick up snakes with their hands. And when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all. They will place their hands on sick people. And the people will get well.*¹¹ *Mk.16:17-18* But the story can also be taken as an allegory to represent our ability to shake the devil off and leave us unharmed. **However, the devil can still deceive us:** *I promised you as a pure bride to one husband—Christ. But I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted, just as Eve was deceived by the cunning ways of the serpent. You happily put up with whatever anyone tells you, even if they preach a different Jesus than the one we preach, or a different kind of Spirit than the one you received, or a different kind of gospel than the one you believed.*¹² *2Cor11:2-4* **Which is why we must stay alert and continually renew our minds by washing them with the water of the Word:** *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*¹³ *Eph.5:25-27* 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} Turn all your anxiety over to God because he cares for you. Keep your mind clear, and be alert. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion as he looks for someone to devour. Be firm in the faith and resist him.^{1Pet.5:7-9}

Because Christ is now within us through the abiding Person and Presence of the Holy Spirit, we do not have to fear the evil one. So when the devil tries to deceive or oppose us, let's resist the him.

We resist the devil by yielding to God: *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}

We resist the devil by praying: *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. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.*^{Eph.6:16-18}

We resist the devil by using the Sword of the Spirit (like Jesus)—and then God will send His angels (either spirit messengers or human messengers) to care for us. *Jesus answered, "It is written... Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him."*^{Matt.4:4-11}

Sunday 25th August. Ps.56:8-13. Acts Lk.1:1-38

Prayer, Incense and the Name of Jesus.

Worship of God under the Old Covenant required people to meticulously follow a set of rituals and ceremonies that were primarily based in the Tabernacle and then later in the Temple at Jerusalem. The purpose of these rituals was to remind people of who God was and to illustrate in a dramatic way God's plan of salvation. God is holy (pure, clean and whole) and so anyone who comes to God must also be pure, clean and whole. Because no-one is naturally holy, we have to be made pure, clean and whole before we can fellowship with God. Under the Old Covenant, the religious ceremonies were performed by priests and had to be meticulously carried out in order to accurately portray what they represented—being made spiritually clean by having sins forgiven through the life of a substitute. *The priests serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain."* 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.8:5-6} God told Moses that the Israelites should worship God in the place the He would show them: *Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you want to. Offer them only at the place the LORD will choose in one of your tribes. There obey everything I command you.*^{Deut.12:13-14} Eventually that place was revealed as Jerusalem and so that is where Solomon built the Temple. The centre-piece of worship was a box-chest called the "Ark of the Covenant" where God met with the High Priest: *Have them make a chest out of acacia wood; overlay it with pure gold and run a gold moulding around the edge... The chest is the ark where the tablets of the covenant are kept. I will meet with you above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark.*^{Ex.25:10-}

²² But as only holy people can meet with a holy God, the priest had to bring a sacrifice to cover his own sins as well as the sins of the people: *The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to your brother Aaron. Tell him not to come into the Most Holy Room just anytime he wants to. Tell him not to come behind the curtain that is in front of the cover of the ark. The cover is the place where sin is paid for. If he comes behind the curtain, he will die. That is because I appear in the cloud over the cover. Aaron must not enter the area of the sacred tent without bringing a sacrifice."*^{1Lev.16:2-3}

The Temple rituals and ceremonies for worship under the Old Covenant were copies (types or illustrations) of the heavenly realities they represented: *It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than*

these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.^{Heb.9:23-3} Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant.^{Rev.11:19} So when Jesus introduced the New Covenant they became obsolete—Jesus was a better Priest offering a better Sacrifice than anything under 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} By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.^{Heb.8:1} Now under the New Covenant we don't worship in Jerusalem or through the medium of a human priest because we have direct access to God through Jesus Christ: Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.^{Jn.4:24} And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's house, let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.^{Heb.10:19-22} The Old Covenant is finished—along with its rituals and ceremonial rules: Then people will not talk about the ark of the covenant of the LORD anymore. It will never enter their minds. They will not remember it. The ark will not be missed. And another one will not be made.^{Jer.3:16} Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He cancelled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross. So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.^{Col.2:13-17} However, we can learn a lot about our spiritual life—the heavenly realities—from those Old Covenant ceremonies and especially from the Temple worship.

The Temple was administered by 24 courses of Priests (descendants of Aaron) and Levites—with each course serving for a week at a time. *This is how Aaron's descendants, the priests, were divided into groups for service... Eleazar's descendants were divided into sixteen groups and Ithamar's into eight... The first lot fell to Jehoiarib... The twenty-fourth lot fell to Maaziab. Each group carried out its appointed duties in the house of the LORD according to the procedures established by their ancestor Aaron in obedience to the commands of the LORD, the God of Israel.*^{1Chron.24:1-19} The daily ceremonies included burning incense at 9.00am and 3.00pm: *Every morning when Aaron maintains the lamps, he must burn fragrant incense on the altar. And each evening when he lights the lamps, he must again burn incense in the LORD's presence. This must be done from generation to generation. Do not offer any unholy incense on this altar, or any burnt offerings, grain offerings, or liquid offerings.*^{Ex.30:7-9} It was a great honour for any priest to burn the incense as it usually happened only once in their lifetime—and one day it was Zechariah's day: *One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar.*^{Lk.1:8-11} The incense was made up from various ingredients and ground up in a golden mortar (there is an engraving of the mortar in the triumphal Arch of Titus in Rome). *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather fragrant spices—resin droplets, mollusc shell, and galbanum—and mix these fragrant spices with pure frankincense, weighed out in equal amounts. Using the usual techniques of the incense maker, blend the spices together and sprinkle them with salt to produce a pure and holy incense. Grind some of the mixture into a very fine powder and put it in front of the Ark of the Covenant, where I will meet with you in the Tabernacle. You must treat this incense as most holy."*^{Ex.30:34-36} The officiating

priest was left alone within the Holy Place to burn the incense (½lb of incense was burnt each morning and evening), whilst the people withdrew from the inner court and fell down before the Lord, spreading their hands in silent prayer. At this most solemn period, deep silence rested on the worshipping multitude throughout the vast Temple buildings (the Temple Mount could comfortably hold 100,000 people and accommodate a crowd of 250,000 if needed). In the sanctuary itself, the priest laid the incense in the burning embers on the golden altar, and the cloud of “odours” rose up before the Lord—an image of the heavenly realities of prayer: *When the Lamb broke the seventh seal on the scroll, there was silence throughout heaven for about half an hour... Another angel came and stood at the altar. He had a shallow gold cup for burning incense. He was given a lot of incense to offer on the golden altar in front of the throne. With the incense he offered the prayers of all God's people. The smoke of the incense together with the prayers of God's people rose up from the angel's hand. It went up in front of God.*^{Rev.8:1-4} As the priest burnt the incense, the clouds of aromatic smoke ascended into the sky to remind people that the priest's prayers were reaching heaven and that his prayers were a sweet fragrance to God: *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*^{Ps.141:2} *And when he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people.*^{Rev.5:8}

Today, we don't have a human priest to burn incense for us or to intercede for us because we have Jesus interceding for us. *For he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.*^{Is.53:12} *Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*^{Rom.8:34} *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 both Priest and Sacrifice and just as the burning incense gave off a fragrant aroma, so the Name of Jesus gives off a fragrant aroma: *Your name is like perfume [ointment] poured out.*^{Sof.1:3} *A good name is better than fine perfume [ointment].*^{Ecc.7:1} When we spend time with Jesus we imbibe His fragrance and we become a pleasing aroma to God: *Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.*^{Eph.5:1-2} *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.4:17-19} Christ's aroma on us brings life for some but for others it brings death—some people love us and some people loath us! *For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life.*^{2Cor.2:15-16} But let's make sure that we don't pollute Jesus' fragrance with our own folly: *As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.*^{Ecc.10:1} So when we pray, let's remember the incense of the Old Covenant and remind ourselves of the spiritual reality it represented—that Jesus is our Priest who intercedes for us and so our prayers reach God and are a sweet aroma to Him. This will give us the confidence to come to God boldly in the name of Jesus: *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*^{Eph.3:12} *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*^{Heb.4:16}

September

to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. *Ephesians 1:6*

Sunday 1st September. Ps.130.

See what God can do for you!

Over the last 2 Family Services we have heard testimonies from people who have had their lives changed after they met with Jesus—some were historical (from Billy Graham’s 1949 Los Angeles Crusade and from Corrie ten Boom) and some were up-to-date (from our own congregation). Stewart Hamblin’s song “*It is no secret what God can do, what he’s done for others He’ll do for you. With arms wide open He’ll welcome you; it is no secret, what God can do!*” summarizes their testimonies—and also the testimonies shared today from people in our congregation. God does not change and what He has done for us, He can do for others—but they need to know what God can do for them. Faith comes from hearing the Word of God *Rom.10:17* but unless people listen to us, they won’t hear what we have to say! Testimonies help other see what we have seen and to encourage others to overcome—to come over and see things from God’s perspective. When we share our testimony we want to attract people to hear the Word of God so that faith will arise in their hearts—because it is only the Gospel that can save people: *I am not ashamed of the good news. It is God’s power. And it will save everyone who believes. It is meant first for the Jews. It is meant also for those who aren’t Jews. The good news shows how God makes people right with himself. From beginning to end, becoming right with God depends on a person’s faith. It is written, “Those who are right with God will live by faith.”* *Rom.1:16-17*

After we are made right with God by placing our trust in Him, we have an obligation to live holy lives that honour Him. Although God has given us a new spirit that is holy, we still have our own personality (soul) that we must maintain and keep pure—and **we** are responsible for doing that! The Holy Spirit abides within us, empowering, counselling and challenging us but our personality (soul) is saved (sanctified, made holy, matures) as we live out our faith. *So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls.* *1Pet.1:7-9* It is our faith that enables us to overcome difficulties, troubles and temptations. *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 he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.* *1Jn.5:3-5* So we must make every effort to maintain our faith: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.* *1s.7:9* *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* Obviously, the Word of God is the mainstay of our faith: *The Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’* *Matt.4:4* *So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.* *Rom.10:17*

But there are 3 main factors in maintaining our faith and being overcomers—the blood of Jesus, our own personal testimony and our selfless commitment to Jesus Christ: *Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God have come. The authority of his Christ has come. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; And they did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die.* *Rev.12:10-11*

We overcome by the blood of Jesus. We often use the phrase “*the blood*” and it is in many of our hymns but we sometimes overlook its meaning. The *blood of Jesus* is not a talisman to use for protection but a statement of the heavenly realities. God told Moses that: *the life of every creature is its blood,* *Lev.17:14* thus the *blood of Jesus* means the *life of Jesus*. When Jesus died, He gave

His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. *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} Jesus died as the Lamb of God and took our sins away: *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*^{1Jn.1:29} *This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and remission [separation and removal] of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*^{1Lk.24:46-47} We overcome by what Jesus has already done for us at Calvary—and by trusting Him and living in fellowship with Him: *This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:4-5} At conversion God took us out of the world—He took us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of Light: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*^{1Pet.2:9} *You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.*^{1Thess.5:5-6} Now we belong to Jesus (*we have confessed Him as Lord*^{Rom.10:9-10}) we must live as if we belong to Jesus—as children of light: *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.*^{Eph.5:8-11} *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.*^{1Jn.2:15-17}

We overcome by the word of our testimony. Faith speaks! We all talk about what we are passionate about (what we believe in)—whether friends, food or faith! *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken."* *With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak.*^{2Cor.4:13} But we are also under an obligation to share our faith—it was the last thing that Jesus said before He ascended to the Father: *Then Jesus said to them, "So wherever you go in the world, tell everyone the Good News."*^{Mk.16:15} And when we share our faith, we gain a better understanding of what we believe—whether it is with unbelievers for evangelism or with believers for encouragement: *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.*^{Phile.1:6} Another version puts it this way: *that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.* So, sharing our faith is as easy as acknowledging every good thing which is in us in Christ Jesus! Sharing our faith involves telling others what God has done for us and what He has given to us! Because we worship God in Spirit and in truth,^{Jn.4:24} we must be careful to say the truth about God and His life in us. We must make our lips do their duty and fill them with the Word; we must make our lips say what God says about our situation and not allow them to say anything to the contrary. *Look to God's instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark.*^{Is.8:20} Remember, our testimony is about God's goodness not to our badness! Our testimony is about how good God has been to us and how we have experienced God's goodness, not just about surviving our problems. John G. Lake said: *It is a sad thing when you hear Christians with a groan. The secret of Christianity is the secret of Christ possessing the heart of a person, a person being yielded to Him so that His victory, His consciousness and His power possesses your spirit and mind.* Our emphasis is on the Divine, not the devil—so make sure your *testimony* is not a *moany about your test!* Keep focused on Jesus, our Emmanuel (which means: God with us). *Christ is in you. He is your hope of glory.*^{Col.1:27}

We overcome by not loving our lives so much that we are afraid to die. However wonderful heaven is, none of us wants to go there today because it will mean dying! However, death is the inevitable end of our life here on earth and each of us will have to face it someday.

The Greek word for *witness* is *martyr* and because so many of the Witnesses in early Church gave their lives for their faith, the word *martyr* now means someone who gives their life for a cause—and especially for Jesus Christ. Paul reached the place where he could say: *For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honour to Christ, whether I live or die. For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. If I continue to live in this life, my work will produce more results. I don't know which I would prefer. I find it hard to choose between the two. I would like to leave this life and be with Christ. That's by far the better choice.*^{Phil.1:20-23} But Paul was in prison when he wrote that—and because we are living in relative freedom and comfort, it would be harder for us to feel the same way about dying! Nevertheless, we must first count the cost and then carry our cross if we are to faithfully follow Jesus: *If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels. I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Kingdom of God.*^{Lk.9:23-27} To follow Christ requires a wholehearted commitment but the result is eternal life!

As we apply these 3 principles of, the blood of Jesus, our own personal testimony and our selfless commitment to Jesus Christ, we will overcome every spiritual difficulty that the world can throw at us **AND** we will bring honour to our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. So let's continue testify to God's goodness as we acknowledge every good thing in Christ Jesus that is in us—and tell others: **see what God can do for you!**

Pablum From the Pit

Cootchie, cootchie, cootchie coo,
God loves me and God loves you!
Smile sinner, don't be sad;
God's not angry; He's not mad.
Even when you leave the path,
There's no hell and there's no wrath.
So don't you fear, just do your best.
Judgment Day won't be a test.
God sees your heart and that's enough.
The Judgment Seat won't be that tough.
For you can't sin away His grace
Or take that smile from His face.
'Cause God is love and love is good:
He'll treat you like you think He should!
Just trust me, sinner, to the end.
My name is satan; I'm your friend!
From Playing With Holy Fire by Michael Brown

Sunday 8th September. Ps.57

As we have a Guest Speaker this morning, I have included these articles:

Faithfulness Is Not Theologically Complicated

Lately I have been mystified by—and distressed with—a trend I've seen with many who identify as Christians yet seem to effortlessly embrace secular ideas completely at odds with a biblical understanding of reality. These more “*progressive*” Christians tend to be pluralistic regarding

salvation, sexually active as single persons, gay friendly (and here I do not mean appropriately friendly with gays, but rather supportive of “*alternative sexualities*”), comfortable with “*gender fluidity*,” in favour of same-sex marriage, and pro-choice. I’m distressed because they have fallen into a trap Paul warned about: “*See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men...rather than according to Christ.*”^{Col. 2:8} I’m mystified because there’s no good reason for faltering in the face of these particular trends because Scripture speaks with clarity against them. Since there is no biblical ambiguity on any of these issues, there is no real cause for a Christian’s confusion. Simply put, on a host of culturally charged moral and spiritual issues, *faithfulness is not theologically complicated.*

Why, then, are many who claim to be Christians floundering on fundamentals with such regularity? I think there are two reasons.

First, it’s clear that many Christians are untutored in the basics. To them, Christianity is simply about believing in Jesus in some vague sense and loving people in a can’t-we-all-just-get-along kind of way. That’s where their theology begins, and that’s where it ends.

Second, many Christians—especially among the younger generation, sadly—seem to care more about what their friends think about them than what Jesus thinks about them. Each of these failings is dangerous on its own; in combination, they are spiritually deadly.

I will not, here, parse out clever ways to persuade outsiders of God’s point of view on these issues. Rather, I want Christians to see the simple biblical facts for themselves. Maybe clarity will lessen the confusion and breed the courage needed to face the cultural pressures.

Salvation: First things first. That trust in Jesus of Nazareth is necessary to escape eternal punishment for sin is arguably the most offensive detail of classical Christian theology. Peter called it “*a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.*”^{1Pet. 2:8} Yet it is also gospel bedrock.

To stand with Jesus on this issue invites a tsunami of scorn and abuse in our culture. It is the first claim jettisoned when Christians itch to become more “*tolerant*” and substitute a Christianity of worldly love, acceptance, and inclusion for the gospel of rescue from wrath. To side with the crowd on this, though, is spiritual treason.

The disciples did not choose the name “*Christians*” for themselves. Others did. Followers of Jesus described themselves simply as “*the Way*”.^{Acts. 9:2} The reason was clear. That was how Jesus described Himself: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.*”^{Jn. 14:6} Lest anyone be tempted to read ambiguity into that statement at the end of Jesus’ ministry, take counsel from this one at the very beginning: *Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*^{Matt. 7:13–14} Controversial? Yes. Confusing? No. The claim is clear. New Testament writers repeated it constantly in a variety of ways, offering nine lines of argument to solidify their point.

1. **Jesus is the world’s only source of salvation:** *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*^{Jn. 3:16}
2. **Jesus is the Father’s choice:** *Jesus...said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.’*^{Jn. 6:29}
3. **Thus, rejection of Jesus is rejection of the Father Himself:** *He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent Him.*^{Jn. 5:23}
4. **Rejecting Jesus brings wrath; believing in Jesus rescues from wrath:** *He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.*^{Jn. 3:36}
5. **Jesus alone provides forgiveness of sin:** *Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.*^{Jn. 8:24}

6. **Many impostors will claim to provide other ways of salvation:** *See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many.*^{1Matt.24:4-5}
7. **But there are no alternatives:** *There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.*^{1Acts.4:12}
8. **Jesus will be man's final judge:** *Christ Jesus... is to judge the living and the dead.*^{2Tim.4:1}
9. **Therefore, all nations are to be given this gospel:** *Repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations.*^{1Lk.24:47}

There is only one answer to the Philippian jailer's question, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul gave it: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved".^{1Acts.6:30-31} Culture may be confused on salvation. Don't you be. On this issue God has spoken clearly—faithfulness to our Lord is not theologically complicated. **It is simple and straightforward, uncomplicated and unambiguous. Do not be confused.**

Greg Koukl www.str.org

Flesh and Faith

Theosophy (*the teaching about God and the world based on individual enlightenment rather than Scripture*) tries to make us believe that all people have the nature of deity, the "spark of divinity dwells in all men and new birth is simply the awakening, blowing into flame". No spark of divinity is in man apart from the new birth. **Christianity is God possessing man and is a miracle.** Everyone born again becomes a Temple of the Holy Spirit who makes His home in the Believer's physical body and dominates the human spirit that has been re-created. Before we were born again, our minds were in harmony with our unregenerate spirit. Now that our spirit has been recreated, our minds become renewed by the Word. Now the two, our spirit and our mind are brought into harmony. Your mind, which has been dominated by the senses, receiving all of its knowledge through the nerve centres, is being renewed through the Word, so that it is coming into fellowship with your recreated spirit. What is spirit? In a word it may be said that it is the divine element in man or, perhaps more correctly, that which is cognizant (aware) of God. It is not the intellectual or mental or aesthetic (philosophical theory as to what is beautiful) or sensual (of the senses) part of man but the spiritual, that higher nature which recognises and converses with the heavenly and divine.

E.W.Kenyon. *Righteousness* (An unpublished manuscript)

Sunday 15th September. Ps.61. Lk.1:39-80

The Paradox of Christianity *He has lifted up the humble and He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*^{1Lk.1:52-53}

A paradox (literally, "contrary to expectation") is a statement that appears to be self-contradictory, but which may include a latent truth. For instance, in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, one part of the cardinal rule is this statement: "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." The government in the novel claims that everyone is equal, but it has never treated everyone equally. It is the concept of equality stated in this paradox that is opposite to the common belief of equality.) Christianity is a paradox because the principles of God's Kingdom often go against human logic— what one would naturally expect. However, when our God is taken into consideration, Christianity is rational, real and relevant. This is because our God 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): *LORD, you know me and see me. You test my thoughts about you.*^{Jer.12:3} *Now we can see that you know all things. This makes us believe that you came from God.*^{1Jn.16:30} **Omnipotent** (all powerful): *I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?*^{2Jer.32:27} **Omnibenevolent** (perfectly good and all love): *You are good, and what you do is good.*^{Ps.119:68} God's thoughts and ways are bigger

than our thoughts and ways! *My thoughts are not like your thoughts. And your ways are not like my ways. The heavens are higher than the earth. And my ways are higher than your ways. My thoughts are higher than your thoughts.*^{Is.55:8-9} In God's Kingdom, the unseen dominates the seen because the spiritual dominates the sensual and the supernatural dominates the natural. In God's Kingdom, the God of miracles is at work: *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*^{Ps.77:14} In God's Kingdom the natural laws are no longer absolute because the God who created them is not restricted by them: for instance, one of the basic laws of physics is that "*matter can neither be created nor destroyed*" and yet God made everything out of nothing—*creatio ex nihilo*! *Faith convinces us that God created the world through his word. This means what can be seen was made by something that could not be seen.*^{Heb.11:3} To become a Christian, one has to repent—which means "*change your thinking*". Repentance means changing our mind about everything. Repentance means changing our mind about God, changing our mind about sin and changing our mind about our self—including our old way of life and our old way of thinking. Our old pattern of thinking, seeing, talking, acting, behaving and reacting is out and a new pattern is in place. *If any man be in Christ Jesus he is a new creation old things are passed away behold all things have become new.*^{2Cor.5:17} [For more information see the booklet "**New Creation Realities**" available on our website under [What we Teach/Resources or click on this link](#)] In God's Kingdom, weakness becomes a Christian's strength. Although naturally speaking, weakness makes us ineffective and a burden, in God's Kingdom when we are weak, we are at our strongest and become our most effective: *But God told me: "My kindness is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak." So I will brag even more about my weaknesses in order that Christ's power will live in me. Therefore, I accept weakness, mistreatment, hardship, persecution, and difficulties suffered for Christ. It's clear that when I'm weak, I'm strong.*^{2Cor.12:9-10} In God's Kingdom, poverty becomes a Christian's asset. Although naturally speaking poverty makes us poor, in God's Kingdom when we are poor, we are we are at our richest: *Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?*^{1Jas.2:5} In God's Kingdom, humility becomes a Christian's authority. Although naturally speaking lowliness makes us insignificant, in God's Kingdom when we are humble, we are at our greatest: *Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.*^{Lk.9:48} Humility is the channel for God's grace: *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*^{1Pet.5:5-7} And it is God's grace that changes our situation: *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} If we will humble ourselves, God will lift us up and we can fellowship with Him—and receive the help we need: *For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."*^{Is.57:15} *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*^{Heb.4:16} Humble Christians can live their lives in confidence and blessed assurance, knowing that God will use them in the most extraordinary ways: *The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*^{Matt.23:11-12} *For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*^{Lk.14:11}

In the *Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions*, there is this prayer:

Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, You have brought me to the valley of vision, where I live in the depths but see You in the heights; hemmed in by mountains of weakness, I behold Your glory. Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up; that to be low is to be high; that the broken heart is the healed heart; that the contrite spirit is the

rejoicing spirit; that the repenting soul is the victorious soul; that to have nothing is to possess all; that to bear the cross is to wear the crown; that to give is to receive; that the valley is the place of vision. Lord, in the daytime, stars can be seen from deepest wells, and the deeper the wells the brighter Your stars shine; let me find Your light in my darkness, Your life in my death, Your joy in my sorrow, Your grace in my sin, Your riches in my poverty, Your glory in my valley.

Spiritual hunger is another paradox of the Christian life: *He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*^{Lk.1:53} The Israelites were fed daily for 40 years with *manna* during their wandering in the wilderness—they neither sowed nor reaped but just collected their bread for free! God’s provision of physical food for the Israelites was an illustration of God’s provision of spiritual food for us—spiritual food that can’t be earned or bought but only received for free! *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} *Long ago your people ate the manna in the desert, and they still died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven. A person can eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Everyone who eats some of this bread will live forever. The bread is my body. I will give it for the life of the world.*^{Jn.6:49-51} Just as the Israelites collected and ate the manna each day for those 40 years in the wilderness, we too must collect and eat our spiritual food each day. *Give us this day our daily bread.*^{Matt.6:11} *Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*^{Matt.4:4} And just like those Israelites whose food appeared each day, our food will always be available for us—we will never go spiritually hungry or thirsty again if we believe in Jesus as God’s Son and our Saviour. *Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”*^{Jn.6:35} *Jesus answered her, “Everyone who drinks this water will become thirsty again. But those who drink the water that I will give them will never become thirsty again. In fact, the water I will give them will become in them a spring that gushes up to eternal life.”*^{Jn.4:13-14} However, just as eating physical food with no exercise is bad for your health (and we all know the consequences of obesity), so just “eating” spiritual food with no exercise is also bad for our spiritual health. If all we do is “eat” spiritual food (read and listen to the Word of God) and don’t exercise (put God’s Word into practice) then we will become spiritually “obese” and probably not *finish the race* in good spiritual health. When Ehud brought the Word of the Lord to Eglon (who was obese), *he stuck the sword it into the king's stomach. Even the handle sank in after the blade... Ehud didn't pull the sword out. And the fat closed over it.*^{Jdg.3:21-22} This is an allegory to show that the Word of God that brings life, can also bring death if we are not spiritually healthy. The Christians in Corinth had plenty of spiritual “*food*” and even though they thought they were “*exercising*” by having the spiritual gifts in operation, they were immature and spiritually lazy to the point of being unhealthy: *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ.*^{1Cor.3:1} Paul warned them that spiritual weakness and sickness leads to physical weakness and sickness—even physical death: *So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.*^{1Cor.11:27-32} God has provided us with spiritual food—the Word of God (both Jesus Himself and the Scriptures)—but we still have to actually eat it and share it with others! If we don’t act on God’s Word, we are deceiving ourselves: *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it*

says.^{Jas.1:22} *Son of man, your people talk about you in their houses and whisper about you at the doors. They say to each other, 'Come on, let's go hear the prophet tell us what the LORD is saying!' So my people come pretending to be sincere and sit before you. They listen to your words, but they have no intention of doing what you say. Their mouths are full of lustful words, and their hearts seek only after money. You are very entertaining to them, like someone who sings love songs with a beautiful voice or plays fine music on an instrument. They hear what you say, but they don't act on it.*^{Ezek.33:30-32} Like Paul, we must keep spiritually fit and healthy by leading a disciplined life: *So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*^{1Cor.9:26-27} So, let's keep eating and exercising yet staying humble and we will be filled with good things! **He has lifted up the humble and He has filled the hungry with good things.**^{Lk.1:52-53}

Sunday 22nd September. Ps.62.1-7

As we have Steve Bryant with us today I have included this article from Greg Koukl (continued from 2 weeks ago).

Faithfulness Is Not Theologically Complicated

Today, many who identify as Christians seem to effortlessly embrace secular ideas completely at odds with a biblical understanding of reality. These more “*progressive*” Christians tend to be pluralistic regarding salvation, sexually active as single persons, supportive of “*alternative sexualities*”, comfortable with “*gender fluidity*,” in favour of same-sex marriage, and pro-choice. They have fallen into a trap Paul warned about: *See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men...rather than according to Christ.*^{Col.2:8} Since there is no biblical ambiguity on any of these issues, there is no real cause for a Christian's confusion. Simply put, on a host of culturally charged moral and spiritual issues, *faithfulness is not theologically complicated*. Why, then, are many who claim to be Christians floundering on fundamentals with such regularity? I think there are two reasons. First, it's clear that many Christians are untutored in the basics. To them, Christianity is simply about believing in Jesus in some vague sense and loving people in a can't-we-all-just-get-along kind of way. That's where their theology begins, and that's where it ends. Second, many Christians—especially among the younger generation, sadly—seem to care more about what their friends think about them than what Jesus thinks about them. Each of these failings is dangerous on its own; in combination, they are spiritually deadly. I will not, here, parse out clever ways to persuade outsiders of God's point of view on these issues. Rather, I want Christians to see the simple biblical facts for themselves. Maybe clarity will lessen the confusion and breed the courage needed to face the cultural pressures.

Abortion: I realize, of course, that Scripture does not address abortion directly. Rather, the issue is subsumed under a broader biblical injunction. The sixth commandment says simply, *You shall not murder.*^{Ex.20:13} It mirrors a directive going back almost to the beginning that is itself grounded in a truth in the very first chapter of the Bible. After the flood, God told Noah, *Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.*^{Gen.9:6} Twice in Genesis 1, God declares that humans bear His image. Because human beings bear God's image, any destruction of a human being deserves the severest penalty. Here is the question: Are unborn human beings image-bearers in the same sense God is referring to in Genesis? Are they protected under the sixth commandment, thus making abortion an act of *de facto* homicide? Are the preborn the same kind of living beings as those who have already been born? Put another way, *in God's eyes*, are humans *before birth* the *very same valuable individuals* they are *after* they are born? It does no good, by the way, to dismiss the value of preborn humans by labelling them “*fetuses*,” or “*zygotes*,” or “*blobs of cells*.” First, you and I are also “*blobs of cells*” after a fashion. Second, like the word “*adolescent*,” the other terms are purely human inventions marking stages of biological development. Embryology—and common sense—tells us that the very same

individual is present at each stage, regardless of the arbitrary terms we use to distinguish the stages.

Some will be surprised to know that Scripture itself gives a definitive answer to our question above in a passage that is clear, unambiguous, and decisive. Luke 1 records a remarkable exchange between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, almost immediately after Mary conceives Jesus by the Holy Spirit. *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. And she cried out with a loud voice and said, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy.*^{Lk.1:41-44} Note, this meeting took place when Martha was in her late second trimester with John, and Mary was in her early first trimester with Jesus. Recall also that earlier in the chapter we learned that John *himself* would be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb^{Lk.1:15} and this passage marks the prophecy's fulfilment. Clearly, John the "fetus"—filled with the Holy Spirit—leaped with joy in the presence of the "zygote," Jesus the Lord. So here is our question again, now applied specifically to the prophet and the Saviour: Were John the Baptist and Jesus their same selves *before* they were born as they were *after* they were born? Clearly the biblical answer is, "Yes." Had Mary or Elizabeth chosen abortion, then, they would have killed Jesus and John—not a *potential* or *possible* or *future* Jesus and John, but Jesus and John *themselves*.

The sixth commandment forbids murder. Murder is the wilful killing of an innocent human being, an individual made in the image of God. Does abortion do this? According to what we learn in the Bible, yes, it does. Abortion, then—in God's eyes—is murder. No Christian should condone it. No Christian should participate in it. Every Christian should condemn it. Having a baby under any circumstances is a challenge, but especially so when the pregnancy is unplanned or the result of a traumatic experience. Even so, these complications do not change the basic biblical calculus. Abortion violates the sixth commandment.

Do not be confused. This is *not* a complex issue, theologically.

Marriage: When Jesus was asked about the legitimacy of divorce, He answered by going back to the beginning. *Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"?*^{Matt.19:4-5} According to Jesus, then, marriage is not a cultural convention based on current custom and sexual whim. Instead, marriage is tied to God's creation order. Here is His formula for marriage: *one man, with one woman, becoming one flesh, for one lifetime.* Notice Jesus' implicit support of binary gender in His reference to Genesis 2:24: *a man* leaves his *father* and *mother* and cleaves to his *wife*. The kind of marriage God had in mind from the beginning is rooted in gender. Men marry women. Women marry men. And being a man or a woman is determined by one's physical body. The reason, of course, is obvious. As a group, as a rule, by nature and by design, long-term, monogamous, heterosexual marriages produce the next generation. Successful reproduction requires stable families; stable families are fundamental to civilization; marriages begin families, and a man and a woman make a marriage. According to Jesus' thinking, then, same-sex marriage (or any other creative variation) is not only wrong for the same reason divorce is wrong—it corrupts God's good design—it's also a contradiction in terms. The word "*marriage*" has no meaning when used of same-sex couples since heterosexual union is inherent to God's definition of marriage. **There is nothing ambiguous about Jesus' view. Yes, the culture is confused, but there is no reason for you to be confused.**

There is a telling passage in the passion narrative where Pilate is confronted by the mob and must decide where his loyalties lie. Mark records his decision: *Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.*^{Mk.15:15} Many

in Christendom today are taking their cues from Pilate. They are more concerned with satisfying the crowd than being faithful to Jesus. They champion the criminal and turn their back on the Saviour.

Culture may be confused on salvation, abortion, gender, marriage, and sex. Don't you be. On these issues, God has spoken clearly. Faithfulness to our Lord is not theologically complicated!!!

Sunday 29th September. Ps.127 Luke 2

The fundamentals of our faith: *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.*^{Lk.2:34-35}

Good theology makes easy Christianity! Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain.^{Ps.127:1} And unless we have a sound understanding of God through His Word, our life will fall apart in times of trouble. Although all Scripture is inspired and useful for instruction, there are some verses in Scripture that clearly describe the fundamentals of our faith—verses like: *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} *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*^{1Jn.1:9} *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*^{Gal.2:20} There are other verses that also contain the fundamentals of our faith but in more opaque terms—verses like: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*^{Gen.3:15} *Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."*^{Gen.22:2} *Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.*^{Gen.21:10} These are clearly allegories but when these verses are read in the context of God's plan of salvation, it is obvious that they explain some of the fundamentals of our faith—they point to Jesus Christ, God's Son and our Saviour. *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} Simeon's prophecy to Mary also contains the fundamentals of our faith: *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.*^{Lk.2:34-35}

Child: *This child...*^{Lk.2:34} The very basic fundamental of our faith is the Trinity, one eternal God who co-exists in three Persons—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. At a definite point in history, the Eternal Word of God became human and dwelt among His creation in the Person of Jesus. *The Holy Spirit will come to you. The power of the Most High God will cover you. So the holy one that is born will be called the Son of God.*^{Lk.1:35} *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... 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.1:1-2;14} **The fundamentals of our faith includes the Child**—Jesus is truly God and truly human.

Destined: *This child is destined...*^{Lk.2:34} Jesus was destined (appointed) to save us from sin by His death on the cross. This Child grew up into a Man who was killed by the Romans at the request of the Jews because of their spiritual spite and anger. However, they didn't understand that their murder of Jesus was fulfilling God's plan of Salvation for us! *Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption... We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord*

of glory.^{1Cor.1:30;2:6-8} And God had planned Jesus' vicarious death from the very beginning: *The Book of Life belongs to the Lamb whose death was planned before the world was created.*^{Rev.13:8} *You were bought by the priceless blood of Christ. He is a perfect lamb. He doesn't have any flaws at all. He was chosen before God created the world. But he came into the world in these last days for you.*^{1Pet.1:19-20} **The fundamentals of our faith includes a destiny**—God's predetermined plan of our salvation through Jesus' death on the cross.

Falling: *This child is destined to cause the falling...*^{Lk.2:34} Jesus is the Prince of Peace: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*^{Is.9:6} But Jesus said that that following Him would not be peaceful: *As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near'... As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you... All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved... Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword... anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*^{Matt.10:7-38} This is because the world is under the domination of satan—who is the opposer of God and everything that God stands for: *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*^{1Jn.5:19} *The god of this world has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. As a result, they don't see the light of the Good News about Christ's glory.*^{2Cor.4:4} Jesus **is** the Way^{Jn.14:6} but for unbelievers He is **in** the way! *And Israel, who seemed so interested in reading and talking about what God was doing, missed it. How could they miss it? Because instead of trusting God, they took over. They were absorbed in what they themselves were doing. They were so absorbed in their "God projects" that they didn't notice God right in front of them, like a huge rock in the middle of the road. And so they stumbled into him and went sprawling. Isaiah (again!) gives us the metaphor for pulling this together: Careful! I've put a huge stone on the road to Mount Zion, a stone you can't get around. But the stone is me! If you're looking for me, you'll find me on the way, not in the way.*^{Rom.9:31-33} However, for Believers, Jesus is not a stumbling stone but a stepping stone and the chief foundation stone—a Stone to be proud of: *To you who trust him, he's a Stone to be proud of, but to those who refuse to trust him, the stone the workmen threw out is now the chief foundation stone. For the untrusting it's... a stone to trip over, a boulder blocking the way. They trip and fall because they refuse to obey, just as predicted.*^{1Pet.2:7-8} **The fundamentals of our faith includes falling**—there is a hell as well as a heaven, there is eternal punishment as well as eternal life: *those who place their trust in Jesus Christ will not perish but have eternal life... But those who do not place their trust in Him stand condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son!*^{Jn.3:16-18}

Rising: *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many...*^{Lk.2:34} The Greek word for "rising" is *anastasis* which means *resurrection* (literally "stand up"). Jesus explains that there are 2 resurrections: the 1st resurrection is **now** when people hear His voice (**conversion**); the 2nd resurrection is **later** when people will rise up out of their graves when Jesus returns at the Judgement Day (**conclusion**). *What I'm about to tell you is true. Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He will not be found guilty. He has crossed over from death to life. What I'm about to tell you is true. A time is coming for me to give life. In fact, it has already begun. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. Those who hear it will live. The Father has life in himself. He has also allowed the Son to have life in himself. And the Father has given him the authority to judge. This is because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this. A time is coming when all who are in the grave will hear his voice. They will all come out of their graves. Those who have done good will rise and live again. Those who have done evil will rise and be found guilty.*^{Jn.5: 24-29} The 1st death is spiritual death—the separation from God that every human being descended from Adam inherited: *He gave us life even when we were dead in sin.*^{Eph.2:5} The 2nd death is physical death and the judgement that follows. *The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.*^{Rev.20:14-15} Those of us who have experienced **conversion** (1st resurrection) have no fear of the

conclusion (2nd resurrection) because the 2nd death (physical death and beyond) will not harm us: *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*^{Rev.2:10-11} *Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them.*^{Rev.20:6} *But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshippers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.*^{Rev.21:8} Jesus was appointed to cause us to “stand up” now and also at the resurrection on the last day because we belong to Him and have peace with God through the cross: *At one time you were far away from God. But now you belong to Christ Jesus. He spilled his blood for you. That has brought you near to God. Christ himself is our peace... 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.2:13-19} Yes! **The fundamentals of our faith includes our rising—rising up now at the resurrection of conversion and rising up later at the resurrection of conclusion—at the Judgement Day when Jesus returns.**

Sign: *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against...*^{Lk.2:34} People can't be neutral about Jesus. C.S.Lewis said “Jesus was either **Lord, Liar, or Lunatic!** Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about Him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” Although everyone has evidence of the Creator (even if they don't believe in Creation!), not everyone knows about the Christ—so Jesus' Commission is our Go-Mission. **The fundamentals of our faith includes the sign of Jesus' virgin birth, vicarious death and physical resurrection:** *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*^{Is.7:14} *Evil and unfaithful people ask for a miraculous sign! But none will be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Jonah was in the stomach of a huge fish for three days and three nights. Something like that will happen to the Son of Man. He will spend three days and three nights in the grave.*^{Matt.12:39-40}

Revelation: *This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.*^{Lk.2:34} Another version puts it this way: *A figure misunderstood and contradicted. But the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are.* Until we are challenged and convicted of sin, we will never want a Saviour. Christianity involves a conviction of sin and a revelation that Jesus is God's Son and our Saviour. **The fundamentals of our faith includes revelation**—we realise that God sees our deepest thoughts (and darkest thoughts!). But faith also includes the revelation that Jesus has forgiven us, that we are declared righteous by Him and now we belong to Him.

As we begin to understand **the fundamentals of our faith**, we are able to enjoy fellowship with God **in happy times and in hard times** because we **trust Him and obey Him.**

October

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. Ephesians 1:7-8

Sunday 6th October. Ps.62:7-12

See what God can do for you!

Over the summer we have seen and heard testimonies of what God has done for others—with the theme: “*It is no secret what God can do; what He’s done for others He can do for you!*” Our testimony should never be an ordeal, and like our giving, should be shared “*generously, cheerfully and willingly, not under compulsion!*” We overcome the world and we stay overcomers through our testimony: *Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God have come. The authority of his Christ has come. Satan, who brings charges against our brothers and sisters, has been thrown down. He brings charges against them before our God day and night. 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. So be joyful, you heavens! Be glad, all you who live there! But how terrible it will be for the earth and the sea! The devil has come down to you. He is very angry. He knows his time is short.*^{Rev.12:10-12} Our testimony is the story of what we have experienced about God, what we know about Him and how we trust Him—or to put it simply: our faith. And so it is actually **our faith** that gives us the victory over the world and everything in the world—including life’s troubles: *Here is what it means to love God. It means that we obey his commands. And his commands are not hard to obey. That's because everyone who is a child of God has won the battle over the world. Our faith has won the battle for us. Who is it that has won the battle over the world? Only the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{1Jn.5:3-5} When we **remember** who God is and what God has done for us, we will be emboldened to **testify** about who God is and what God has done for us.

So, Who is God? What has God done for us?

Who is God?

God is Lord of heaven and earth: *Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.”*^{Jn.10:21} God is not a figment of our imagination or a made-up folk story from past generations—He is the Creator of the Universe who 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} He is **Omniscient** (all knowing): **LORD, you know me and see me. You test my thoughts about you.**^{Jer.12:3} *Now we can see that you know all things. This makes us believe that you came from God.*^{Jn.16:30} He is **Omnipotent** (all powerful): *Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.*^{Jer.32:17} *I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.*^{Job.42:2} He is **Omnibenevolent** (perfectly good and all love): *You are good, and what you do is good.*^{Ps.119:68} *Every good present and every perfect gift comes from above, from the Father who made the sun, moon, and stars. The Father doesn't change like the shifting shadows produced by the sun and the moon.*^{Jas.1:17} That is why praise focuses on the greatness and goodness of God. Praise is saying good words (eulogy) about God, not saying how we feel about Him or what we want Him to do. Praise is simply honouring God for who He is! When we lose sight of who God is, it is easy to begin to think that He can’t (or won’t) help us. Although we can’t see God, we know He is real because Jesus came to earth from heaven and showed us what He is like. *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. So how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don't you believe that I am in the Father? Don't you believe that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. The Father lives in me. He is the One who is doing his work. Believe me when I say I am in the Father. Also believe that the Father is in me. Or at least believe what the miracles show about me.*^{Jn.14:9-11} Jesus’ life, His teachings and His activities were documented by His followers who witnessed them. But Jesus’ life, His teachings and His activities have also been validated by the

millions of His subsequent followers over the past 2000 years who have confirmed them through their changed lives when they placed their trust in Him. *No one has ever seen God. But if we love one another, God lives in us. His love is made complete in us. We know that we belong to him and he belongs to us. He has given us his Holy Spirit. The Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. We have seen it. We give witness to it. God lives in anyone who agrees that Jesus is the Son of God. That kind of person remains joined to God. So we know that God loves us. We depend on it. God is love. Anyone who leads a life of love shows that he is joined to God. And God is joined to him. So love is made complete among us. We will be bold on the day God judges us. That's because in this world we love as Jesus did.*^{1Jn.4:12-17} When we speak of God's love for us and our love for God, we don't mean an emotional transitory feeling but a **commitment**—God is committed to us and we are committed to Him. Our love for God can be described as our respect for Him, His Name and His honour—*may Your Name be honoured.*^{Matt.6:9} When we love for God we will work with Him, we will support Him, we will speak well of Him, we will enjoy His company—and His family's company too!

What has God done for us?

God has redeemed us from our sin. We must never forget that God has redeemed us through Jesus' death: *To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.*^{Rev.1:5} There was a point in time when we connected with God through Jesus' death on the cross and in that incredible miracle of conversion, God exchanged our life for Jesus's life and freed us from our sin. *I live in a relationship with God. I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live I live by believing in God's Son, who loved me and took the punishment for my sins. I don't reject God's grace.*^{Gal.2:19-21} Although this message of the Cross may seem foolish, it is only foolish to those who are perishing: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*^{1Cor.1:18} When we were converted, we made contact with the Cross (the place of Jesus' sacrifice) which was foreshadowed in the Old Covenant by the altar—and we became holy!!! *Make atonement for the Altar and consecrate it for seven days; the Altar will become soaked in holiness—anyone who so much as touches the Altar will become holy.*^{Ex.29:37} So, why would God care for me? Why would God redeem me? When we think of our failures and our weaknesses, it is easy to think that we are not “spiritual” enough for God to bother with us—but we should remember that Jesus came for sinners not saints! *At just the right time Christ died for ungodly people. He died for us when we had no power of our own. It is unusual for anyone to die for a godly person. Maybe someone would be willing to die for a good person. But here is how God has shown his love for us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The blood of Christ has made us right with God.*^{Rom.5:6-9} And we should also remember who we are now—**in Christ, we are a new creation!** *Anyone who believes in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone! The new has come! It is all from God. He brought us back to himself through Christ's death on the cross. And he has given us the task of bringing others back to him through Christ.*^{2Cor.5:17-18} After they were emancipated, God told the Israelites not to go back to Egypt—and although they didn't physically return to Egypt, they did return to Egypt in their hearts because rejected God and resisted the Holy Spirit: *But our ancestors refused to obey Moses. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us... You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That's what your ancestors did, and so do you.'*^{1Acs.7:39-51} This story illustrates that we can have a new spirit, yet still have an old mind; we can be a Believer, yet still think like an unbeliever; we can be a citizen of heaven, yet still be influenced by this world's culture and values. If we don't live to honour God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, we will be influenced by this world's values—and then end up living like an unbeliever. The antidote to immaturity (also called worldliness and carnality) is to yield ourselves to God and renew our minds. *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}

So let's keep focused on believing God, on trusting God, on our faith—the same faith that our spiritual father Abraham had: *Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father.* ^{Is.51:1-2} *By faith Abraham... All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.* ^{Heb.11:8-16} *Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith... David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them." ...Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.* ^{Rom.4:3-16} And then, as we live in fellowship with God, with His Word and with His people, we will be eager to share what God has done for us and live as overcomers.

Sunday 13th October. Ps.63:1-5. Luke 3

Protestants or Proclaimants? *Preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... and with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.* ^{Lk.3:3-18}

The name *Protestant* was given to those churches which came out of Roman Catholicism during the Reformation in the late C15th. It originally applied in the 1700s to Lutherans in Germany, the Presbyterians in Switzerland, and Anglicans in England. Later groups such as Congregationalists, Episcopalians and Methodists were added to the lists of Protestants denominations—these Protestant churches practiced infant baptism and believed in sacraments. [A '*sacrament*' is a physical act that (supposedly) brings a spiritual reward to accumulate sufficient grace to give souls access to heaven by religious acts, fasting, prayers, etc.—a '*means of grace*' without the operation of faith!] Historically, Baptists (and their spiritual children such as Pentecostals) were never part of the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant Reformation—and so technically they cannot correctly be called the "*protesters*" (Protestants) who left the Roman Church. For us the only valid sacrament is faith and the only valid baptism is the baptism of a believer (someone who has personally placed their trust in Jesus to save them from their sins)! Since C6th rebaptism was one of the two heresies which carried the death penalty and during the Reformation both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants persecuted the Anabaptists, resorting to torture and execution in attempts to curb the growth of the movement. In Spain, King Ferdinand declared that "*the third baptism*" (drowning) was "*the best antidote to Anabaptism*"!!! In England, even the Protestant monarchs (Edward VI and Elizabeth I), persecuted Anabaptists as they were deemed too radical and therefore a danger to religious stability. *Martyrs Mirror*, by Thieleman J. van Braght, describes the persecution and execution of thousands of Anabaptists in various parts of Europe between 1525 and 1660. Many of those early Anabaptists experienced the Pentecostal gifts and manifestations such as dancing, falling under the power of the Holy Spirit, prophesying, speaking in tongues and the dead being raised: "*Many of them have remained constant, enduring tortures inflicted by sword, rope, fire and water and suffering terrible, tyrannical, unheard-of deaths and martyrdoms, all of which they could easily have avoided by recantation. Moreover one also marvels when he sees how the faithful God (Who, after all, overflows with goodness) raises*

from the dead several such brothers and sisters of Christ after they were hanged, drowned, or killed in other ways. Even today, they are found alive and we can hear their own testimony”.

However, what really matters is not fore fathers but our first Father; it's not where we've come from but where we are going; it's not our historical culture but our present culture—who we are and how we live for God **now**. As Bible-believing Christians, we take the Scripture to be the inspired Word of God and the infallible, all sufficient rule for faith and practice. The *Elim Statement of Faith* puts it this way: *We believe the Bible, as originally given, to be without error, the fully inspired and infallible Word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.* And so, we take the Bible as the supreme and final authority on how we communicate the gospel and the Bible declares this to be by preaching—which includes the call to repentance as well as the forgiveness of sins. *And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.*^{Matt.24:14} *For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*^{1Cor.9:16} But today, some people think that preaching belongs to a bygone era. They think that with all the knowledge and technology available to us today, we have “better” and more “effective” methods—we don't need the old-fashioned method of “preaching” that our forefathers had to rely on. However, God has chosen preaching as the method of communicating the good news of Jesus Christ: *God was pleased to save those who believe by the foolishness of preaching... but we preach about a crucified Christ, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*^{1Cor.1:21-24}

So what is preaching? The Greek word for “preaching” is “evangelise”—which means “to bring good news” (from 2 words *eu*=good and *aggelos*=angel or messenger). However, the **method** of bringing the good news is not prescribed in Scripture—just that we **bring good news!** John the Baptist brought the good news when he told people to repent. He said that they couldn't rely on their social standing or even their family background—they had to personally repent by changing their mind and changing their behaviour and then they must be baptised. *In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ...People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.*^{Matt.3:1-9} John's ministry was not just to make people into better people but to prepare the way of the Messiah who would save them—He would redeem them from sin: *He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.’*^{Lk.3:3-6} Although John's preaching was powerful and direct, it was not oppressive or condemnatory but encouraging—it was an **exhortation**: *And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*^{Lk.3:18} John explained that their sins were no longer going to be atoned for (covered over) but that Jesus would **remove** their sins and so they no longer had to live with their guilt and shame: *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him. John said, “Look! The Lamb of God! He takes away the sin of the world! This is the One I was talking about. I said, ‘A man who comes after me is more important than I am. That's because he existed before I was born.’ I did not know him. But God wants to make it clear to Israel who this person is. That's the reason I came baptizing with water.”*^{Jn.1:29-31} Now our sins have been expunged through Jesus' death on the cross, repentance and remission of sins is to be preached. *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.*

He told them, *This is what is written. The Christ will suffer. He will rise from the dead on the third day. His followers will preach in his name. They will tell others to turn away from their sins and be forgiven. People from every nation will hear it, beginning at Jerusalem. You have seen these things with your own eyes.*^{Lk.24:45-48} Yes, our sins have been remised, forgiven and removed and they no longer separate us from God. John's ministry of preaching was prophesied by the Angel Gabriel before he was even conceived: *And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*^{Lk.1:17} John's preaching was also prophesied by his father when he was just 8 days old: *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} The message that John preached was that one must "repent" in order to receive the *knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins: In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*^{Matt.3:3} So, what is repentance? Repentance literally means to "change one's mind". In Christian terms, repentance means to change one's mind about God, about sin and self. Repentance is aligning our values with God's values and aligning our mind with God's mind. Although the Scripture can be defined as God's mind in a book, we need to correctly understand the Bible or else we will misrepresent God because we misunderstand Him. Today there is a tendency to rename "sin" as "alternative behaviour" and then excuse that "alternative behaviour" as "different" rather than as "rebellion" or "wrong". We have all sinned: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*^{Rom.3:23} And we have a duty to tell people to repent: *In the past, God didn't judge people for what they didn't know. But now he commands all people everywhere to turn away from their sins. He has set a day when he will judge the world fairly. He has appointed a man to be its judge. God has proved this to all people by raising that man from the dead.*^{Acts.17:30-31} *I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.*^{Acts.26:20} But there is a "woe" to those who intentionally promote evil as good: *To those who say, "Let God hurry; let him hasten his work so we may see it. The plan of the Holy One of Israel—let it approach, let it come into view, so we may know it." Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.*^{Is.5:19-21} True repentance is more than being remorseful for being found out—true repentance brings life and leaves no regret: *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*^{2Cor.7:10} **True repentance which will always include these 5 A's: Acknowledgement** of the wrong. **Apology** for the wrong. **Action** of determination to change. **Appreciation** of God's forgiveness. **Attitude** of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people.

There is a time to protest about sin—about things that are wrong, and even about things that are wrong in the Church—like the Protestants, except they did not go far enough—they were only Reformers. We should be Radicals (which means going back to the root) and be Proclaimers. So let's make sure we are known as **Proclaimants of the good** rather than **Protestants against the bad**. And let's proclaim the Good News by an *exhortation to repent*^{Lk.3:3-18} rather than excusing wrongs as "alternative behaviour". But remember, what we often call "sin" is mostly a manifestation of the real sin—which is **unbelief**. *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.3:23}

Sunday 20th October. Ps.63:6-11. Luke 4

The Power of the Word of God. *Jesus answered, "It is written..."*^{Lk.4:4}

The Word of God is the 2nd Person of the Godhead, who is co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*^{Jn.1:1-2} The 3 Persons of the Trinity co-existed from all eternity and are eternal—they had no beginning and will have no end—but at a definite time in history, Jesus was born and the Word become human: *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}

The Son is the gleaming brightness of God's glory. He is the exact likeness of God's being... God never said to any of the angels, "You are my Son. Today I have become your Father." Or, "I will be his Father. And he will be my Son." God's first and only Son is over all things. When God brings him into the world, he says, "Let all of God's angels worship him."^{1Jeb.1:3-6} Mary's baby was the Son of God: *the holy one that is born will be called the Son of God.*^{Lk.1:35} And He was called **Jesus** (which means **Saviour**), because He came to save His people from their sins: *You must give him the name Jesus. That is because he will save his people from their sins.*^{Matt.1:21} Jesus was also called Emmanuel—meaning *God with us.*^{Matt.1:23}

Although Jesus is the Word of God, the message about Jesus is also called the Word of God: *So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*^{Acts.6:7} Before the New Testament was completed, Christians preached from the OT and the teachings of the apostles: *For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.*^{Acts.15:21} *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*^{Acts.2:42} But as time went on, it became imperative that there was an accurate written record of Jesus' teachings (and also the apostles' teachings) for future generations to access: *Many people have attempted to write about the things that have taken place among us. Reports of these things were handed down to us. There were people who saw these things for themselves from the beginning and then passed the word on. I myself have carefully looked into everything from the beginning. So it seemed good also to me to write down an orderly report of exactly what happened. I am doing this for you, most excellent Theophilus. I want you to know that the things you have been taught are true.*^{Lk.1:1-4} Eventually the NT was completed and integrated into the Bible that we have to day—and the Bible is called the Word of God because God breathed out His Word through the various authors (we call this "inspired"): *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 revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.*^{Rev.1:1-3} And today God speaks to us through the Bible: *We ourselves heard that voice from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. Because of that experience, we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place—until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts. Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.*^{2Pet.1:18-21} However, God can still speak to us through prophecies, dreams and visions: *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*^{Acts.2:17-18} God still directly gives us counsel and comfort through the Holy Spirit: *For God speaks again and again, though people do not recognize it. He speaks in dreams, in visions of the*

night, when deep sleep falls on people as they lie in their beds. He whispers in their ears and terrifies them with warnings. He makes them turn from doing wrong; he keeps them from pride. He protects them from the grave, from crossing over the river of death.^{Job.33:14-18} But God will never contradict His established will that is already revealed in Scripture because Scripture is true, trustworthy and reliable: *Scripture is always true [cannot be broken/annulled/set aside].*^{Jn.10:35} And it is from the Scripture that God gives us revelation of Himself and of His plan of Salvation: *You have known the Holy Scriptures ever since you were a little child. They are able to teach you how to be saved by believing in Christ Jesus.*^{2Tim.3:15} The Living Word of God (Jesus) and the Written Word of God (the Bible) both have authority: *for you have exalted above all things your name and your word,*^{Ps.138:2} *They were amazed at [Jesus'] teaching, because his words had authority... 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.4:32-36} *[Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*^{Heb.1:3} But our relationship with Jesus Christ is not a ritual or a ceremony. God's authority is in Jesus not in the words of a book—even a holy Book about Jesus! And so we can't invoke God's authority by just quoting Scripture: *You do not have [the Father's] message in your hearts, because you do not believe me—the one he sent to you. You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.*^{Jn.5:38-40} And neither can we utilise the power of God's Word by just using the name of Jesus: *Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.*^{Acts.19:13-16}

So how do we utilise the power of God's Word? We utilise the power of God's Word in the same way as Jesus did! Jesus did not use His divinity to his own advantage but lived with the limitations of a human being: *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*^{Phil.2:5-7} Jesus did nothing apart from His Father: *I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.*^{Jn.5:19} And so to utilise the power of God's Word we must be in fellowship with God (be at one with Him): *I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*^{Jn.15:5} When we remain in Jesus and bear fruit (that is, reproduce His personality and character in our own life), we can pray with confidence: *You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.*^{Jn.15:14-17} *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.*^{1Jn.5:14-15} Remaining in Jesus requires spending time with Him and getting to know Him and His values through studying His Word and through fellowship. Fellowship is a partnership—a sharing together—which involves interacting with Jesus through prayer and meditation in our daily routine. [Meditation is reflecting or musing on God and His way of doing things—the Psalmist uses the word “selah”.] Remaining in Jesus also requires fellowshipping (interacting) with other Believers—the Church (which is His family). We are Jesus' Ambassadors who have been given the ministry of reconciliation: *God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has*

committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.^{2Cor.5:18-20} And, like political Ambassadors who represent their government in a foreign country, we are Jesus' Ambassadors who represent the Kingdom of heaven here on earth. This means we have a duty to **be** like Jesus our Lord and Master and to **speak** like Jesus our Lord and Master. Christians who become arrogant or abusive have lost connection from their Head: *Through these promises you will share in the divine nature because you have escaped the corruption that sinful desires cause in the world. Because of this, make every effort to add integrity to your faith; and to integrity add knowledge; to knowledge add self-control; to self-control add endurance; to endurance add godliness; to godliness add Christian affection; and to Christian affection add love. If you have these qualities and they are increasing, it demonstrates that your knowledge about our Lord Jesus Christ is living and productive. If these qualities aren't present in your life, you're short-sighted and have forgotten that you were cleansed from your past sins.*^{2Pet.1:4-9} *Don't tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They're a lot of hot air, that's all they are. They're completely out of touch with the source of life, Christ, who puts us together in one piece, whose very breath and blood flow through us. He is the Head and we are the body. We can grow up healthy in God only as he nourishes us.*^{Col.2:18-19} We are to have the same attitude as Jesus: *Don't do anything only to get ahead. Don't do it because you are proud. Instead, be free of pride. Think of others as better than yourselves. None of you should look out just for your own good. You should also look out for the good of others. You should think in the same way Christ Jesus does.*^{Phil.2:3-5}

Yes, both Jesus and the Scriptures are the Word of God and they both have the same power today as they did in Bible times. So let's utilise the power of God's Word by remaining in Jesus, by representing Jesus in our activities and by reflecting Jesus in our attitudes—and then we will see His kingdom come and His will done on earth—for *Yours is the Power and the Glory for ever! Amen.*

*I 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 stout-hearted.*^{Ps.138:2-3}

Sunday 27th October. Ps.32. Luke 5

But because You say so, I will... ^{Lk.5:5}

Apparently, insanity is doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different result! But throughout history there have been many very sane people who kept doing the same thing over and over again because they expected a different result. Thomas Edison is a prime example—he conducted thousands of experiments to develop the electric light bulb and each step required the invention of a new component, from vacuumed and sealed glass bulbs to switches, special types of wire and meters but the greatest challenge was coming up with a material that could serve as a long-lasting filament. After testing thousands of materials, including over 6,000 types of plant ingredients, he succeeded and filed his first light bulb patent in January 1880. Edison wrote: *"The electric light has caused me the greatest amount of study and has required the most elaborate experiments. I was never myself discouraged or inclined to be hopeless of success. I cannot say the same for all my associates."*

Many of the C19th missionaries also suffered great disappointments but it was their faithfulness that laid a foundation for others to build on and establish great works for God in those nations. These missionaries initially appeared insane because they faithfully kept on doing the same thing—preaching—but their foundation was Jesus Christ: *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*^{1Cor.3:10-11} Some of these missionaries are now renowned for their success—missionaries such as David Livingstone (Africa), Robert Thomas (Korea), William Carey (India), Hudson Taylor (China).

Simon Peter had been fishing all night and caught nothing but when Jesus told him to try again, he did so—not because he was insane but because Jesus said so: *Simon answered, “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done so, they caught a large number of fish. There were so many that their nets began to break.*^{Lk.5:5-6} Jesus then commissioned Peter to fish for people: *Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don't be afraid. From now on you will catch people.” So they pulled their boats up on shore. Then they left everything and followed him.*^{Lk.5:10-11}

No! Peter was not insane but spiritual because he recognised Jesus' authority and obeyed Him! Paul was called insane by Festus because he kept on preaching the same message of Jesus Christ: *At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defence. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”*^{Acts.26:24} Paul preached the same message and he still expected converts—even when no one responded. But Paul was not insane but spiritual because he recognised Jesus' authority and obeyed Him—he was faithful to Jesus' call, command and commission! *“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable... King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”*^{Acts.26:25-28}

We too, are called, commissioned and commanded to preach (proclaim, testify and witness)—regardless of the results we initially see or of our past experiences: *For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach because I want to, I get a reward. If I preach because I have to, I'm only doing my duty. Then what reward do I get? Here is what it is. I am able to preach the good news free of charge. And I can do it without making use of my rights when I preach it.*^{1Cor.9:16-18} If we are faithful to Jesus' call, command and commission, then we are not insane but spiritual—even if there are few or no converts! **The reason we preach is because God tells us to preach** and one day we will reap an amazing harvest of souls because we have obeyed God and people have heard the Good News. ***Because You say so, I will preach.***

There are other essential Christian activities that we are called, commissioned and commanded to do and regardless of the initial results or what has happened in the past, our response should be: *But because You say so, I will...*^{Lk.5:5} For instance **we should study the Bible**. Studying the Bible involves reading with understanding: *He heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you're reading?” Philip asked. “How can I?” he said. “I need someone to explain it to me.” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him... The official said to Philip, “Tell me, please. Who is the prophet talking about? Himself, or someone else?” Then Philip began with that same part of Scripture. He told him the good news about Jesus... The official answered, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”*^{Acts.8:30-37} Although studying the Bible is important, it is not as important as believing the Bible and putting what we learn into practice: *But everyone who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man.*^{Matt.7:26} *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.*^{Rev.1:3} *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*^{Jas.1:22} However, just reading and studying the Scripture alone will not give us eternal life—it is believing in Jesus that gives us eternal life: *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} But if we are to mature (prosper), we must study the Bible—which involves receiving, reflecting and reacting: *Be strong and very brave. Make sure you obey the whole law my servant Moses gave you. Do not turn away from it to the right or the left. Then you will have success everywhere you go. Never stop reading this Scroll of the Law. Day and night you must think about what it says. Make sure you do everything that is written in it. Then things will go well with you. And you will have great success.*^{Josh.1:7-8} *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} There are so many ways of accessing the Word of God today, including from our smart-phones, tablets, computers, TVs and DVDs—as well as the tried and tested way of reading the Bible! But with so much information available there seems to be a lack of actual learning! Jesus said: *You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.*^{Matt.22:29} Sadly, many Christians have not even understood God's plan of Salvation properly because they have not actually studied the Bible for themselves—read with understanding! God loves His creation and especially His creation that made in His own image—mankind. And when man rebelled against Him, God had already devised a way of restoring man to Himself—and that plan was Jesus Christ, *the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.*^{1Jn.1:29} *For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors... It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. God chose him as your ransom long before the world began, but now in these last days he has been revealed for your sake.*^{1Pet.1:18-20} God nurtured the descendants of Abraham so that the Christ would come to the right place and at the right time: *But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.*^{Gal.4:4-5} But God has never restricted His salvation to Abraham's physical descendants—the Bible names several non-Jewish people who became Believers, such as Hagar and Ruth plus the *many other people went up with them*^{Ex.12:8} out of Egypt. Indeed, God said that He would make Gentiles into Abraham's descendants: *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones [Gentiles] God can raise up children for Abraham.*^{Lk.3:8} "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 [Gentiles] will cry out."^{Lk.19:38-40} *A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.*^{Rom.2:28-29} Now under the New Covenant, there is no difference in God's sight between any people group or nationality because Jesus has broken down all spiritual distinctions: *At one time you were far away from God. But now you belong to Christ Jesus. He spilled his blood for you. That has brought you near to God. Christ himself is our peace. He has made Jews and non-Jews 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 wanted to create one new group of people out of the two. He wanted to make peace between them. He planned to bring both of them as one body back to God because of the cross. Christ put their hatred to death on that cross. 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.2:13-19} God left the best till last. Now under the NT everyone has equal access to God, regardless of race or ancestry—and even the OT saints are made perfect with us NT saints: *All of those people were praised because they had faith. But none of them received what God had promised. God had planned something better for us. So they would only be made perfect together with us. A huge cloud of witnesses is all around us. 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 is the author of faith. He also makes it perfect.*^{Heb.11:39-12:2} Christians have the same faith that Abraham had—faith in Jesus. Abraham saw Jesus from the distance, but we see Jesus up close! *Your father Abraham was filled with joy at the thought of seeing my day. He saw it and was glad.*^{1Jn.8:56} *Think about Abraham. Scripture says, "Abraham believed God. God accepted Abraham because he believed. So his faith made him right with God." So you see, those who have faith are children of Abraham. Long ago, Scripture knew that God would make non-Jews right with himself by believing in him. He announced the good news ahead of time to Abraham. He said, "All nations will be blessed because of you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham. He was the man of*

faith. ^{Gal.3:6-9} **The reason we study the Bible is because God tells us to study the Bible.** But when we realise how marvellous and wonderful our salvation is, we will eagerly study the Bible to discover more about what God has done for us and about our spiritual inheritance. And we will be amazed at our maturity because God's Word lives in us. ***Because You say so, I will study the Bible.***

So let's be eager to respond to God's Word and do what He says—regardless of the initial results or our past experiences. **We are not insane but spiritual because we recognise Jesus' authority and obey Him**—and there is always a blessing in doing what God says!

November

And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment. Ephesians 1:9

Sunday 3rd November. Ps.65:1-7

Praying for the Persecuted Church

Remember those in prison as if you were in prison with them. And remember those who are treated badly as if you yourselves were suffering.^{Heb.13:3}

We each have an inbuilt sense of “brotherhood” and our primæval desire to help those in need is one of main characteristics that elevates us above the animals. Adam and Eve were created by God in His image and given a spiritual nature that instinctively cares for others—and all human beings are descended from Adam and Eve: *So God created man in his own likeness. He created him in the likeness of God. He created them as male and female.*^{Gen.1:27} *Adam named his wife Eve. She would become the mother of every living person.*^{Gen.3:20} So when we see people hurting or suffering, it is a natural human response to want to help them in the best way that we can—and this response comes from God’s image within us—our spiritual nature. And after we are born again, we have an even greater compassion with our fellow Believers because we are even more closely linked to God—by our natural birth and also by our spiritual birth. *Jesus answered, “What I’m about to tell you is true. No one can enter God’s kingdom without being born through water and the Holy Spirit. People give birth to people. But the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised when I say, ‘You must all be born again.’”*^{Jn.3:5-7} And although it is natural to care for others, it is also Biblical—caring for others is a command from God: *Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.*^{Phil.2:1-2} *Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*^{Col.3:12-14}

¹⁴ And we are especially instructed to remember those in prison: *Remember those in prison as if you were in prison with them. And remember those who are treated badly as if you yourselves were suffering.*^{Heb.13:3}

There are several Biblical characters who spent time in prison including Joseph, Samson, Jeremiah, Daniel, James, Peter and Paul. Each of them experienced emotional lows in prison and some even died there, but it was their personal faith (trust) in God that kept them going and strengthened them. Faith is not mind over matter but the absolute confidence in God—based on His Character (who He is) and His Word (what He has said). Fate says, “*What will be, will be!*” But faith says, “***Let God’s Will be!***” But however spiritual someone is, and however strong their faith is, they are still human and have a soul (a human personality) as well as a spirit (a God conscious part) . We each have a part of us that was made to socialise and craves for human company: *The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.”*^{Gen.2:18} *God places lonely people in families.*^{Ps.68:6} And just our spirit craves for spiritual fellowship, so our soul (personality) craves for human fellowship: *Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls,*^{Ps.42:7}

Johnny Cash wrote this song to convey the reality that however wonderful Creation is, we need flesh and blood—human company:

*Beside a singing mountain stream Where the willow grew
Where the silver leaf of maple Sparkled in the morning dew
I braided twigs of willows Made a string of buckeye beads
But flesh and blood needs flesh and blood And you're the one I need
I leaned against a bark of birch And I breathed the honey dew*

*I saw a North-bound flock of geese Against a sky of baby blue
Beside the lily pads I carved a whistle from a reed
Mother Nature's quite a lady But you're the one I need
Flesh and blood needs flesh and blood And you're the one I need.*

*A cardinal sang just for me And I thanked him for the song
Then the sun went slowly down the west And I had to move along
These were some of the things On which my mind and spirit feed
But flesh and blood need flesh and blood And you're the one I need*

*So when this day was ended, I was still not satisfied,
For I knew everything I touched Would wither and would die,
And love is all that will remain And grow from all these seeds.*

*Mother Nature's quite a lady But you're the one I need.
Flesh and blood needs flesh and blood And you're the one I need.*

Yes we need human company and God made us to socialise! That is why isolation is so oppressive—and especially solitary confinement. The Bible says that if we isolate our self, we oppose all good sense. *One who has isolated himself seeks his own desires; he rejects all sound judgment.*^{Prov.18:1}

Whilst we can sympathise with people who are in prison (including those in an emotional or spiritual prisons), they need more than sympathy from us—at the very least they need empathy and, if at all possible, some practical help as well. Both empathy and sympathy deal with the feelings and experiences of another person, having their roots in the Greek term *páthos* meaning “*feeling, suffering.*” Sympathy is feeling compassion, sorrow, or pity for the hardships that another person encounters. “*Pity may represent little more than the impersonal concern which prompts the mailing of a check, but true sympathy is the personal concern which demands the giving of one’s soul.*” Martin Luther King Jr. Empathy is putting yourself in the shoes of another. “*I’ve always thought of acting as more of an exercise in empathy, which is not to be confused with sympathy. You’re trying to get inside a certain emotional reality or motivational reality and try to figure out what that’s about so you can represent it.*” Edward Norton We should pray for those who are suffering: *Remember those in prison as if you were in prison with them. And remember those who are treated badly as if you yourselves were suffering.*^{Heb.13:3} But our prayers should be more than sympathy—we should also empathise in our prayers—like Jesus did. *Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb... Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.’*^{Jn.11:38-42} *Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’*^{Mk.1:41} When we pray, we should feel compassion, sorrow, and pity for others—but we should also put our self in their shoes. *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*^{Rom.12:11-13} We should pray intelligently, credibly and sensibly using our personality and our human emotion.

Our prayers can go where we cannot... There are no borders, no prison walls, no doors that are closed to us when we pray. In prayer, it’s as if you are sitting by me in Church. By praying for me, you are not far away—you are here with me!

Syria: The war in Syria has made the country a lot less safe for Christians. They have been attacked, kidnapped and many have lost their homes, forcing them to move far away. Thousands of families are still living in refugee camps. A lot of children haven’t been to school for years – and with no jobs, parents find it difficult to afford food for their families. Many Syrians lost their jobs and their income during the war. Factories were destroyed, shops were closed and often looted. Families struggled to pay the bills and provide food for their families.

One Believer said: *We didn't know what to do, we lived in fear. What helped us was prayer. We prayed to God, we stayed at home, but we also learned not to think only of ourselves but also to help others. We prayed for the needy, although we ourselves also were in urgent need. When we left the city, we didn't know if we would ever return. It's very hard to leave your home, your friends, your bed, not knowing if you will ever see them again.* The war in Syria caused much material damage as well as human losses. Many houses, even entire neighbourhoods or villages, have been destroyed. Pray for those helping people to return and rebuild their homes in relatively peaceful parts of the country. Ask God to work through them to restore His people's hope for a better future in their country. Pray for the church to be salt and light across Syria. Pray that Christians will be included in reconciliation initiatives so that the church can play a positive role in rebuilding the country.

A PRAYER FOR SYRIA

Heavenly Father, we ask for Your peace in Syria. Bring an end to war and violence there, that Your people may flourish. Be with all those who have no place to call home. Strengthen Your church, our family, that they may continue to bring Your hope to their communities.

Remembrance Sunday 10th November. Ps.65:8-13

As Dave Smethurst is with us today, I have used these notes from www.str.org

A “Worldview” is more than a “Point of View”.

Everyone you know has a set of beliefs that they use to filter everything in their life and in their world. This set of beliefs is the basis from which they move and breathe and interpret everything that happens to them personally and everything that happens in the world they observe every day! Let's say, for example, you are an atheist and you do not believe that there is a creator God who continues to interact with his creation. You have a worldview which now shapes how you interpret the events in your life. Tomorrow, your best friend dies in a car crash. Because you believe that all of us have come into being as part of a process of Darwinian evolution, you accept the perspective that we are the product of random chance occurrences over incredibly long periods of time. In fact, everything in your world is the product of random chance, including the destinies of each of us individually. Your friend's death is a random accident of random events, within the context of a random universe. Not only is your friend's death accidental, his very life was also accidental. Your worldview affects the way you interpret his death. From your perspective as an atheist, life is relatively meaningless to begin with; it is, after all, merely the product of random chance and unguided forces. There is no meaning in his death because there was really no meaning in his life. All of it was random and accidental. Worldview clearly colours the way we interpret the events of our life and the perspective we take on those events.

Christianity is more than a belief—it is a worldview! Now as a Christian, I recognize that my ideas about God are not limited to some little box in my life that I call my “*faith*” or my “*religion*”. My beliefs about God are a fundamental lens through which I view and interpret the world. They are also a grid from which I decide what is right and what is wrong. They are the structural foundation that helps me establish all future plans and movements. **My faith is my worldview!** I believe my friend's life has incredible meaning because he was created by a living God who knows his name and is still involved in the daily activities of his life. When my friend dies in a car accident, my Christian worldview moves me to try to interpret the event from God's perspective. I cannot simply toss up my hands and see the event as another random cosmic accident. While I may never have the answer for events such as these, my worldview causes me to search the history of my life (and my friend's life) to discover the work of God and try as best I can (while still here on earth) to understand God's will and plan for our lives.

My worldview will ultimately take me in a different direction than the atheist as I try to interpret the same events from a very different perspective.

We all try to answer the same questions. All worldviews try to answer the same three questions, and these questions are important. First, “*How did we get here?*”? In addition to this, all worldviews try to answer the critical question, “*What happened to us?*” In other words, “*How did everything get this messed up?*” or, “*Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?*” And finally, worldviews address the third critical question, “*How can this mess be corrected?*”

All of us want to know how we got here, how our world got so messed up, and then what we can do to rescue ourselves and our planet from the mess we’re in. And every worldview does its best to provide answers for these questions. In fact, if you really think about it, there is something about human beings that **requires** us to develop views to answer these questions! Life is very difficult to live without some set of beliefs, imaginary or otherwise, that help us to interpret and understand our world.

I believe that Christianity is more than a limited set of religious opinions. It is the truth. Not just the truth about a set of events that happened in history. The truth about everything. The truth about God, the truth about life, the truth about the nature of the universes, and the truth about the **truth!** All that we see, experience and live must be interpreted in light of this truth. Christianity is a worldview; not just another choice in the smorgasbord of worldview options, but the **true** view of the world. All of science, all of human behaviour, all of history, all of humanity can be properly understood from this one worldview. And where is this worldview described? Where is the worldview of Christianity revealed? It is revealed in the Scriptures, the Holy Bible, God’s love letter to us. There is a single over-arching theme that permeates all of the Bible. The Scriptures track this theme from cover to cover. They tell us how we were created, came into our fallen condition and have then been offered a way to restore ourselves forever. Let’s begin at the beginning. How did we get here? In thousands of pages of Scripture, and culminating with the New Testament history of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, we can see the overall message of the Bible. It is a message of truth about the nature of God, truth about the nature of Jesus, and truth about the nature of our salvation. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus is the Lamb of sacrifice that God requires of all of us. We no longer have to sacrifice animals over and over again to pay the price for our sin. Jesus died once for all of us, and we can accept his sacrifice on our behalf with a simple act of surrender: *Anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.*^{Rom.10:13} *For if you tell others with your own mouth that Jesus Christ is your Lord and believe in your own heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in his heart that a man becomes right with God; and with his mouth he tells others of his faith, confirming his salvation.*^{Rom.10:9-10}

The entire Bible focuses on this point of truth and history. Jesus came as a sacrifice for us, died on that cross, came back to life to assure us of a life after death. Jesus is the solution and the answer to life’s big dilemma, “*How can I correct this mess; what can I do to be restored to the God who created me?*” Of all the things that people want and need, the first and greatest need we all have is to be restored to a right relationship with our Creator. According to the Bible, this can only be done through the perfect life and death of Jesus.

What Does the Future Hold? The stories and promises of the Bible just keep getting better. In the last book of the Scriptures (the book of Revelation), God allows us to get just a glimpse of what heaven might be like. Now the language of this book is filled with poetic, metaphoric and allegorical imagery, and many have devoted their lives to trying to understand it. There are many different interpretations of what God might be trying to tell us here, but there are several things about our future with God that are clear from the last book of the Bible. God promises us that Godly people will not always suffer, even if there are times when we may suffer here on

earth. God has prepared a home in heaven for everyone who trusts Jesus, and nobody will be sad there. Heaven will be a wonderful place. In addition, there will not always be evil rulers; their cruelty and power will end, and God will punish them. But perhaps the most important thing that the Book of Revelation tells us is that Jesus **will** return to this earth, and when He does, everyone will know that He is God. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus will be the judge of everyone. That shouldn't worry those of us who have already surrendered to Him as Lord, but it should worry those who continue to rebel against God and delight in their own passions, pride and rebellion. The Book of Revelation tells us that the devil will not always be powerful. God will eventually punish Satan and he will lose his evil powers and influence on our fallen world. In everything that the book of Revelation describes, there is a sense of urgency that is palpable. This book tells us that terrible things will happen before Jesus returns, and the time to invite God into our lives is now. The Scriptures have been given to us for a reason. The Bible is not just a "good book", it's a "**guide book**"; a book that directs us toward Salvation, a book that guides us to God and helps us understand the nature of people, the nature of Salvation and the nature of the heaven that waits for those of us who have put our trust in Jesus.

Sunday 17th November. Ps.82. Lk.6

Sons and Sinners! *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. You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.*^{Lk.6:34-36}

All human beings are sons of God by natural birth because we are all descended from Adam: *...the son of Adam, the son of God.*^{Lk.3:38} *From one man he has made every nation of humanity to live all over the earth. He has given them the seasons of the year and the boundaries within which to live. He has done this so that they would look for God, somehow reach for him, and find him. In fact, he is never far from any one of us. Certainly, we live, move, and exist because of him. As some of your poets have said, 'We are God's children.' So if we are God's children, we shouldn't think that the divine being is like an image made from gold, silver, or stone, an image that is the product of human imagination and skill. God overlooked the times when people didn't know any better. But now he commands everyone everywhere to turn to him and change the way they think and act. He has set a day when he is going to judge the world with justice, and he will use a man he has appointed to do this. God has given proof to everyone that he will do this by bringing that man back to life.*^{Acts.17:26-31}

But because Christians are born-again, we are twice sons of God—we are sons of God by spiritual re-birth as well as sons of God by natural birth: *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*^{Gal.3:26} *Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."*^{Gal.4:6} *Jesus answered, "What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can enter God's kingdom without being born through water and the Holy Spirit. People give birth to people. But the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised when I say, 'You must all be born again.'*^{Jn.3:5-7}

However, just as in the parable of the 2 sons,^{Lk.10:11f} where neither son behaved as the father would have wanted, so we don't always behave as our Heavenly Father wants us to! Jesus spent a lot of His time teaching His disciples how to live as children of their Heavenly Father: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*^{Matt.5:9-16}

And even though none of us are perfect (yet!) there is a big distinction between us and non-Christians, between "sons" and a "sinners"—we have a permanent place within God's spiritual family and, if we do wrong things or say wrong things, we are not slaves to the wrong: *I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*^{Jn.8:34-36} Our conscience is sensitised by the Holy Spirit so that we feel guilty about doing

wrong and want to restore our relationship with our Heavenly Father (the Holy Spirit “convicts” us of sin): *Suppose we say that we share life with God but still walk in the darkness. Then we are lying. We are not living by the truth. But suppose we walk in the light, just as he is in the light. Then we share life with one another. And the blood of Jesus, his Son, makes us pure from all sin. Suppose we claim we are without sin. Then we are fooling ourselves. The truth is not in us. But God is faithful and fair. If we admit that we have sinned, he will forgive us our sins. He will forgive every wrong thing we have done. He will make us pure. If we say we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar. His word has no place in our lives.*^{1Jn.1:6-10}

Although God counts us righteous because of our faith, none of us are sinless and so if we sin, we are highlighting that we are a “work-in-progress”—which is different from being a hypocrite. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be someone they are not (the Greek word was used for stage-actors who were speaking out their performance). But we are not actors playing out a drama on a stage—we are God’s creation, made in God’s image and accountable to God for how we live and what we say.

Jesus exposed hypocrisy more than any other sin because it corrupts the conscience and averts holiness of life: *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.*^{Matt.23:15} Hypocrisy substitutes the personal and practical with the ceremonial and formal,

considering outward performance more important than what is believed in the heart: *And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*^{Matt.6:5-6} However, true religion lives out the values of God’s kingdom: *If a person thinks that he is religious but can't control his tongue, he is fooling himself. That person's religion is worthless. Pure, unstained religion, according to God our Father, is to take care of orphans and widows when they suffer and to remain uncorrupted by this world.*^{Jas.1:26-27}

Religious hypocrisy has the pretence of a relationship with God through the performance of certain rituals or lifestyles—without the regeneration of the heart through a personal trust in Jesus Christ. *A person is not a Jew because of his appearance... Rather, a person is a Jew inwardly, and circumcision is something that happens in a person's heart. Circumcision is spiritual, not just a written rule. That person's praise will come from God, not from people.*^{Rom.2:28-29}

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.^{Matt.23:27-28}

Religious hypocrisy keeps people away from God whereas true religion connects people to God. Religious hypocrisy requires the performance of a holy ceremony by a holy person in a holy place, but true religion acknowledges that Jesus Christ is that holy Person who has performed the holy act of redemption. *So Christ has now become the High Priest...he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever... the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. 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.*^{Heb.9:11-15}

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.2:17}

Keeping the Sabbath was one of the religious institutions of the Old Covenant that invoked a lot of hypocrisy. The Sabbath was initially implemented with the death penalty attached: *One Sabbath day, people saw a man gathering wood. They brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole community. They kept him under guard. It wasn't clear what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must die.” So the people took the man outside the camp. There they killed him by throwing stones at him. They did just as the LORD had commanded Moses.*^{Nu.15:32-36} And although the death

penalty was not later so rigorously enforced, keeping the Sabbath was integral to Judaism—which is why the religious people became angry when Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath. *The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were trying to find fault with Jesus. So they watched him closely. They wanted to see if he would heal on the Sabbath... Then Jesus said to them, "What does the Law say we should do on the Sabbath day? Should we do good? Or should we do evil? Should we save life? Or should we destroy it?" But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were very angry.*^{Lk.6:7-10} The reason God was so strict about keeping the Sabbath was because the Sabbath illustrated our salvation. Salvation is a free gift from God—it is so precious, valuable and expensive that no one can ever earn their salvation and we demean God's free gift of love if we even try to buy His favour. When God finished His work, He rested, so if we are to enter God's rest, we too must stop working. *On the seventh day God rested from all his work. In the part of Scripture I talked about earlier God said, "They will never enjoy the rest I planned for them." It is still true that some will enjoy that rest. But those who had the good news preached to them earlier didn't go in. That was because they didn't obey. So God again chose a certain day. He named it Today. He did that when he spoke through David a long time later. As it was said earlier, "Listen to his voice today. If you hear it, don't be stubborn." Suppose Joshua had given them rest. If he had, God would not have spoken later about another day. So there is still a Sabbath rest for God's people. God rested from his work. Those who enjoy God's rest also rest from their work. So let us make every effort to enjoy that rest. Then no one will fall into sin by following the example of those who didn't obey God.*^{Heb.4:4-11}

When Jesus introduced the New Covenant, He freed from the ceremonies and dogmas of the Old Covenant—including keeping the Sabbath day. *But some Pharisees said, "Why are you breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath?" Jesus added, "The Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath."*^{Lk.6:2-5} Because we are now twice God's sons—sons by natural birth and sons by spiritual re-birth—we have an obligation to live as God's sons not as sinners—and certainly not as slaves to sin. We have a new set of ethics to live by and these ethics are much higher than the world's ethics—they are God's ethics. So let's make every effort to live up to those ethics and honour our family name of Christ—who taught us to *love our enemies, do good to them and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then our reward will be great and we will be sons of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.*^{Lk.6:35-36}

Remember to Whom you belong!

I am created by God, I am His. I am redeemed by God, I am His.

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

I belong to Jesus Christ!

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

He loves me, He delights in me.

I belong to Jesus Christ!

I am my Beloved's and He is mine.

No-one else possesses any right or power over me—all that is mine is His.

I belong to Jesus Christ!

All my sin, weakness and shortcomings, I give to Him.

He has taken all my condemnation, misery and fear.

I belong to Jesus Christ!

His strength is my strength, His righteousness, my righteousness.

His wisdom, my wisdom and His holiness, my holiness.

I belong to Jesus Christ!

He is my God. He is my Father.

His family is my family and His heaven is my home.

I belong to Jesus Christ!

Sunday 24th November. Ps.66:1-7 Lk.7.

Your faith has saved you; go in peace. ^{Lk.7:50}

Last week we looked at the difference between religious hypocrisy and true religion. Hypocrisy corrupts the conscience, substituting the personal and practical with the ceremonial and formal—it considers outward rituals more important than the inward relationship with God: *And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.* ^{Matt.6:5-6} True religion however, cherishes God's values and lives out the principles of God's kingdom: *If a person thinks that he is religious but can't control his tongue, he is fooling himself. That person's religion is worthless. Pure, unstained religion, according to God our Father, is to take care of orphans and widows when they suffer and to remain uncorrupted by this world.* ^{Jas.1:26-27} Religious hypocrisy has the pretence of a relationship with God through the performance of certain rituals or lifestyles—but without the regeneration of the heart through a personal trust in Jesus Christ. *A person is not a Jew because of his appearance... Rather, a person is a Jew inwardly, and circumcision is something that happens in a person's heart. Circumcision is spiritual, not just a written rule. That person's praise will come from God, not from people.* ^{Rom.2:28-29} *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.* ^{Matt.23:27-28} True religion however, has a living relationship with God through a personal faith (trust) in Jesus Christ. *So Christ has now become the High Priest...he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever... the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. 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.* ^{Heb.9:11-15}

Christianity is not a matter of following a set of rules or performing certain rituals—like the Jews under the Old Covenant who were required to follow the laws absolutely meticulously: *If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully keep all his commands that I am giving you today... However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you.* ^{Deut.28:1-15} Actually, no one ever managed to fully obey God's laws and so the religion of the Old Covenant never actually worked. *For if there had been nothing wrong with that we will want to obey Him. Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love him. We will come to him and make our home with him.* ^{Jn.14:23}

Christianity though, is much more than just a religion because it is 100% supernatural. In Christianity, God makes a spiritually *first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. 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.* ^{Heb.8:7-10} Instead of being a law religion, Christianity is a love religion—and if we love God,

dead person come alive—and then dwells within them. *But God is so rich in mercy from, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus.* ^{Eph.2:4-6} *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course,*

you fail the test?^{2Cor.13:5} *We are the temple of the living God. God has said, "I will live with them. I will walk among them. I will be their God. And they will be my people."*^{2Cor.6:16} *The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel (which means "God with us").*^{Matt.1:23}

We desire to obey God because He has written His rules on our heart—rather than on a stone as He did for Moses. Instead of following a set of rules, Christians follow Christ—the Son of God our Redeemer—who saves us from our sins. However, the basis of Christianity is the New Covenant—it is still a Covenant (an agreement)—but unlike the Old Covenant, the New Covenant is not dependant on us keeping it. The New Covenant was made between God and Jesus—who kept it fully. Christians are included by virtue of belonging to God through the spiritual new-birth into His family. This means that if we fail to fully obey God, the Covenant is not broken and—*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*^{1Jn.1:9}

A Christian's relationship with God is by faith: *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 and is by faith.*^{Phil.3:8-9} So what is faith? Faith is the absolute confidence and trust in God based on who He is (His Character) and what He has said (His Word) and this has been recorded in the holy Scriptures. That is why we have such a high regard for Scriptures: *The Scriptures cannot be discredited.*^{Jn.10:35} *We accept the Scriptures as God's revelation to us: 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} We publicly read the Scriptures in our Church Services: *devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.*^{2Tim.4:13} And we also use the Scriptures in our prayer and praise: *When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," mouth of your servant they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through me, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?"*^{2Act.4:24-25} Although some of the Scriptures may be hard to understand, it is the ignorant and unstable people who doubt and distort them: *Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*^{2Pet.3:15-16} We however, like the Disciples, believe and trust the Scriptures: *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." ... But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.*^{Jn.2:19-22}

We know God through the Scriptures and so it is through the Scriptures that we access peace: *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:165} God is the God of Peace: *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.*^{Rom.16:20} *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.*^{Is.9:6-7} *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.*^{Ep.2:13-14} And so true peace comes from knowing God AND Jesus: *The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.*^{Ps.29:11} *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} God's peace gives us a gentle, quite confidence that keeps flowing out of us: *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.*^{Is.26:3} *The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.*^{Is.32:17} *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} But opposition to God give us the opposite of peace: *"There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."*^{Is.57:21} *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear... The way of*

peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks along them will know peace.^{Is.59:2-9}

So let's stay faith-full and faithful, then we will know that we are spiritually secure and be able to live out our lives in peace. **Your faith has saved you; go in peace.**^{Lk.7:50}

May the Lord who gives peace give you peace at all times and in every way. May the Lord be with all of you.^{2Thes.3:16} *The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.*^{Nu.6:24-26}

December

to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one Head, even Christ. ^{Ephesians 1:10}

Sunday 1st December. Ps.66:8-13

See what God can do!

Our Family Services over the last few months have focussed on testimonies, so this month I am going to give some hints on how to share our testimony

Testimony.

The aim of a testimony is to whet the spiritual appetite of others so they will want to know God for themselves. If God has changed our life, then He can change theirs too! A testimony is different from a Gospel presentation. A Gospel presentation explains how to be saved and be at peace with God, whereas a testimony is purely and simply saying what we know about God—what we have seen and experienced of Him. A testimony is not saying what the Bible says or what other preachers have told us—it is not even our opinion. Our testimony is **our own experience of God that we have experienced.** That is why our testimony is so powerful—it cannot effectively be contradicted because it is **our** story. Our testimony should be conversational—we are not preaching a Sermon—and we should try to avoid religious phrases or church jargon. When we have whetted a person's appetite to know more about God, then we are in a position to share the Gospel.

Our testimony states what God means to us and how He has changed our life for the better. The Gospel is good news that the Kingdom of God has already come and is here right now—it is the reign of Christ within a Believer ^{Lk.17:21} and so it is a spiritual kingdom consisting of *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* ^{Rom.14:17} Yes, there is something better than the mess and chaos of mere existence! We should not exaggerate our past and make it appear that we were terrible. If we do, others may think that although we needed to get saved, they don't, because they aren't as bad as we were! **The reason people need God is because they are separated from Him.** God loves them and wants the best for them—whether they are “evil” or “good”. And they need God—whether they are “evil” or “good”. God does not condemn us but He does convict us—that is, expose our guilt. It is the Words of Jesus that we reject that will condemn us: *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* ^{Jn.3:17} “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” ^{Jn.8:11} *As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.* ^{Jn.12:47} *When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt [will expose the guilt of the world] in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement.* ^{Jn.16:8} *See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.* ^{Jude.14} *There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.* ^{Jn.12:48}

Testimonies should only include the necessary details and information. So we should keep our testimony brief and to the point. Our testimony is aimed at non-Christians who have little or no interest in God, so about 3 minutes is long enough—if we are any longer they will probably have lost interest. And if we are too specific about your details, we will fail to relate to them. For example, if we had been a thief and we shared how God had changed us, then our testimony would be relevant to thieves but not many other people. But if our testimony described what it was like to break God's laws and how that felt, then it would be relevant to everyone. **We should be careful that our testimony honours God and not the devil.** Don't dwell on something that God has removed or recall what God will not remember. *The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not... take up their names on my lips.* ^{Ps.16:4} *As far as the east*

is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.^{Ps.103:12} “Come now, let us reason together; though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.^{Is.1:18} I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.^{Is.43:25}

The Kingdom of God is Debt Free; Regret Free; Stress Free! The phrase “if only” should not part of the Christian’s vocabulary. If God is Lord and He works all things out for our good, why should we live in regret? He has forgiven all our sins, healed all our diseases, redeemed us from the pit and crowned us with loving kindness!!! *Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.*^{Ps.103:15} Blessed are the people whose **God is the LORD.**^{Ps.144:15} *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.*^{Rm.8:28} *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; knowledge; self-control; perseverance; godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, 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 if anyone does not have them, he is near-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.*^{2Pet.1:3-9}

Gospel Presentation

After we have whetted someone’s appetite with our **Testimony**, we are then in a position to offer them the **Gospel**. Ask questions such as:

- ♦ “If you died today are you sure you would go to heaven?”
- ♦ “Are you secure in your relationship with God?”
- ♦ “What does Jesus mean to you?”

Whichever way they respond to our question we are in a position to tell them the Good News. Normally we can ascertain from their answer if they are born again **but listen to what they don’t say as much as to what they do say!** A Muslim believes in God (Allah) but is not secure in his relationship with him. A Buddhist may think he is secure in his relationship with God but is not sure that he is going to heaven. A Jew may think he is going to heaven but has a different perception of Jesus than a Christian. Actually, there are many “Jesus’s” in the world, of whom some are worshipped—but **there is only one Jesus who is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and the Eternal Word!** “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”^{Mat.16:13-16} We know there is only one God. There may be so-called gods either in heaven or on earth. In fact, there are many “gods” and many “lords.” But for us there is only one God. He is the Father. All things came from him, and we live for him. And there is only one Lord. He is Jesus Christ. All things came because of him, and we live because of him.^{1Cor.8:4-6}

The ABC

Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again”^{John 3:3}

To be born again is as simple as ABC and as profound as knowing God

A Admit: Admit you are a sinner: separated from God and spiritually dead. *There is no one righteous, not even one*^{Rom.3:10}

B Believe: Believe in Jesus. *Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.*^{Acts 16:26} **Believe** that Jesus death paid the penalty for your sin: *The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.*^{Is.53:5} **Believe**

that God raised Jesus from the dead and He is your Lord (owner): *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.*^{Rom.10:9}

C Change: Repentance means changing your mind—we make a quality decision to change. We change the ownership of our lives to Jesus. *Repent then and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.*^{Acts 3:19}

D Do: "Believing" alone is not enough. We must act on what we say we believe. *Faith without deeds is dead.*^{Jas.2:26}

E Experience: If you want to experience this spiritual new birth, pray this prayer...

Dear God

I come to You in the name of Jesus.

I know I am a sinner. I cannot save myself and need Your forgiveness.

I believe that when Jesus died, He paid the price for my sins—He was punished instead of me.

I believe that You raised Him from the dead so that I too may live a new life.

I receive Jesus as my Lord and receive Your forgiveness for all my sins.

Thank You for giving me a new, holy and righteous spirit that will never be separated from You.

I promise to love, honour and obey You for the rest of my life.

Sin shall not be my master because I am under Grace.

You are my Father and I am Your child.

Amen—I make this prayer mine

F Follow up: After praying this prayer with them follow it up by asking Jesus to baptise them with the Holy Spirit. This is the very next step after being born-again and an essential experience for every Believer. Don't wait for them to "cool off" or for unbelievers to put unbelief into them. Every Christian who is filled with the Holy Spirit can lay hands on others and expect God to fill them with His Holy Spirit or to heal them. Remember that it is God who convicts, God who converts, God who saves, God who baptises and God who heals. All God expects from us is **willingness and obedience**. *If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land.*^{Is.1:19} *Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth.*^{Ps.110:3} *For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.*^{2Cor.8:12} *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*^{Ps.51:10-12} (Note: God granted us a willing spirit at conversion!)

G Go to Church with the new convert. Encourage the new Christian to attend a Bible-believing, Faith-teaching, Holy Spirit-led Church—just like the one you are part of! It is always best to take them to Church with you, rather than leave the new Christian to find their own way to a Church. *Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*^{Acts 2:41-42} *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*^{Heb.10:25}

Sunday 8th December. Ps.66:16-20 Lk.1:26-56

Jesus' Birth Foretold. *You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*^{Lk.1:32-32}

Jesus existed from all eternity as the Word of God, the 2nd Person of the Godhead: *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} *You were bought by the priceless blood of Christ. He is a perfect lamb. He doesn't have any flaws at all. He was chosen before God created the world. But he came into the world in these last days for you.*^{1Pet.1:19-20} *"What I'm about to tell you is true," Jesus answered. "Before Abraham was born, I am!"*^{Jn.5:58}

But Jesus' human birth was foretold throughout the OT over 100's of years. These prophecies were very specific and included the reason for His birth, the place of His birth and His ancestry: *The right to rule will not leave Judah. The ruler's rod will not be taken from between his feet. It will be his until the king it belongs to comes. It will be his until the nations obey him.*^{Gen.49:10} I said to him, 'You will always have a son to rule over Israel.'^{2Chron.7:18} Bethlehem, you might not be an important town in the nation of Judah. But out of you will come a ruler over Israel for me. His family line goes back to the early years of your nation. It goes all the way back to days of long ago.^{Mic.5:2} Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted because they are no more.^{Jer.31:15} Out of Egypt I called My Son.^{Hos.11:1} And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.^{Gen.1:15} Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your Saviour comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.'^{Is.62:11} The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land."^{Jer.23:5} The Jewish leaders studied those prophecies but didn't understand them because, even if though they still kept the label of "God's People", they had turned their backs on God and rejected Him. *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.*^{Matt.23:15} No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.^{1Cor.2:7-8} However, there were some Jews who were faithful to God and believed the Bible prophecies—yet even these did not know when Jesus would come—they only knew that the Messiah would come and save them! *Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.*^{1Pet.1:10-12} But when Jesus did come, those faithful Believers accepted Him as the Messiah: *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ. You are the Son of the living God."*^{Matt.16:16} The Word was in the world that was made through him. But the world did not recognize him. He came to what was his own. But his own people did not accept him. Some people did accept him. They believed in his name. He gave them the right to become children of God.^{In.1:10-12} In Jerusalem there was a man named Simeon. He was a good and godly man. He was waiting for God's promise to Israel to happen. The Holy Spirit was with him. The Spirit had told Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ... Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, 'Lord, you are the King over all. Now let me, your servant, go in peace. That is what you promised. My eyes have seen your salvation. You have prepared it in the sight of all people. It is a light to be given to those who aren't Jews. It will bring glory to your people Israel.'^{Lk.2:25-32}

When the actual time came for Jesus' incarnation, it was announced to Mary first: *Do not be afraid, Mary. God is very pleased with you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son. You must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king like his father David of long ago. He will rule forever over his people, who came from Jacob's family. His kingdom will never end.*^{Lk.1:30-22} And for Mary, the birth of Jesus—of "God becoming human"—was problematic because it was personal to her!—and so she asked: "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"^{Lk.1:34} Gabriel explained simply: *The Holy Spirit will come to you. The power of the Most High God will cover you. So the holy one that is born will be called the Son of God.*^{Lk.1:35}

When the Holy Spirit came and covered Mary, she had Jesus within her as a baby. When the Holy Spirit comes to us and convicts us, converts us and changes us, we also have Jesus within us—not as a son but as a Saviour! *Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: "The world is guilty as far as sin is concerned. That is because people do not believe in me. The world is guilty*

as far as godliness is concerned. That is because I am going to the Father, where you can't see me anymore. The world is guilty as far as judgment is concerned. That is because the devil, the prince of this world, has already been judged.^{Jn.16:7-11} "I assure you," He said, "unless you are converted and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."^{Matt.18:3} The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.^{1Sam.10:6-7}

But when Jesus comes into our life, it is obviously different from Mary's experience—however, it is just as real and just as miraculous. Too often we overlook the supernatural element of Christianity—of God becoming human through a virgin giving birth to a Child (which is a natural impossibility). And too often we overlook the supernatural element of our own Christian faith—of God making His home with us by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (which is another natural impossibility). However, this is a supernatural possibility—and a supernatural reality. *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.*^{Ezek.36:26} My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.^{Gal.4:19} Examine yourselves to see whether you are still in the Christian faith. Test yourselves! Don't you recognize that you are people in whom Jesus Christ lives?^{2Cor.13:5} Yes! Christianity is 100% supernatural because God impregnates us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus lives within us, not as a child or a son but as the Christ and the Saviour: *The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less.*^{2Cor.5:5} For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.^{1Pet.1:23} So we Christians are **more than** mere people—we are Holy Spirit filled Believers. *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{Rom.8:37-39} However, Christians can still live like mere people who ignore God and choose not to fellowship with their "unseen Guest" even though He is the "silent Listener" to every conversation! *Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings?*^{1Cor.3:1-4}

The Birth of Jesus was foretold so people could be sure of the reality of the Christmas Story—which is the story of God dwelling with us in the Person of Jesus Christ. However, there is a cost to this because we have to be spiritually clean before God can live with us. Jesus had to come to earth, die on the cross, rise from the dead and return to His Father: *Lord, I lift Your Name on high. Lord, I love to sing Your praises. I'm so glad You're in my life; I'm so glad You came to save us. You came from heaven to earth: You are the Way. From the earth to the cross: my debt You paid. From the cross to the grave; From the grave to the sky. Lord, I lift Your Name on high.* Now that Jesus has paid the price to make us spiritually clean so God can live with us—and for us to live with God—we dishonour God if we reject Jesus even if we ignore Him. So as we look again at the Christmas Story, we see that Mary said that *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*^{Lk.1:46-47} The Shepherds: *spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*^{Lk.2:17-18} And the Wise men were: *filled with joy! ...they bowed down and worshiped him... they gave him gifts.*^{Matt.2:10-11} But what will you do?

Sunday 15th December. Ps.67 Lk.2

Jesus' Birth Fulfilled

Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.^{Lk.2:11}

In his play *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare wrote: *What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.* But the very name “Jesus” is important because it means “Saviour”: *Joseph, descendant of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus [He Saves], because he will save his people from their sins.*^{Matt.1:20-21} Actually, all the names of Jesus are important because they describe aspects of His ministry. *I will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.*^{Ps.138:2} And because our words have consequences, every word we use is also important: *But here is what I tell you. On judgment day, people will have to account for every careless word they have spoken. By your words you will be found guilty or not guilty.*^{Matt.12:36-37}

When people say that something is different from reality, they are doing more than bring confusion—they are lying! This is especially true when they say that God’s standards have changed and today we have different moral and spiritual standards from those of the early Church: *How terrible it will be for those who say that what is evil is good! How terrible for those who say that what is good is evil! How terrible for those who say that darkness is light.*^{Is.5:20} And so when people say that all religions are the same—then that is a lie: *Before me, there was no other god at all. And there will not be any god after me. I am the one and only LORD. I am the only one who can save you.*^{Is.43:10-11} When people say that you can come to God anyhow and anyway you like—then that is a lie: *Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*^{Jn.14:6} When people say that God will forgive everyone—whether they believe and trust Him or not—then that is a lie: *Those who believe in him won't be condemned. But those who don't believe are already condemned because they don't believe in God's only Son... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life. Instead, he will see God's constant anger.*^{Jn.3:18,36} When people say that “alternative lifestyles” are acceptable lifestyles—lifestyles such as drunkenness, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lying, cheating, etc.—then that is a lie: *Don't you know that evil people will not receive God's kingdom? Don't be fooled. Those who commit sexual sins will not receive the kingdom. Neither will those who worship statues of gods or commit adultery. Neither will men who are prostitutes or who commit homosexual acts. Neither will thieves or those who always want more and more. Neither will those who are often drunk or tell lies or cheat. People who live like that will not receive God's kingdom. Some of you used to do those things. But your sins were washed away. You were made holy. You were made right with God. All of that was done in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*^{1Cor.6:9-11}

God is holy and so we are expected to be holy too: *The one who chose you is holy. So you should be holy in all that you do. It is written, “Be holy, because I am holy.”*^{1Pet.1:15-16} The Old Testament part of our Bible contains some very draconian rules and penalties in order to show the holiness of God and severity of sin—including the consequences of breaking God’s laws. But those rules and penalties were temporary—they were only until the New Covenant was implemented: *By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:13} However, the principle of the moral laws of righteous godly living still remain for today—rules such as: don’t take God’s Name in vain; don’t cheat; don’t lie; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t murder; etc. But the OT penalties for breaking those rules were only for the Jews who were under the old Law. When Jesus came to establish the new Law—the Law of Grace and Mercy—the old Law was obsolete and so those old laws don’t carry over into the New Covenant. Thus Mary’s Child was born at just the right time in history—and given the name Jesus—in order to fulfil God’s laws and also His plan of salvation so He could bring us into His Family: *But then the right time came. God sent his Son. A woman gave birth to him. He was born under the authority of the law. He came to set free those who were under the law. He wanted us to be*

adopted as children with all the rights children have. 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.^{Gal.4:4-6} Wesley penned the sentiments of those verses: *Born that man no more may die, Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.*

Sadly some of the teachings of the Church have evolved over the years and become distorted, but the faith as originally given to the apostles was sound and timeless: *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.3:16} *The Spirit says clearly that in later times some believers will desert the Christian faith. They will follow spirits that deceive, and they will believe the teachings of demons. These people will speak lies disguised as truth. Their consciences have been scarred as if branded by a red-hot iron. They will try to stop others from getting married and from eating certain foods. God created food to be received with prayers of thanks by those who believe and know the truth. Everything God created is good. Nothing should be rejected if it is received with prayers of thanks. The word of God and prayer set it apart as holy.*^{2Tim.4:1-}

⁵ So we have a responsibility to examine the Church's teachings and check them against the Scriptures: *They were very willing to receive God's message, and every day they carefully examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true.*^{Acts.17:11} And we must contend for the true faith. *Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.*^{Jude:3}

In the past, slavery was not only condoned but actually promoted by the Church (the church of the establishment—not the Church of Believers) but the NT Bible clearly describes slave trading as “*ungodly, sinful and contrary to sound doctrine.*” *We know that the law is good if it is used properly. We also know that the law isn't made for godly people. It is made for those who break the law. It is for those who refuse to obey. It is for ungodly and sinful people. It is for those who aren't holy and who don't believe. It is for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine. True teaching agrees with the glorious good news of the blessed God. He trusted me with that good news.*^{1Tim.1:8-11}

Some of the Church's teaching about women have clearly been at odds with the NT teaching and practice—such as forbidding women to speak and insisting they wear hats. This passage clearly shows that women were expected to pray and share in public worship: *Every man who covers his head when he prays or speaks what God has revealed dishonours the one who has authority over him. Every woman who prays or speaks what God has revealed and has her head uncovered while she speaks dishonours the one who has authority over her.*^{1Cor.11:4-5}

The very basic NT doctrine is based on Mary having a son called Jesus who is “*God with us*”: *The virgin is going to have a baby. She will give birth to a son. And he will be called Emmanuel. The name Immanuel means “God with us.”*^{2Matt.1:22}

Any teaching (or teacher) that denies Jesus Christ has come as a human being, is wrong and should be refuted: *Many people who deceive others have gone into the world. They refuse to declare that Jesus Christ came in flesh and blood. This is the mark of a deceiver and an antichrist. Be careful that you don't destroy what we've worked for, but that you receive your full reward. Everyone who doesn't continue to teach what Christ taught doesn't have God. The person who continues to teach what Christ taught has both the Father and the Son.*^{2Jn.1:7-9}

And any teaching (or teacher) that denies Jesus Christ is not God should also be refuted: *So I want you to know that no one speaking by God's Spirit says, “Jesus is cursed.” No one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.*^{1Cor.12:3}

Although false teachings and false teachers will come, we must build ourselves up in the most holy faith by praying in the power of the Holy Spirit: *But you, my dear friends, must remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ predicted. They told you that in the last times there would be scoffers whose purpose in life is to satisfy their ungodly desires. These people are the ones who are creating divisions among you. They follow their natural instincts because they do not have God's Spirit in them. But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus*

Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love.^{Jude:17-21} And we must also study God's Word so that we are credible in our doctrine and not blown around by any false doctrine: *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*^{2Tim.2:15} *Then we will no longer be little children, tossed and carried about by all kinds of teachings that change like the wind.*^{Eph.4:14}

Yes, the Name of Jesus is important but so is the doctrine of Jesus. Poor theology wears you out but good theology makes Christianity easy. The Gospel is simple, settled and spiritual—if we get our doctrine right, our faith becomes supernaturally natural. Jesus' birth fulfilled God's purpose to save us: *Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*^{Lk.2:11} Now it is up to us live as saved people by honouring God in thought, word and deed.

Sunday 22nd 10.30am. Ps.68:1-7 Matt.2

Jesus' Birth Followed Up. *We have come to worship him.*^{Matt.2:2}

Jesus' birth was fulfilled just as it had been foretold—and then it was followed up with the visit of the Magi who were seeking the Messiah. Although the Bible prophesies clearly pointed to the Messiah being Jesus, the Baby born to Mary in Bethlehem did not fit in with the Jew's expectation of a Messiah who would deliver them from the oppressive Romans. And even after His resurrection, Jesus' disciples still expected political kingdom: *Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*^{Acts.1:6} But Jesus' kingdom was not a political kingdom and it never will be a political kingdom because it is a spiritual kingdom—a kingdom whose values are *"righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*^{Rom.14:7} *"My kingdom," said Jesus, "doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king."*^{Jn.18:36}

Although Herod had been given the title *"king of Judea"* by Rome, he wasn't even Jewish—he was Idumean (a descendant of Esau and from Edom) and every Jew knew that the Messiah would be King and a descendant of king David: *For this is what the LORD says: 'David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.'*^{Jer.33:17} So it was little wonder that Herod saw Jesus as competition when the Magi asked: *Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?*^{Matt.2:2}

Herod was very affluent and influential—he financed many building projects, including the brand-new city and harbour Caesarea Maritima (whose facilities would be a credit to any port today) and he even bailed out the cash-strapped Olympic Games in 12B.C. Although known as Herod the Great, his moral legacy was certainly not great. He was married 10 times and murdered many of his extended family, as well as many of his close family, including his wife (uxoricide), brothers (fratricide), sons (filicide)—some when they were still children (infanticide). So the description of him being *"a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis"* was not an exaggeration! (Emperor Augustus remarked, 'It is better to be Herod's pig than his son'. Herod would not kill pigs, but had three of his sons, and many others, killed.) With a record like that, it is not surprising that the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem isn't even mentioned in the historical books of his era! Herod tried to endear himself to the Jews by rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem where he employed over 1000 priests as builders and carpenters. Herod eventually died from a very painful and putrefying illness (referred to as *"Herod's Evil"*) in 4B.C. aged 59.

Herod had no legal right to the Jewish throne, and even though he pretended to want to pay homage to Jesus,^{Matt.2:8} he had no intention of acknowledging *the one who has been born king of the Jews.*^{Matt.2:2} In contrast, the Magi, who were renowned as *"wise-men"*, really did want to pay homage to the Baby who was *born king of the Jews* and their reward was an audience with the King of Kings who had created the Universe. **What would you do if you had a face-to-face audience with the King of Kings?**

Christmas carols are an excellent opportunity to explain how to have a face-to-face audience with the King of Kings—which actually is the real meaning of Christmas! Our English word “*carol*” is derived from the Old French word *carole*, meaning *a circle dance accompanied by singers*. Originally it had no religious connection but was used for any singing with a parade or dance. *Wassailing* is an even older English word which comes from the Anglo-Saxon toast *Wæs þu hæl*, meaning “*be thou hale*” i.e. “*be in good health*”. Although many of the Christmas carols include sentimental fiction, some include great Christian doctrine—for instance, these verses from “*Angels from the realms of glory*”:

*Sinners, wrung with true repentance, doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes the sentence, mercy calls you; break your chains.
All creation, join in praising, God, the Father, Spirit, Son,
Evermore your voices raising to th’eternal Three in One.*

Charles Wesley wrote the carol “*Hark! how all the welkin rings Glory to the King of Kings*” but “*welkin*” is not a word that we use very much—it actually means “*heaven*”! Wesley especially asked that it was sung to slow and solemn music, but George Whitefield edited the words to “*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*” and the tune was changed to a joyful cantata composed by Mendelssohn to commemorate Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, making it the popular carol that we sing today—and this too has some important Christian doctrine:

*Hail the heav’nly Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings, Ris’n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by, Born that man no more may die.
Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born King!”*

It is always helpful to revisit the Nativity story in the Bible because sentimental carols have kept the focus of Christmas on the Crib not the Cross and commercialism has exchanged Father God with Father Christmas, so that Jesus is no longer the reason for the season.

Luke mentions that there was *no room in the Inn*^{Lk.2:7} but this word “*Inn*” is misleading and so some of the newer translations use “*guest room*”: *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*^{Lk.2:6-7} The 1st English translation of the Bible (by John Wycliffe in 1385) accurately translates this word as “*chamber*”: *And she bare her firstborn son, and wrapped him in clothes, and put him in a cratch [feed-trough], for there was no place to him in no chamber.* This word “*Inn/guest-room/chamber*” is the same word that Luke used for the Upper Room where Jesus held the Last Supper: *The Teacher asks, “Where is the guest room? Where can I eat the Passover meal with my disciples?” He will show you a large upstairs room with furniture in it. Prepare for us to eat there.*^{Lk.22:11-12} Luke uses quite a different word for “*Inn*” for the Good Samaritan story—and this word means “*a house for the reception of strangers*”: *But a Samaritan came to the place where the man was. When he saw the man, he felt sorry for him. He went to him, poured olive oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey. He took him to an inn and took care of him.*^{Lk.10:33-}

³⁴ So the real nativity story is that Mary and Joseph came, not to strangers but to their relatives in Bethlehem (their home town)—and as there was no room in the upstairs guest room, they used the manger as a crib!

The Biblical account of the “*wise men*” is also very different from the story promoted by many of the carols. The Bible makes no mention of 3 kings visiting a stable! (Isaiah mentions camels, gold and frankincense^{Is.60:6} but in the context of many people seeing the Messiah’s glory and coming to faith in Him.) What the Bible actually says is that *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.*”^{Matt.2:1-2} The word “*magi*” (from where we get “*magic*”) is also found in Acts 8 where

Simon is described as a “sorcerer” (*magi*)—the Greek language does not differentiate between *holy* “wise-men” and *occult* “wise-men” in the way that our English language does! When these Magi found the child Jesus *they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.* ^{Matt.2:10-11}

This is a wonderful explanation of worship:

1. **filled with joy** (not fear or panic or unbelief; there is joy in God’s presence).
2. **come to Jesus** (Jesus is the focus of our worship and we cannot worship God from a distance).
3. **bow down and worship** (this must be the attitude of our heart).
4. **open treasures** (our heart will be where our treasure is; ^{Matt.6:21} worship requires an open heart).
5. **present gifts** (worship is giving to God from our treasure, i.e. our heart).

Worship is the “worth-ship” of Jesus—the value and honour we give to Him. Our word “worship” comes from the old English word “weorscipe” meaning “worth-ship”. *All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”* ^{Rev.7:11-12}

As we recall the Nativity story again this year, let’s make sure that we don’t let the pageantry detract from the real purpose of Christmas nor allow the commercialism to change the true meaning of Christmas. The Biblical story is still relevant today because it shows how we can have a face-to-face audience with the King of Kings—by receiving Him as Lord:

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n!
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.*

So let’s follow up Jesus’ birth with the same response as the Magi: *We have come to worship him.* ^{Matt.2:2}

Sunday 29th 10.30am. Ps.68.32-35—bring and share:

When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: bring a hymn or a teaching or a word from God. All of those things must be done to make the church strong. ^{1Cor.14:26}

At Christmas it is traditional for national leaders to broadcast a Message to the Nation. As usual, the Queen gave an inspirational message this year that honoured Jesus Christ:

Of course, at the heart of the Christmas story lies the birth of a child: a seemingly small and insignificant step overlooked by many in Bethlehem. But in time, through his teaching and by his example, Jesus Christ would show the world how small steps taken in faith and in hope can overcome long-held differences and deep-seated divisions to bring harmony and understanding. Many of us already try to follow in his footsteps. The path, of course, is not always smooth, and may at times this year have felt quite bumpy, but small steps can make a world of difference... And, as we all look forward to the start of a new decade, it’s worth remembering that it is often the small steps, not the giant leaps, that bring about the most lasting change.

Our Politicians also made Christmas speeches:

Ed Davey (Lib.Dems.): *As a Christian, for me, it’s all about hope. And joy. And love. What could possibly represent hope, joy and love better – than a new born baby. When I held my first child, in the crook of my arm in Kingston Hospital, just minutes after he’d been born, that was the first time I really understood how my own father and mother must have loved me. So you don’t actually have to believe in Jesus to recognise that for Christians, Christmas has a deep, profound meaning. It’s why we light candles. It’s why we remember that even in those dark days – when King Herod was willing to slaughter thousands of new born babies just to hold*

onto power, and forced the Holy Family to become refugees and asylum seekers – even then, hope, joy and love were possible. Jesus went on to teach – and to teach ideas and values that still speak powerfully to us today. Perhaps my favourite is this. ‘Love Thy Neighbour As Thyself’ So this Christmas – let’s have hope. And joy. And love. And let’s love all our neighbours. Even those who believe in unicorns.

Jeremy Corbyn (Labour): *This has been a difficult year for many of us. We didn’t succeed in delivering the change that so many people so desperately need... But Christmas is a chance to listen, reflect and remember all the things that bind us together: our compassion, our determination to tackle injustice and our hope for a better world... the scale of injustice and inequality is in very plain sight... While we celebrate being together, we are reminded of the many who will be alone and sadly lonely at Christmas... But our communities are built on generosity and the solidarity that comes from that. So we do not walk by on the other side.*

Boris Johnson PM: *Christmas Day is, first and foremost, a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a day of inestimable importance to billions of Christians the world over. I hope you are all enjoying a wonderful break with your loved ones, sharing gifts and tucking into some delicious food. Of course, as many of us are enjoying a break at this time of year, let’s not forget all those who have selflessly put their celebrations on hold... Today of all days, I want us to remember those Christians around the world who are facing persecution. For them, Christmas Day will be marked in private, in secret, perhaps even in a prison cell. As Prime Minister, that’s something I want to change. We stand with Christians everywhere, in solidarity, and will defend your right to practice your faith. So as a country let us reflect on the year, and celebrate the good that is to come.*

Archbishop of Canterbury: *To follow Jesus is not through compulsion, for he has expressed God’s language of love by being a baby, so vulnerable and weak, so easily overlooked. To follow Jesus is not to become dull and tedious, for in him is light and life more than anywhere else in all eternity. The very heavens shake with the music of his birth. In him is love spoken and reliable. In him is a new language that transforms us and all around us, God’s language of love.*

All our leaders managed to say some good things this Christmas but the Nation is a very different audience from our Church congregation or even our own family. When we speak to Christians, we want to encourage and inspire them but also instruct them in sound doctrine. *When you gather for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: bring a hymn or a teaching or a word from God. All of those things must be done to make the church strong.*^{1Cor.14:26} And if we could speak to the Nation we would have to be careful to present our message in such a way that people who have no relationship with God would want to listen to what we say—and take notice!

We would want our message to encourage, inspire and instruct—whether our audience consists of Believers, not-yet-Believers, or both. And we should always strive to be clear in our presentation of sound doctrine (remember, sound doctrine makes stress-free Christianity!): *You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.*^{Titus.2:1-2} We are not responsible for what other people believe or don’t believe but we are responsible for what we believe—and for what we say: *Your mouths say everything that is in your hearts. A good man says good things. These come from the good that is put away inside him. An evil man says evil things. These come from the evil that is put away inside him. But here is what I tell you. On judgment day, people will have to account for every careless word they have spoken. By your words you will be found guilty or not guilty.*^{Matt.12:34-37}

We would want to be clear about Jesus. Jesus is much more than a good man or even a prophet—He is the Eternal Son of God: *You are the Christ. You are the Son of the living God.*^{Matt.16:16}

We would want to be clear that God is holy. God has both spiritual and moral standards and He expects us to keep them. But our hope does not come from the way we live or even by following Jesus’ example. Our hope comes from Jesus Himself—from believing in Him and then following Him by putting His words into practice. *Do not work for food that spoils. Work for food that lasts forever. That is the food the Son of Man will give you. God the Father has put his seal of approval*

on him.” Then they asked him, “What does God want from us? What works does he want us to do?” Jesus answered, “God’s work is to believe in the One he has sent.”^{Jn.6:27-29} Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do what my Father in heaven wants will enter... So then, everyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like a wise man. He builds his house on the rock... But everyone who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man. He builds his house on sand.^{Matt.7:21-26} An angry person doesn’t do what God approves of. So get rid of all immoral behaviour and all the wicked things you do. Humbly accept the word that God has placed in you. This word can save you. Do what God’s word says. Don’t merely listen to it, or you will fool yourselves... However, the person who continues to study God’s perfect teachings that make people free and who remains committed to them will be blessed. People like that don’t merely listen and forget; they actually do what God’s teachings say.^{Jas.1:20-25}

So, let’s make every effort to maintain both our trust and our testimony and try to make our message clear and memorable.

We started this year with this Prayer so let’s end this year with the same Prayer:

Compassionate Lord,

as I cross the threshold of this day, I commit myself, my soul, my body, my affairs and my friends to Your care. Watch over me, keep me, guide me, direct me, sanctify me and bless me. Your mercies have brought me to the dawn of another day. Vain will be its gift unless I grow in grace, increase in knowledge and ripen for spiritual harvest.

Mould me wholly into the image of Jesus, as a potter forms clay. May my lips be a well-tuned harp to sound Your praise. Let those around, see me living by Your Spirit, transformed by a renewed mind, clad in the entire armour of God, shining as a never-dimmed light and showing holiness in all my doings. Let no evil this day soil my thoughts, words or hands.

Preserve my understanding from subtilty of error, my affections from love of idols, my character from stain of vice and my profession from every form of evil. May I engage in nothing in which I cannot implore Your blessing and in which I cannot invite Your inspection. Prosper me in all lawful undertakings—or prepare me for disappointments.

Teach me how to use the world and not abuse it; to improve my talents and to redeem my time; to walk in wisdom toward those without and in kindness to those within; to do good to all people and especially to my fellow Christians. May I view all things in the mirror of eternity, waiting for the coming of my Lord and listening for that last trumpet call to herald the new heaven and earth.

Order this day, all my communications according to Your wisdom and to the gain of mutual good. May I speak each word as if my last word and walk each step as my final one. If my life should end today, let this be my best day.

Bible Time Chart

Time Chart of OT

1479B.C.	Exodus under Thutmose II <i>(Thutmose II is the only Pharaoh's mummy to display cysts, possible evidence of plagues that spread through the Egyptian and Hittite Empires at that time. [Edersheim, A., Old Testament Bible History])</i>
1270B.C.	<i>Another possible date for the Exodus (under Ramesses 2 also called Ramesses the Great)</i>
1000B.C.	David
970B.C.	Solomon builds the Temple
722B.C.	Israel's (Northern Kingdom) Exile 2Kings 17:6
597/6B.C.	Judah's (Southern Kingdom) 1 st Exile 2Kings 24:10-17
586B.C.	Judah's (Southern Kingdom) 2 nd Exile 2Kings 25:1-21
537B.C.	Judah's (Southern Kingdom) Return from Exile

Time Chart of NT

20/19B.C.	<i>Herod's Temple began</i>
18/17B.C.	<i>Herod's Temple in use</i>
c8B.C.	Zechariah in the Temple (Lk.1)
5B.C. April 5 th	Birth of Jesus
4B.C.	<i>Death of Herod the Great</i>
A.D.14 -37	<i>Reign of Tiberius Caesar</i>
A.D.29	Baptism of Jesus Lk.3:1 15 th year of Tiberius reign hence A.D. 29 **
A.D.33 April Wed. 1 st	Last Supper (see Colin Humphreys' "The Mystery of the Last Supper")
A.D.33 April Fri. 3 rd	Crucifixion of Jesus
c A.D.35	Conversion of Paul Acts 9
<A.D.37	<i>Christianity came to Britain. ***</i>
A.D.37-41	<i>Reign of Caligula</i>
A.D.41-54	<i>Reign of Claudius</i>
c A.D.44	<i>Death of Herod Agrippa 1</i>
< A.D.50	Letter of James
A.D.48-49	Paul's 1 st missionary journey
A.D.49/50	Jerusalem Conference Acts.15
A.D.50	Paul's 2 nd missionary journey
A.D.50-52	Paul at Corinth
A.D.51	1 & 2 Thessalonians from Corinth
A.D.52	Galatians from Corinth
A.D.54	Paul's 3 rd missionary journey
A.D.54 -68	<i>Reign of Nero</i>
A.D.54-57	Paul at Ephesus
A.D.57	1Corinthians from Ephesus
A.D.57	2Corinthians from Macedonia
A.D.57/58	Romans from Corinth
A.D.58	Paul's arrest at Jerusalem
A.D.58-60	Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea
A.D.60-61	Paul winters at Malta
A.D.61	Paul arrives at Rome
A.D.61-63	Paul's imprisonment at Rome
A.D.62	Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon from Rome
A.D.63	Philippians from Rome

A.D.63-65	Paul's release & further ministry
A.D.63	1 Timothy & Titus
A.D.64	Hebrews
<i>A.D.64</i>	<i>Herod's Temple finished</i>
<A.D.65	Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts
<A.D.65	Revelation****
A.D.64-68	1 & 2 Peter from Rome
A.D.65	Peter's death in Rome
A.D.66	Paul's 2 nd imprisonment at Rome
A.D.66	2 Timothy from Rome
A.D.66/67	Paul's death at Rome
A.D.67/68	Jude
<i>A.D.68</i>	<i>Death of Nero</i>
<i>A.D.68-69</i>	<i>Reign of Galba</i>
<i>A.D.69</i>	<i>Reign of Otho</i>
<i>A.D.69</i>	<i>Reign of Vitellius</i>
<i>A.D.69-79</i>	<i>Reign of Vespasian</i>
<i>A.D.70</i>	<i>Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus</i>
<i>A.D.79-81</i>	<i>Reign of Titus</i>
<A.D.98	Gospel John, 1, 2, & 3 John
A.D.98/100	Death of John
<i>A.D.81-96</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 455B.C. (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 A.D.29 (*there is no date of 0B.C. or A.D.0*).

******* 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 (A.D.150-220) 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 C1st author who wrote *The Pseudo-Apocalypse*. He died well before John, i.e. well before A.D.95, but his Pseudo-Apocalypse contains many references to John's Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation).

Internal evidence:

42 months = the period between A.D.64 and A.D.66 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 (Rev.13:18) designates Nero. The number involves the use of *gemetria* (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*.

Rome launched its persecution against Christians in A.D.64 under the direction of Caesar Nero. This ended with his death in A.D.68. It had lasted around 1240 days (3½ years). Rome launched its attack against Jerusalem in A.D.66 and this ended when Jerusalem fell under the leadership of Caesar Vespasian in A.D.70. This was a period of 1260 days (3½ years).

Memory Verses 2019—New Covenant Praying

January: For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Colossians 1:9

February: And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, Colossians 1:10

March: being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, Colossians 1:11

April: joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. Colossians 1:12

May: 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. Colossians 1:13-14

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

July: For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. Ephesians 1:4

August: In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will Ephesians 1:5

September: to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. Ephesians 1:6

October: In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. Ephesians 1:7-8

November: And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment Ephesians 1:9

December: to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one Head, even Christ. Ephesians 1:10



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