

Deal Pentecostal Church Sermon Outlines 2020

Daily Prayer for 2020

O God, most high and most glorious,
the thought of Your infinite serenity cheers me,
for when I am toiling and moiling, troubled and distressed,
You are for ever at perfect peace!

Your designs cause You no fear or care of unfulfilment—
they stand fast as the eternal hills.

Your power knows no bond and Your goodness knows no stint.
You bring order out of confusion, making my defeats Your victories
the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Lord, help me!

Let the weeds that grow in my soul be cut at their roots.

Grant me to know that I truly live
only when I live to You—all else is trifling.

Your Presence alone can make me holy, devout, strong and happy.

Contents

January.....	2
February	12
March.....	23
April.....	37
May	48
June.....	61
July	72
August	83
September	97
October	109
November.....	124
December.....	139
Bible Time Chart.....	151
Memory Verses 2020—Trust.....	154

January

The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a Stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know Your name will trust in You, for You, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek You. Psalm 9:9-10

Sunday 5th January 2020. Ps.71:1-8.

Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God^{C.ten Boom} Our theme for this year is **Trusting God**. Our Prayer for this year encourages us to trust God and our Memory Verses also encourage us to trust God. Actually, we cannot please God without trusting Him (which is what faith is): *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} This verse defines faith as believing the fact of God's existence **and** believing that God rewards us when we seek Him—*he cares enough to respond to those who seek him.*TM We find it easy to trust God on Sundays when we are all together but we must learn to trust God every day of every week and especially when we are by ourselves. And it is by trusting God (faith) that we are saved from our sins—**together with** acknowledging that **Jesus is Lord**: *So now everyone who believes can be right with God... "The word is near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart." That means the word we are preaching. You must put your faith in it. Say with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord." Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Then you will be saved. With your heart you believe and are made right with God. With your mouth you say that Jesus is Lord. And so you are saved. Scripture says, "The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."*^{Rom.10:4-11} So faith must be active **and** audible—if we don't talk to God and about God, then we won't really trust Him: *It is written, "I believed, and so I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe. And we also speak. We know that God raised the Lord Jesus from the dead. And he will also raise us up with Jesus. He will bring us with you to God in heaven.*^{2Cor.4:13-14}

Trusting God is not dependant on receiving what we wanted or hoped for. God is not a spiritual "Father Christmas" who comes to give us presents—but He is our spiritual Father who gives us eternal life. The OT saints were commended for their faith, even though many of them never received the physical promises from God and none of them received the spiritual promise of God. The spiritual promise of God they were waiting for was of the removal of the guilt of their sins because they were waiting for Jesus to come—to be born, to live, to die for our sins, to rise again for our justification, and to ascend to the Father to send the Holy Spirit. *These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us. So they would only be made perfect together with us.*^{Heb.11:39}

Although life is unpredictable, God is never unpredictable. We know that God is good: *You are good and what you do is good,*^{Ps.119:68} And we also know that God is with us: *The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel (which means "God with us").*^{Matt.1:20-23} *On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.*^{Jn.14:20} *Be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*^{Heb.13:5} And life is never quite what it seems—nothing happens by chance (even if it looks like it does) because God is in charge—which is what "**Jesus is Lord**" really means. There is a spiritual dimension to life that is unseen yet very real and the God of miracles is in control: *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*^{Ps.77:14} *I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.*^{Job.2:2} 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.*^{Jn.16:30} **Omnipotent** (all powerful): *I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?*^{Jer.32:27} **Omnibenevolent** (perfectly good and all love): *You are good, and what you do is good.*^{Ps.119:68} And 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}

Whether life is comfortable and easy or tough or difficult, we must trust God if we are going to please God and live in peace. When remember God's greatness and declare His goodness, we will rise above our doubts and unbelief. *Here's something else I've seen on this earth. Races aren't always won by those who run fast. Battles aren't always won by those who are strong. Wise people don't always have plenty of food. Clever people aren't always wealthy. Those who have learned a lot aren't always favoured. God controls the timing of every event. He also controls how things turn out. A man doesn't know when trouble will come to him. Fish are caught in nets. Birds are taken in traps. And people are trapped by hard times that come when they don't expect them.*^{Ecc.9:11-12}

True faith is never disappointed because our trust is in God—not in what He does! Because God is **Omnipresent, Omniscient, Omnipotent** and **Omnibenevolent** we can trust Him to look after us. If we get angry with God or blame Him for our troubles, it is a vote of no confidence in God and it shows how little we trust Him!

To trust is to surrender—and this often shown by raising our hands. The Bible says that we should raise our hands to God: *I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.*^{Ps.63:4}

But there are two ways of raising our hands—to receive or reject; in praise or in rebellion. One of the Hebrew words for “praise” or “thanks” is “*Judah*” which literally means “*to stretch out your hand in submission*”: *Why are you depressed, O my soul? Why are you upset? Wait for God! For I will again give **thanks** to my God for his saving intervention.*^{Ps.42:5}

The another way of raising your hand is to shake your fist, as in anger or rebellion: *The LORD has spoken, “I raised my children and helped them grow, but they have **rebelled** against me.”*^{Is.1:2}

Both types of raising hands can look similar but are the exact opposite of each other. There is a righteous anger—against sin, such as Jesus' anger against religious hypocrisy: *He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.*^{Matt.3:5}

But if we get angry at God we show that we don't understand anything about trusting God. If we are to be judged for being angry with our brother, how much more so, if we are angry with God! *Anyone who is angry with his brother will be judged... But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire in hell.*^{Matt.5:22}

Job had learned to trust God even when he did not understand what was happening—but the Bible clearly implies that had Job been angry with God, he would have sinned: *The LORD gave me what I had, and the LORD has taken it away. Praise the name of the LORD!” In all of this, Job did not sin by blaming God.*^{Job.1:21-22}

We take the good days from God—why not also the bad days?” Not once through all this did Job sin. He said nothing against God.^{Job.2:10}

We must make every effort to keep our faith strong and vibrant because faith is the only thing that will really counts: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9}

These next Scripture verses on trusting God speak for themselves: *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.*^{Ps.20:7-8}

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

No matter what happens, live in a way that brings honour to the good news about Christ. Then I will know that you stand firm with one purpose.^{Phil.1:27}

The sting of death is sin. And the power of sin is the law. But let us give thanks to God! He wins the battle for us because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done. My dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Don't let anything move you. Always give yourselves completely to the work of the Lord. Because you belong to the Lord, you know that your work is not worthless.^{1Cor.15:56-58}

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.^{1Cor.16:13-14}

But it is not just **our** faith that counts—it is also **God's** faithfulness! If we were left to our own devices, we would all fail—but it is God who makes us stand. And we will stand—if we don't give up. This is what Church is about—working together so we stand firm in your own faith: *God has made a great many promises. They are all “Yes” because of what Christ has done. So through Christ we say “Amen.” We want God to receive glory. He makes both us and you stand firm because we belong to Christ. He anointed us. He put his Spirit in our hearts and marked us as his own. We can now*

be sure that he will give us everything he promised us... Your faith is not under our control. You stand firm in your own faith. But we work together with you for your joy.^{2Cor.1:20-24}

So this year, let's determine to put our trust in God and build ourselves up in the holy faith—and we will stand firm to the end! *Finally, let the Lord make you strong. Depend on his mighty power... Evil days will come. But you will be able to stand up to anything. And after you have done everything you can, you will still be standing.*^{Eph.6:10-14}

Sunday 12th January 2020. Ps.71:14-19. Lk.8:1-25

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear... Therefore consider carefully how you listen.^{Lk.8:8;18}

We have all spoken to someone who heard our audible words but didn't hear what we actually said—usually because they weren't paying attention or were not really interested. That is the same with many people when they hear the Bible read—which is why Jesus said that we should *consider carefully how we listen.*^{Lk.8:18} Whilst the actual words of Scripture are easily heard with our physical ears and understood with our natural mind, there is a spiritual dimension to the Bible that needs spiritual ears to hear and a spiritual mind to understand: *They look, but they don't really see. They listen, but they don't really hear or understand... But blessed are your eyes because they see. And blessed are your ears because they hear. What I'm about to tell you is true. Many prophets and godly people wanted to see what you see. But they didn't see it. They wanted to hear what you hear. But they didn't hear it.*^{Matt.13:13-17}

There are various ways through which God can communicate with us—through Creation, circumstances, conscience and even calamities: *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.*^{Rom.1:20-22} *Why do you claim that God never answers any of our questions? He 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. He wants to stop them from going down into the grave. He doesn't want them to be killed with swords.*^{Job.32:13-18} **But God speaks to us** primarily through His **Son, Jesus Christ:** *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. God made everything through him. The Son is the gleaming brightness of God's glory. He is the exact likeness of God's being. He uses his powerful word to hold all things together. He provided the way for people to be made pure from sin.*^{Heb.1:1-3} **Jesus speaks to us** through the **Holy Spirit:** *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{Rev.3:22} *But God has shown it to us through his Spirit. The Spirit understands all things. He understands even the deep things of God. Who can know the thoughts of another person? Only a person's own spirit can know them. In the same way, only the Spirit of God knows God's thoughts. We have not received the spirit of the world. We have received the Spirit who is from God. The Spirit helps us understand what God has freely given us. That is what we speak about. We don't use words taught to us by people. We use words taught to us by the Holy Spirit. We use the words of the Spirit to teach the truths of the Spirit.*^{1Cor.2:10-14} **And the Holy Spirit speaks to us** primarily through the **Scriptures, God's Word:** *The word of the prophets is made more certain. We have that word. You must pay attention to it. It is like a light shining in a dark place. It will shine until the day Jesus comes. Then the Morning Star will rise in your hearts. Above all, here is what you must understand. No prophecy in Scripture ever came from a prophet's own understanding. It never came simply because a prophet wanted it to. Instead, the Holy Spirit guided the prophets as they spoke. So prophecy comes from God.*^{2Pet.1:19-21}

We are all born spiritually dead (and so deaf to God) because of Adam's sinful nature that we inherited—even though we are created in God's image: *At one time you were dead in your sins. Your*

sinful nature was not circumcised. But God gave you new life together with Christ. He forgave us all of our sins.^{Col.2:13} *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, things can't be understood without the Spirit's help... But we have the mind of Christ.*^{1Cor.2:14-16} *So we need more than just our physical ears to hear God: Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.*^{Ezek.12:2} *With your own eyes you have seen everything the LORD did in Egypt to Pharaoh. You have seen what he did to all of Pharaoh's officials and to his whole land. With your own eyes you saw how the LORD really made them suffer. You saw his miraculous signs and great wonders. But to this very day the LORD hasn't given you a mind that understands. He hasn't given you eyes that see. He hasn't given you ears that hear.*^{Deut.29:2-4} *To hear from God, we need spiritual senses—and these come from being re-born spiritually: 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.3:5-8}

Some people think that the Bible is book of mythology that is akin to fairy-tales. Other people think the Bible is a book of mysteries with hidden meanings which only certain enlightened people can understand. But the Bible is actually a revelation of God's plan of salvation for mankind through Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Saviour and if we lose sight of the purpose of Scripture, we will get side-tracked into all sorts of superstition and conspiracy theories that will lead us into confusion, distract us from faith in God and leave us spiritually tired. Although the Bible is not a science book, it does contain eternal truths of science and nature. Although the Bible is not a history book, it does contain accurate historical records. Although the Bible is not a philosophy book, it does contain wonderful insights into philosophy and promotes the highest moral standards. Although the Bible is not tomorrow's newspaper where we can read what will happen to individuals or countries, it does contain clear information on our future and how this world will end. But the Bible does have hidden meanings—yet only to those who are spiritually dead! To those of us who are born-again, the Bible is an open Book because our spiritual senses have been awakened, our spiritual ears have been opened, so now we can hear God speak to us through the Bible. *You are permitted to understand the secrets [mysteries] of the Kingdom of God. But I use parables to teach the others so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled: 'When they look, they won't really see. When they hear, they won't understand.'*^{Lk.8:10}

The Bible is a spiritual Book that has God's life in its words. *For no word from God will ever fail [void of power].*^{Lk.1:37} *Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.*^{Deut.32:46-47} *And so the Bible is our spiritual life and our spiritual food: Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*^{Matt.4:4} *The Spirit alone gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But some of you do not believe me." (For Jesus knew from the beginning which ones didn't believe, and he knew who would betray him.) Then he said, "That is why I said that people can't come to me unless the Father gives them to me."*^{Jn.6:63-65} *As well as being our spiritual food, the Bible is also our guide book to prepare us for living righteously: 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} *So we must take care that we listen to what God says to us. Let me tell you what's going on here: No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer; but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him. For a long time now people have tried to force themselves into God's kingdom. But if you read the books of the Prophets and God's Law closely, you will see them culminate in John, teaming up with him in preparing the way for the Messiah of the kingdom. Looked at in this way, John is the 'Elijah' you've all been expecting to arrive and introduce the Messiah. Are you listening to me? Really listening?*^{Matt.11:11-15} *If we put God's Word into practice, we are*

blessed—but if ignore God’s Word we are going to have major problems (or worse, if we quarrel with God)! *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise... But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man.*^{Matt.7:24-26} *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! But when all these terrible things happen to them—as they certainly will—then they will know a prophet has been among them.*^{Is.33:30-33} *What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator.*^{Is.45:9}

So let’s continue to listen carefully to God and pay attention to His Word—then we will be truly blessed as we live our lives in fellowship with God and at peace with Him. *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:165}

Sunday 19th January 2020. Ps.72:1-8. Lk.8:22-56

I know that power has gone out from me.^{Lk.8:46}

Jesus was unique—and is unique. When He spoke, demons left, diseases were healed and death was conquered—and it is the same today when He speaks. The big question is **how**? And the answer is simple—**Jesus is the Son of God.** *You are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.*^{Lk.1:31-32} *At once he [Paul] began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*^{Acts 9:20}

There is no greater mystery than God. When the identity of God is discussed there are a wide range of ideas put forward. Some have gained acceptance and formed the basis for the world's religions. For those who have realised that God must have an identity, they conclude that He must be a person. And this is called *theism*—or more precisely, *monotheism*. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are three great monotheistic religions of the world. But Christianity is further distinguished from these other monotheistic religions by identifying **God** as **Father, Son** and **Holy Spirit**. The reason for this, is the clear presentation in Scripture of God's identity by these three terms. *The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.*^{Acts.5:30-32} *For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.*^{1John 5:7}

This belief is referred to as “*the doctrine of the Trinity*” and although the word “*trinity*” is not found in Scriptures, the Bible clearly teaches that there is only **one** true God: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*^{Dent.6:4} *I am the Lord and there is no other; apart from me there is no god.*^{Is.45:5-6} *There is no God but one... There is but one God, the father from whom all things come.*^{1Cor.8:4-6} And yet this **one** God is revealed in **three** persons: *He saw the **Spirit of God** (the Holy Spirit) descending like a dove, and lighting upon **him** (Jesus, God the Son), and a **voice from heaven** (God the Father) said, This is my Son.*^{Matt.3:16-17} *I (God the Son) will ask the **Father** (God the Father) and he will give you **another counsellor** (God the Holy Spirit).*^{John 14:16} *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the **Father** and of the **Son**, and of the **Holy Spirit.***^{Matt.28:19} *Exalted to the right hand of God, **he** (Jesus, God the Son) has received from **the Father** the promised **Holy Spirit.***^{Acts 2:33} ***God** (the Father) anointed **Jesus of Nazareth** (God the Son) with the **Holy Spirit.***^{Acts 10:38} ***Christ** (God the Son), who through the eternal **Spirit** offered himself unblemished to **God** (the Father).*^{Heb.9:14} *The grace of **the Lord Jesus Christ** (God the Son), and the love of **God** (the Father), and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit** be with you all.*^{2Cor.13:14}

When the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, he declared himself the Pontifex Maximus (*greatest priest*) of the Church. In A.D.325, he called for a Council of Bishops to come to Nicaea to resolve the divisive doctrine invented by Arius that Christ was a created

being and therefore the Trinity was not a Biblical concept. [Nicolas, Bishop of Myra (in present-day Turkey) is believed to have been imprisoned during this Council for getting so angry with Arius that he punched him—the bishop is now known as St Nicolas or Santa Claus!] It was Athanasius who swayed the debate in favour of accepting Christ's claims of divinity and the Biblical presentation of the Triune God. He argued that if it could be shown that God the Father was eternal, then He *must* have an eternal Son. Similarly, if Christ is eternal, then He *must* be the eternal God. This is what the Nicæan Council conferred: *We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, True God from true God, Begotten, not made, Of one Being with the Father; Through him all things were made...*^{Nicene Creed}

In much the same way that “Queen” is the title of our monarch and yet her name is Elizabeth, so “God” is a title and “Lord” (Jehovah/Yahweh) is His Name: *And God said to Moses, "I am Yahweh—the LORD." I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El-Shaddai—"God Almighty"—but I did not reveal my name, Yahweh, to them.*^{Ex.6:2-3} Within the title of “**God**” there are three distinct Persons: **Father**, **Son** and **Holy Spirit**. Although these three are equal, **God** (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is not a rule of three (**triumvirate**), but a rule of one (**Trinity**). Jesus taught that all Persons of the Godhead equally deserved to be honoured and worshiped: *that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him.*^{Jn.5:23}

Jesus was always God—co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit: *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} Although Jesus was always the Son of God, when Mary conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit, He became human with a physical body. *So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.*^{Jn.1:14} *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*^{Lk.1:35} (The phrase “overshadow” refers to the protection of the Presence of God: *He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*^{Ps.91:4}) As Mary's son, Jesus grew and developed as a human being: *Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and all the people.*^{Lk.2:52} Jesus' ministry of teaching people about God was a prelude to laying down His life as a sacrifice for our sins. But before Jesus began His ministry, He was baptised in water and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him as a tangible Presence (or Person): *When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened. The Holy Spirit came down on him in the form of a dove. A voice came from heaven. It said, "You are my Son, and I love you. I am very pleased with you."*^{Lk.3:21-22} This personal presence of the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus to live as a perfect human rather than as the Son of God—Jesus relied on the Holy Spirit's support and strength instead of using His intrinsic deity. *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.2:6-7} Through the Holy Spirit's guidance and empowering, Jesus relied totally on His heavenly Father. *Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?*^{Lk.2:49} *I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.*^{Jn.8:28-29} When Jesus was hungry, He **chose** to endure discomfort rather than use His deity to meet His human needs: *Then the devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone.'"*^{Lk.4:3-4} *Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.*^{Jn.4:6-8} However, when the crowds were hungry, Jesus performed a miracle to feed them: *So he said, "Your faith is so small! Why are you talking to each other about having no bread? Don't you understand*

yet? Don't you remember the five loaves for the 5,000? Don't you remember how many baskets of pieces you gathered? Don't you remember the seven loaves for the 4,000? Don't you remember how many baskets of pieces you gathered?^{2Matt.16:8-10}

When Jesus was on earth, He retained all the power of His Deity but He **chose** to submit to His Father—even at His death: *That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God, "You have given me a body to offer... Then I said, 'Look, I have come to do your will, O God—as is written about me in the Scriptures.'"*^{Heb.10:5-7} *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*^{Heb.5:7-9} *Father, if you are willing, take this cup of suffering away from me. But do what you want, not what I want.*^{Lk.22:42} *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*^{1Pet.2:23} Jesus was obedient to His Father because He was the perfect Son—but He was also obedient to His Father because He was an example to us: *You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord.' You are right. That is what I am. I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet. So you also should wash one another's feet. I have given you an example. You should do as I have done for you.*^{Jn.13:13-15} *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*^{1Pet.2:21} In fact, Jesus' whole life was an example to us—especially His submission to His heavenly Father and when Jesus returned to His Father, He sent the Holy Spirit to us, so we can learn obedience, submission and service too: *However, the helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything. He will remind you of everything that I have ever told you.*^{Jn.14:26} *The helper whom I will send to you from the Father will come. This helper, the Spirit of Truth who comes from the Father, will declare the truth about me.*^{Jn.15:26} *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes to you. Then you will be my witnesses to testify about me in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*^{Acts.1:8} *I want to know Christ better. I want to know the power that raised him from the dead.*^{Phil.3:10} *I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honour at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.*^{Eph.1:19-20}

Next time we face a difficult situation, let's remember that we are Believers and that Christ is within us! Even if we feel weak, we are actually strong because we are empowered by God: *I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honour at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.*^{Eph.1:19-20} *But he said to me, "My grace is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*^{2Cor.12:9-10} And so, who knows what God might do through us? But whatever God does, it will be for His glory and our good! **For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**^{Matt.6:13}

Sunday 26th January 2020. Ps.72:16-19. Lk.9:1-27

The Son of Man will come in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels.^{Lk.9:26}

The Son of Man will come in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels.^{Lk.9:26}

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God... For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.^{Nicene Creed}

With Christmas only just behind us, the Nativity story is still fresh in our minds. And Jesus' birth was an essential part of God's plan of salvation, because unless Jesus was human, He

could not pay the price for our sin—or even identify with us: *Jesus says, “I am here with the sons and daughters God has given me.” Since all of these sons and daughters have flesh and blood, Jesus took on flesh and blood to be like them. He did this so that by dying he would destroy the one who had power over death (that is, the devil). In this way he would free those who were slaves all their lives because they were afraid of dying. So Jesus helps Abraham's descendants rather than helping angels. Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters so that he could be merciful. He became like them so that he could serve as a faithful chief priest in God's presence and make peace with God for their sins. Because Jesus experienced temptation when he suffered, he is able to help others when they are tempted.*^{Heb.2:13-18}

When the first human (Adam) rebelled against God, he died spiritually and every one of his descendants inherited his nature that had died spiritually—which is why all humans are born with a spiritually dead nature that is separated from God. It would take another human who was spiritually alive and in fellowship with God—one who was perfect and sinless—to redeem mankind and defeat satan. That is why Jesus the Son of God became human: *For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.*^{1Jn.3:8} *Sin entered the world because one man sinned. And death came because of sin. Everyone sinned, so death came to all people... God's gift is different from Adam's sin. Many people died because of the sin of that one man. But it was even more sure that God's grace would also come through one man. That man is Jesus Christ. God's gift of grace was more than enough for the whole world. The result of God's gift is different from the result of Adam's sin. God judged one sin. That brought guilt. But after many sins, God's gift made people right with him... Many people were made sinners because one man did not obey. But one man did obey. That is why many people will be made right with God.*^{Rom.5:12-19}

But all that is now history—literally “*His Story*”! But it is not the end of the story because Jesus died and rose again on the 3rd day. *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*^{1Cor.15:3-4} Jesus then ascended to heaven: *I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.*^{Jn.16:28} *God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this. Now he is exalted to the place of highest honour in heaven, at God's right hand. And the Father, as he had promised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today.*^{Acts.2:32-}

³³ *And it is from heaven that Jesus will return to this earth to collect the Church (the Church is everyone who has placed their trust in Him): We believe that Jesus died and rose again. When he returns, many who believe in him will have died already. We believe that God will bring them back with Jesus. That agrees with what the Lord has said. When the Lord comes, many of us will still be alive. We tell you that we will certainly not go up before those who have died. The Lord himself will come down from heaven. We will hear a loud command. We will hear the voice of the leader of the angels. We will hear a blast from God's trumpet. Many who believe in Christ will have died already. They will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them. We will be taken up in the clouds. We will meet the Lord in the air. And we will be with him forever.*^{1Thes.4:14-17} This return of Jesus to reign in glory, is the hope and confidence of every Believer: *The Son of Man will come in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels.*^{Lk.9:26}

But the how and when of Jesus' return is not known by anyone except God the Father: *Heaven and earth will pass away. But my words will never pass away. No one knows about that day or hour. Not even the angels in heaven know. The Son does not know. Only the Father knows. Remember how it was in the days of Noah. It will be the same when the Son of Man comes... So you also must be ready. The Son of Man will come at an hour when you don't expect him.*^{Matt.24:35-44} *You should not be concerned about times or dates. The Father has set them by his own authority.*^{Acts.1:7} And yet, the return of Jesus has caused so much confusion and controversy—mostly because people are not Bible literate and prefer the sensations of peoples' ideas and imaginations to the study of God's Word: *Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?”*

He is not the God of the dead but of the living.^{19Matt.22:29-31} But we need more than just the lines of the Bible in our heads—we need life of the Bible in our hearts: *And the Father who sent me has testified about me himself. You have never heard his voice or seen him face to face, and you do not have his 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.*^{20Jn.5:37-40}

Interestingly, John Calvin wrote a commentary on every book of the Bible, *except the Book of Revelation!* Matthew Henry did not write a commentary on the Book of Revelation (it was written posthumously by someone else). With such great minds as Calvin and Henry reluctant to tackle the Book of Revelation, it is not surprising that many of those who have commented on Revelation and/or Jesus' return, have shown their ignorance of God's Word and God's power. Hippolytus of Rome and Sextus Julius Africanus (C3rd) concluded that Christ would return and that the end of the world would occur in 500A.D. Their method for interpreting the Book of Revelation was shown to be demonstrably wrong, yet, for many church leaders, it seems to have sown the idea that the goal of interpreting the Book of Revelation was to determine how it predicted events for their lifetime. It's worth noting that shortly after this speculation about the Book of Revelation, the Church Council at Nicaea, Turkey formulated the Nicene Creed, which was, and is, universally accepted by Christians. Understanding this creed is important because it makes a very clear and important statement about what the early Church believed about the return of Christ. *"He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick (living) and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end."* This statement declares: **1. Jesus Christ will return. 2. Jesus Christ's return will coincide with His judgment of all the living and the dead. 3. After Jesus Christ's judgment of all people, He will rule in a world where evil, injustice, and sin are banished.** This early eschatology (doctrine of last things) was simple and clear!

Futile predictions of Jesus Christ's return have abounded—and here are a few of them:

Pope Sylvester II (999 – 1003) declared that the Book of Revelation revealed that the return of Christ and the end of the world would take place on January 1st 1000 A.D. When this came and went, his interpretation was changed to January 1st 1033 (to allow for the date of Christ's crucifixion).

"The world will not last past 1734." Nicholas of Cusa, 1401-1464

"The second coming will take place in the year 1533." Melchior Hofmann, 1531

"The last day is at hand. My calendar has run out. I know nothing more in my Scriptures." Martin Luther, 1532

John Wesley somehow interpreted *time, times and half a time*,^{Rev.12:14} to mean that the return of Christ and the millennium would commence in 1836!

"Only if the Bible is in error am I wrong, and I say that unequivocally. There is no way Biblically that I can be wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town." Edgar C. Whisenant, *"88 Reasons Why The Rapture Is In 1988"*, Nashville, 1988

"I predict the absolute fullness of man's operation on planet Earth by the year 2000 A.D. Then Jesus Christ shall reign from Jerusalem for 1000 years." Lester Sumrall, *"I Predict 2000 A.D."* 1990

With the introduction of credit cards in the 1970s, *"End-Times"* preachers widened their speculation about interpreting the Book of Revelation and interpreted the *'mark of the beast'* as a computerised system of monitoring all people on planet earth. In Australia this speculation was also fuelled by the 1974 introduction of the *'bankcard'* with its symbol which bore a striking resemblance to Revelation 13's "666". As the C20th drew closer to the turn of the new millennium, increasingly bizarre speculations increased but after the turn of the Millennium in 1,000 A.D., speculative eschatology is becoming far less common.

But the Book of Revelation is Scripture and we should interpret it using the same hermeneutical principles that we use to interpret any other book of the Bible.

1. Understand a Book/passage/verse of the Bible in its context (literary genre, historical background, audience, author, flow of thought).
2. Use Scripture to interpret Scripture—always use a clear passage to interpret an obscure one.
3. Seek the original intention of the passage by ‘*looking over the shoulder*’ of the original audience.
4. Never interpret a Scripture in a way that contradicts the overall message of Scripture.

However, regardless of the errors people have made in understanding “*end-times*”, let us never lose sight of our **Foursquare Gospel: Jesus Christ, Saviour, Healer, Baptizer and Coming King**. Yes, Jesus will return and when He comes, every eye will see Him—including ours! **So, are you ready?**

But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.^{1Jn.3:2-3}

February

Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart. Psalm 37:3-4

Sunday 2nd February 2020. Phil.1:4-11

This year we are focusing on Trusting God. Our trust is not based on some invented fiction nor is it a figment of our imagination. Our trust is not blind faith nor is it a leap of faith, but a credible faith—faith in God Himself and based God's Character (who God is) and God's Word (what God has said). *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 If our faith was in what God did, we would be left frustrated because we never see the whole picture, but our faith is in God Himself and so we are never disappointed. God is good, He is love and He is completely dependable—and He cannot be different from His character. *If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful because he cannot be untrue to himself.* ^{2Tim.2:13} The belief in a God who

is a person (rather than a power or influence) is called *theism*, but Christianity is much more specific than just believing in a real personal God. **Christianity is a personal belief in Christ who is Jesus the Son of God AND a practical belief in Christ who is Lord of all:** *For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.* ^{1Tim.2:5-6} To be a Christian, you have to make a conscious decision to place your trust in Jesus Christ to save you from God's wrath by forgiving your sins and making you right with God. This is personal choice not a proxy choice—no one can do this on your behalf. *Scripture speaks about God's approval which is based on faith... it says "This message is near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart." This is the message of faith that we spread. If you declare that Jesus is Lord, and believe that God brought him back to life, you will be saved. By believing you receive God's approval, and by declaring your faith you are saved. Scripture says, "Whoever believes in him will not be ashamed." ...So then, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* ^{Rom.10:6-13} Although, we have to personally make this choice to follow Jesus Christ, God prompts us to do it—and then He enables us to place our trust in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. *Jesus said: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day... No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."* ^{Jn.6:44;65} *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction... you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.* ^{1Thes.1:4-10}

In AD 312 at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Roman emperor Constantine looked up to the sun before the battle and saw a cross of light above it, and with "*in this sign, conquer*" in Greek. Constantine commanded his troops to adorn their shields with a Christian symbol: XQ (*Chi-Rho—looks like X and p*) which are the 1st 2 letters of *Christ*—and thereafter they were victorious. Constantine then made Christianity the State Religion, thus the persecution of Christians ceased and so personal faith became more socially acceptable. However, the State Church began to accommodate a formal religion that was led by State-appointed clergy as opposed to the tried and tested Church leaders who conformed to the Biblical standards of faith and maturity. This developed into the 2 stereotypes of Church that we have today—an "**Institutional Church**" (usually Episcopalian) with a *formal religion* where worship is offered to God through a *priest* and the people can *spectate* (they are not personally involved) and a "**Gathered Church**" (usually Presbyterian or Congregational) with an *informal religion* where worship is offered to God by the *congregation* and everyone can *participate* (they are personally involved). The *formal religion Church* stresses the institutional character of the Church, which is thought of as being in exclusive possession of the supernatural life. For them, the institution of the Church is the Body of Christ, and an extension of the Incarnation. Therefore, the Church institution has a life and tradition

which carries within itself a certain divine authority. This institutional Church conveys its divine life to the individual by means of its sacramental system—hence the need for infant-baptism which brings the child under the supernatural influence of the Church. It usually possesses a sacerdotal (priestly) ministry, whose members are graded in a hierarchy (pecking order)—usually Episcopalian (i.e. bishops, priests, laity, congregation). As a divine institution, the Church is thought of as in possession of a holiness of its own, quite apart from the personal holiness of its members—no personal faith is required for membership (either clergy or congregation). It aims at the stabilization of the social order and makes terms with the State in return for its patronage, blurring any distinction between the Kingdom of the State and the Kingdom of God.

The *informal religion Church* stresses the necessity of a genuine Christian experience (conversion) in all who would join the Church. No person can be born into this Church family—they enter only by personal choice, that is, on the basis of conscious conversion—therefore infant-baptism is usually not countenanced. Because it is a voluntary community whose members join it of their own free-will, it is often organised in comparatively small groups. It rejects the clergy hierarchy, sacerdotal notions or that the Church is in possession of an objective holiness apart from the personal holiness of its members. This Church is completely separate from politic and the State—it is the spiritual Kingdom of God on earth with every member involved. These two Church stereotypes can be summarised thus:

Institutional Church	Gathered Church
Conformist (<i>adheres to tradition rather than Bible</i>)	Non-conformist (<i>adheres to Bible rather than tradition</i>)
Services are Formal	Services are Informal
Hierarchy of priesthood (sacerdotal)	All Believers are priests
Building must be consecrated	Believers must be consecrated
Emphasises Rituals	Emphasises Relationships
Bread and wine, baptism, etc. are Sacraments	Bread and wine, baptism, etc. are Ordinances
Passive involvement of congregation	Personal involvement of congregation
Personal faith is not required	Personal Faith is required

Our memory verses encourage us to make our religion (the expression of our faith) both personal and practical: **Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart.**^{Psalm 37:3-4}

Trust in the LORD and do good. If we live our lives in the same way as the rest of our community, we are probably going to end our lives in the same way as them! Faith without works is dead and if our faith does not motivate us to love God, His Word, His people **and** His values, then we should reevaluate our faith: *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong—not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right.*^{2Cor.13:5-7} We must **do** what is right as well as **be** made righteous—we must **do** good as well as **be** good! *People who want to live a full life and enjoy good days must keep their tongues from saying evil things, and their lips from speaking deceitful things. They must turn away from evil and do good. They must seek peace and pursue it. The Lord's eyes are on those who do what he approves. His ears hear their prayer. The Lord confronts those who do evil.*^{1Pet.3:10-12}

Dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. In the OT, God told Israel to dwell in the land: *Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you,*^{Gen.26:3} but in the NT, He tells us to: *go into all the world.*^{Mk.16:15} In the OT, God says: *the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity,*^{Ps.37:11} but in the NT, He says: *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*^{Matt.5:5} God has not promised us physical safety but He has promised to be with us wherever we go: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So you must go and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the*

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And you can be sure that I am always with you, to the very end.^{Matt.28:18-20} God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"^{Gal.13:5-6} When God is our Shepherd, we are assured of "safe pasture" because He guides us, provides for us, and protects us: *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*^{Ps.23:1-3}

Delight yourself in the LORD. When we realise what God has done for us, following Christ is a delight not just a duty. God has saved us and delivered us; He has forgiven us and redeemed us; He has made us His own and we belong to Him: *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} Our response to God is to love Him and we show our appreciation of Him by respecting and obeying Him: *Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.*^{Lk.7:47}

And He will give you the desires of your heart. The Bible says that God will give us a new heart that responds to Him and wants to obey Him: *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*^{Ezek.36:26-27} This is the New Covenant and what happened to us at conversion: "A new day is coming, says the Lord. I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel...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.^{Heb.8:8-13}

A person who trusts in the LORD and does good; who enjoys a [spiritually] safe life; who delights themselves in the LORD and has what they really desire is truly blessed and has no anxiety for the future. But this is not automatic—this comes from faithfully following God and fellowshiping with God—and Church is where we help one another achieve this: *If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.*^{1Jn.4:15-17} Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.^{1Tim.3:13} **So let's do it!**

Sunday 9th February 2020. Ps.73:23-28 Lk.9:28-62

This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to Him.^{Lk.9:35}

When God speaks, it is because He has something important to say, but His Words are more than a communication—they are also creative. When God spoke, the universe was created: *God said, "Let there be..." and there was..."*^{Gen.1:3} Long ago, God's word brought the heavens into being. His word separated the earth from the waters.^{2Pet.3:5} Faith convinces us that God created the world through his word.^{Heb.11:3}

(This is why we should expect something to happen to us when we hear God's Word—at the very least we should expect our faith to grow: *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*^{Rom.10:17}) God is truth and speaks the truth—He does not say one thing and mean another: *God is not like people. He tells no lies. He is not like humans. He doesn't change his mind. When he says something, he does it. When he makes a promise, he keeps it.*^{Nu.23:19} God says what He means and means what He says—He does not change His mind: *The Father doesn't change like the shifting shadows produced by the sun and the moon.*^{Jas.1:17} Although God **does not repent** (change His mind), God **does relent** (revert back to His original plan). And even though we deserve punishment for our **rebellion**, God's original plan for mankind was (and still is) **redemption**—and if the conditions are right (i.e. we **repent** of our sins), God will return to His original plan of **redemption** (as the citizens of Nineveh found out): *When Jonah's warning reached the king of*

Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened!^{Jon.3:6-10}

Before Jesus was born, God usually spoke to people through a third party, such as through His creation, through an angel or through prophets—but now God speaks to us through Jesus, who is the Word of God: *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.*^{Heb.1:1-2} However, God does still speak to us today through creation, circumstances, dreams, angels and prophets: *Ever since the world was created it has been possible to see the qualities of God that are not seen. I'm talking about his eternal power and about the fact that he is God. Those things can be seen in what he has made.*^{Rom.1:20} *Then Peter stood up with the Eleven. In a loud voice he spoke to the crowd. In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Holy Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will have dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on those who serve me, both men and women. When I do, they will prophesy.*^{Acts.2:14-18} But when God does speak through creation, circumstances, dreams, angels and prophets, He always honours Jesus as His Son—and He expects us to honour Jesus as His Son and our Saviour. *Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” And he added, “These are the true words of God.” At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus.”*^{Rev.19:9-10} When God speaks, His Word becomes our spiritual food: *Jesus answered, “It is written, ‘Man doesn't live only on bread. He also lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*^{Matt.4:4} *My son, pay attention to what I say. Listen closely to my words. Don't let them out of your sight. Keep them in your heart. They are life to those who find them. They are health to your whole body. Above everything else, guard your heart. It is where your life comes from.*^{Prov.4:20-23} And the only reliable testimony we have of what God has said, is the written Word of God (Scripture): *The Scriptures you study give witness about me.*^{Jn.5:39} So, God's written Word (Scripture) is both important and useful: *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} *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}

Although God speaks silently through Scripture (as well as creation, circumstances, dreams, angels, and prophets), God actually spoke audibly from heaven on at least three occasions. **God spoke audibly when Jesus was baptised:** *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened. Jesus saw the Spirit of God coming down on him like a dove. A voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, and I love him. I am very pleased with him.”*^{Matt.3:16-17} **God spoke audibly when Jesus was transfigured:** *A voice came from the cloud. It said, “This is my Son, and I have chosen him. Listen to him.”*^{Lk.9:35} **God spoke audibly shortly before Jesus was crucified:** *“Anyone who loves his life will lose it. But anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it and have eternal life. Anyone who serves me must follow me. And where I am, my servant will also be. My Father will honour the one who serves me. My heart is troubled. What should I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No. This is the very reason I came to this hour. Father, bring glory to your name!” Then a voice came from heaven. It said, “I have brought glory to my name. I will bring glory to it again.” The crowd there heard the voice. Some said it was thunder. Others said an angel had spoken to Jesus. Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine.”*^{Jn.12:25-30} These three occasions when God spoke audibly were very significant—but what God said was even more significant. **1) God said that He was very pleased with Jesus. 2) God said that we must listen to Jesus. 3) God said that He will continue to bring glory to His Name**

through Jesus. If God said that He was very pleased with Jesus, then we too should be pleased with Jesus—and pay attention to what He said and what He did. We should take great delight in God’s Son, our Saviour: *We take great delight in the LORD. We are joyful because we belong to our God. He has dressed us with salvation as if it were our clothes. He has put robes of godliness on us. We are like a groom who is dressed up for his wedding. We are like a bride who decorates herself with her jewels.*^{1s.61:10} If God said that we should listen to Jesus, then we should listen carefully to Him—including to what He says to us through His Word: *Let me tell you what's going on here... Are you listening to me? Really listening?*^{Mat.11:11-15} And if Jesus brought glory to God, then we too should bring glory to God and participate in that glory. Jesus shared in God’s glory when He was living in His humanity, here on earth: *After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed. He said, “Father, the time has come. Bring glory to your Son. Then your Son will bring glory to you. You gave him authority over all people. He gives eternal life to all those you have given him. And what is eternal life? It is knowing you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth. I have finished the work you gave me to do. So now, Father, give glory to me in heaven where your throne is. Give me the glory I had with you before the world began.*^{Jn.17:1-5} And Jesus prayed that we should see His glory: *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am. I want them to see my glory, the glory you have given me. You gave it to me because you loved me before the world was created. Father, you are holy. The world does not know you, but I know you. Those you have given me know you have sent me. I have shown you to them. And I will continue to show you to them. Then the love you have for me will be in them. I myself will be in them.*^{Jn.17:24-26} Moses asked to see God’s glory: *“Now show me your glory.” The LORD said, “I will make all of my goodness pass in front of you. And I will announce my name, The LORD, in front of you. I will have mercy on whom I have mercy. And I will show love to those I love... There is a place near me where you can stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in an opening in the rock. I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by.”*^{Ex.33:18-22} Isaiah prophesied that this glory would arise upon us: *Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*^{Is.9:1-2} *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*^{Is.60:1-2} John wrote that we can see God’s glory in Jesus: *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} Paul wrote that our hope of glory is Jesus 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.*^{Col.1:27} Peter wrote that God’s glory in our life is the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of glory: *Suppose people make fun of you because you believe in Christ. Then you are blessed, because God's Spirit rests on you. He is the Spirit of glory.*^{1Pet.4:14} However, we don’t need to hear an audible word from God out of the sky when we have the actual word of God in the Scriptures: *When we apostles told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, we didn't base our message on clever myths that we made up. Rather, we witnessed his majesty with our own eyes. For example, we were eyewitnesses when he received honour and glory from God the Father and when the voice of our majestic God spoke these words to him: “This is my Son, whom I love and in whom I delight.” We heard that voice speak to him from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. So we regard the words of the prophets as confirmed beyond all doubt. You're doing well by paying attention to their words. Continue to pay attention as you would to a light that shines in a dark place as you wait for day to come and the morning star to rise in your hearts. First, you must understand this: No prophecy in Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation. No prophecy ever originated from humans. Instead, it was given by the Holy Spirit as humans spoke under God's direction.*^{2Pet.1:16-21}

So, let’s take God’s declaration about Jesus seriously and take pleasure in Jesus as we listen to Him and bring Him glory through our faith: *Because you know this, you have great joy. You have joy even though you may have had to suffer for a little while. 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. ^{1Pet.1:6} And then we will enjoy the glory of heaven here on earth now as well as enjoying the glory of heaven later when we get there! **Let Your kingdom come. Let Your will be done on earth as it is done in heaven... For Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen!**

Sunday 16th February 2020. Ps.75 Lk.10

Rejoice that your names are written in heaven. ^{Lk.10:20}

The word “**Church**” in Bible is the Greek word “*Ekklesia*” (ἐκκλησία) and means: **a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place for the purpose of deliberating** ^{Thayer's Lexicon} (to deliberate means to discourse or debate with action taken after careful consideration). So Church is not a place or a building or even an organisation—**Church** is a **gathering of people**. But Church is not just *any people*—Church is a **gathering of people who are citizens of heaven**, people who have been born-again and who belong to the family of God: *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} The Church does not consist of people who belong to a particular nation or race but redeemed people from every country and culture in the world: *And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth.”* ^{Rev.5:9-10} However, when we were born-again and became part of the Church, we retained some of our old traits, traditions and temperaments. Some of these traits, traditions and temperaments are compatible with the values of God’s kingdom—but some of them are not! And it is these incompatible thoughts and behaviours that we need to change. For instance, Paul writes: *Don't you know that wicked people won't inherit the kingdom of God? Stop deceiving yourselves! People who continue to commit sexual sins, who worship false gods, those who commit adultery, homosexuals, or thieves, those who are greedy or drunk, who use abusive language, or who rob people will not inherit the kingdom of God. That's what some of you were! But you have been washed and made holy, and you have received God's approval in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.* ^{1Cor.6:9-11}

At conversion we were justified by faith—we were counted right with God because of our faith: *They didn't know how God makes people right with himself. They tried to get right with God in their own way. They didn't do it in God's way. Christ has completed the law. So now everyone who believes can be right with God.* ^{Rom.10:3-4} And although it is true that we will go to heaven when we die, it is also true that we don’t always reflect Christ’s perfect life in our lifestyle, personality or thoughts: *You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.* ^{Phil.2:5} But the more we fellowship with God through His Word and His people (the Church), the more we become like Jesus—we call this maturing: *But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.* ^{Col.3:8-10} *But the fruit the Holy Spirit produces is love, joy and peace. It is being patient, kind and good. It is being faithful and gentle and having control of oneself. There is no law against things of that kind.* ^{Gal.5:22-23}

Today’s culture is conditioned by the sensational—if it is not exciting or exhilarating, it is not interesting. However, this culture of the sensational that leads to the fast-moving, fun-filled lifestyle, only produces stress and sorrow because it keeps people so busy doing those things we think are *important* (things like getting the newest, fastest or best we can)—but leaves no

time for doing those things we think are *essential* (things like a personal relationship with God). But actually, most of these fast-moving, fun-filled events, soon unfold as frivolous, transitory and outdated—and are then replaced by something else that appears more exciting or exhilarating. Although everyone can find time for their favourite pastime, such as sport, tv, films, internet, etc., not so many can find time for fellowship with God or fellowship with His people by gathering as Church. But those who really understand the value of meeting with God and His people, will always find time for fellowship. Sadly, this culture of the sensational influences all of us—including the gathering of Believers (the Church). But we who are born-again, belong to God not to the world: *But you do not belong to the world. I have chosen you out of the world.*^{Jn.15:19} *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. Don't you know what Scripture says? The spirit that God caused to live in us wants us to belong only to God.*^{Jas.4:4-5} We are created by God and redeemed by God and so we are twice His—His by original creation and His by new-creation! But we still have the capacity to go back to our old way thinking and behaving. In the OT, when the Israelites left Egypt, they left their physical slavery and poverty, but they were never really emancipated because in their hearts they wished they were back in Egypt. *But our people refused to obey Moses. They would not accept him. In their hearts, they wished they were back in Egypt.*^{Acts.7:39} And if we continue to think about our old way of life when we were in rebellion against God, we will be spiritual slaves who are in spiritual poverty. *Don't you know that when you give yourselves to obey someone you become that person's slave? You can be slaves of sin. Then you will die. Or you can be slaves who obey God. Then you will live a godly life. You used to be slaves of sin. But thank God that with your whole heart you obeyed the teachings you were given! You have been set free from sin. You have become slaves to right living.*^{Rom.6:16-18}

Nevertheless, sometimes our gathering as Church is exciting and exhilarating—as Jesus' Disciples discovered when they saw demons submit to them! But Jesus said we should see things from the eternal perspective rather than from the emotional perspective because the most important factor in life is not the **dramatic** but our **destiny**! *I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*^{Lk.10:18-20} The only certainty in life is death! *People have to die once. After that, God will judge them.*^{Heb.9:27} Our eternal destiny should be the focus of our life, not our emotional demeanour—for what is more impractical than working hard all your life and getting paid with nothing more than an expensively framed death certificate? *Once you were slaves of sin. At that time right living did not control you. What benefit did you gain from doing the things you are now ashamed of? Those things lead to death! You have been set free from sin. God has made you his slaves. The benefit you gain leads to holy living. And the end result is eternal life. When you sin, the pay you get is death. But God gives you the gift of eternal life because of what Christ Jesus our Lord has done.*^{Rom.6:20-23} *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even if he dies. And those who live and believe in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*^{Jn.11:25-26}

So, life after death is either **life lived without God** (which will be a life of terror and torment) or **life lived with God** (which will be a life of perfect peace and sublime joy). *The Son of Man will come in all his glory. All the angels will come with him. Then he will sit on his throne in the glory of heaven. All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate the people into two groups. He will be like a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep to his right and the goats to his left. Then the King will speak to those on his right. He will say, 'My Father has blessed you. Come and take what is yours. It is the kingdom prepared for you since the world was created.' ... Then he will say to those on his left, 'You are cursed! Go away from me into the fire that burns forever. It has been prepared for the devil and his angels.' ... Then they will go away to be punished forever. But those who have done what is right will receive eternal life.*^{Matt.25:31-46} *Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his*

people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.^{Rev.20:3-4}

God does not have a merit-based system of salvation, where a person's eternal destiny is determined by the amount of their good or bad deeds. No! Our eternal destiny is not determined by what we have done but by whether our name is written in God's Book of Life. *They have served at my side. They have helped me spread the good news. So have Clement and the rest of those who have worked together with me. Their names are all written in the Book of Life.*^{Phil.4:3} Although we will all have to give an account of our lives to God—whether we have been good or bad, kind or cruel, generous or mean—our eternal destiny is decided by whether our name is in God's Book of Life: *I saw a great white throne and the One who was sitting on it. When the earth and sky saw his face, they ran away. There was no place for them. I saw the dead, great and small, standing in front of the throne. Books were opened. Then another book was opened. It was the Book of Life. The dead were judged by what they had done. The things they had done were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it. And Death and Hell gave up their dead. Each of the dead was judged by what he had done. Then Death and Hell were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. **Anyone whose name was not written in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire.***^{Rev.20:11-15} Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD paid attention and listened. A book was written in his presence to be a reminder to those who feared the LORD and respected his name. "They will be mine," says the LORD of Armies. "On that day I will make them my special possession. I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him. Then you will again see the difference between righteous people and wicked people, between the one who serves God and the one who doesn't serve him."^{Mal.3:16-18} God knows those who are His and has promised to care for us, but we must live victoriously by honouring Him: *Those who overcome will also be dressed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life. I will speak of them by name to my Father and his angels.*^{Rev.3:5} Unfortunately, not all "church-goers" are actually part of the Church of the redeemed—and some live as enemies of God: *Many people live like enemies of the cross of Christ. The only thing they have coming to them is death. Their stomach is their god. They boast about what they should be ashamed of. They think only about earthly things. But we are citizens of heaven. And we can hardly wait for a Saviour from there. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. He has the power to bring everything under his control. By his power he will change our earthly bodies. They will become like his glorious body.*^{Phil.3:18-21}

So let's make every effort to live up to our family name of **Christian** (followers of Christ) and focus on the spiritual rather than the sensational, rejoicing that our names are written in God's Book of Life! "Come! I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." He carried me by his power away to a large, high mountain. He showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven. It had the glory of God... I did not see any temple in it, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city doesn't need any sun or moon to give it light because the glory of God gave it light. The Lamb was its lamp. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will be open all day. They will never close because there won't be any night there. They will bring the glory and wealth of the nations into the holy city. Nothing unclean, no one who does anything detestable, and no liars will ever enter it. **Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life will enter it.**^{Rev.21:9-}

27

Sunday 23rd February 2020. Ps.76:1-6 Lk.11:1-28

How blessed are those who hear and obey God's word.^{Lk.11:28}

The word "blessed" is a fairly common word now—even among the non-Christians! However, when people used "blessed" instead of "lucky" or "good fortune" there is rarely any concept of a personal God looking with favour on them because He loves them or that God wants them to reciprocate His love. To be **blessed** means to *possess the favour of God*, and so when a someone is blessed their satisfaction comes from God and not from favourable circumstances. For most people, life amounts to lots of unconnected events that happen by chance—and their good fortune (or bad fortune) happens with the same prediction as the numbers that show on dice

when they are thrown! Because they believe their life consists only of what they can see, there is no concept of a Designer or an over-riding design to their life. If by chance there does appear to be a design, they think it is just wishful thinking, a figment of their imagination, and the next event of their life will dispel that thought—and so with it, the idea of accountability to the Designer. They think that they are *blessed* (lucky) if their life is comfortable or easy and they are *cursed* (unlucky) if their life is uncomfortable or hard—but there is nothing they can do about it because it is “*in the lap of the gods*”! **But there is a Designer—He is the God in heaven and His name is the Lord:** *Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the **LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below.** There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time.*^{Deut.4:39-40}

God started everything and He also sustains everything—including our own personal life: *Everything was created by him and for him. Before anything was created, he was already there. He holds everything together.*^{Col.1:16-17} *The Son is the gleaming brightness of God's glory. He is the exact likeness of God's being. He uses his powerful word to hold all things together. He provided the way for people to be made pure from sin.*^{Heb.1:3}

And God expects us to show Him respect by believing in Him. But to believe God is much more than believing **about** God—it means **placing our trust in God** by hearing about Him and then acting on what we know: **How blessed are those who hear and obey God's word.**^{Lk.11:28} And if we seek God, He will reward us with life—with eternal life beyond the grave and with a purposeful life before the grave: *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}

This is real blessedness—but being blessed does not necessarily mean a comfortable and trouble-free life! Being blessed means **possessing the favour of God** and that we know **God has forgiven our sins.** *King David said that people are truly blessed when God, makes those people right with himself. But they don't have to do anything in return. David says: Blessed are those whose disobedience is forgiven and whose sins are pardoned. Blessed is the person whom the Lord no longer considers sinful.*^{Rom.4:6-8}

The Old Covenant only atoned for sins (atonement means covering) and so it never dealt with people's consciences—their sins were still there (albeit covered over). But the Old Covenant and all its regulations pointed to Jesus, and He did forgive our sins. It is the New Covenant in Jesus' blood that removes our sin and its stain! *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*^{Matt.26:28} *Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*^{n.1:29}

We can only have a clear conscience with God (and with ourselves) when we know that our sins are forgiven and that we no longer have any guilt before God. *The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship. If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared. But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year. For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*^{Heb.10:1-4}

Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could cleanse people's bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God.^{Heb.9:13-14} When we know that our sins are forgiven, we can approach God without guilt and with a clear conscience: *And when sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices. 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. Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his*

promise.^{Heb.10:18-23} *So let us boldly approach the throne of grace. Then we will receive mercy. We will find grace to help us when we need it.*^{Heb.4:16}

So when we know that our sins are forgiven and have a good conscience, we are truly blessed! But we should maintain that clear conscience by doing what God says. Baptism is one of the ways that God has prescribed for Believers to maintain a good conscience. *And that water [of the Flood in Noah's time] is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience. It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*^{1Pet.3:21} Baptism is not a sacrament (something that will impart some spiritual merit or grace)—however, the Baptism of Believers is an ordinance (something that God has ordained for us to do). The blessing of Baptism is in the obedience: *What pleases the LORD more? Burnt offerings and sacrifices, or obeying him? It is better to obey than to offer a sacrifice.*^{1Sam.15:22} So also with Breaking of Bread—the bread and wine does not change (as if by magic) into a “super-food” that will bring us health! Actually, the conjuring phrase “*hocusocus*” comes from the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Mass: “*hoc est corpus meum*” meaning “*this is my body*”! Transubstantiation teaches that through the eucharistic prayer, the substance of the bread and wine changes into the body and blood of Christ—even though the outward characteristics of bread and wine remain unaltered! Whilst we know that this is pure superstition and foolishness, we should never dismiss the ordinance of Breaking of Bread as superstition and foolishness because there is a great blessing in sharing together in the Lord's Supper. Although the amount of bread and wine we take is not enough to nourish our body, it is the **act of obedience** in remembering Jesus' death and the forgiveness of our sins that will **nourish our spirit**—and it is not just a snack but a spiritual banquet!

Yes, we are truly blessed by doing what God says. *Remember this, my dear brothers and sisters: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and should not get angry easily. 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. If someone listens to God's word but doesn't do what it says, he is like a person who looks at his face in a mirror, studies his features, goes away, and immediately forgets what he looks like. 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.1:19-25} So let's make sure that we don't let anything steal God's Words that have been sown in our hearts: *People hear the message about the kingdom but do not understand it. Then the evil one comes. He steals what was planted in their hearts. Those people are like the seed planted on a path. Others received the seed that fell on rocky places. They are those who hear the message and at once receive it with joy. But they have no roots. So they last only a short time. They quickly fall away from the faith when trouble or suffering comes because of the message. Others received the seed that fell among the thorns. They are those who hear the message. But then the worries of this life and the false promises of wealth crowd it out. They keep it from producing fruit. But still others received the seed that fell on good soil. They are those who hear the message and understand it. They produce a crop 100, 60 or 30 times more than the farmer planted.*^{Matt.13:19-23}

Being blessed should stimulate us to overflow with thanksgiving to God for His blessings—spiritual blessings, emotional blessings and physical blessings—but quality of life is not measured by the blessings of health and wealth, by how much we own or by how comfortable we are: *Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against wanting to have more and more things. Life is not made up of how much a person has.”*^{Lk.12:15} **True quality of life is measured by how much we trust God**—and our trust is not just for our eternal life but also for our daily life: *I tell you, do not worry. Don't worry about your life and what you will eat or drink. And don't worry about your body and what you will wear. Isn't there more to life than eating? Aren't there more important things for the body than clothes? ...So don't worry. Don't say, ‘What will we eat?’ Or, ‘What will we drink?’ Or, ‘What will we wear?’ People who are ungodly run after all of those things. Your Father who is in heaven knows that you need*

them. But put God's kingdom first. Do what he wants you to do. Then all of those things will also be given to you. So don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.^{Matt.6:25-34} This does not mean that we will always have an easy life! In fact, Jesus promised us an uneasy life—and yet we can still be at peace if we trust Him: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!*^{Jn.16:33} *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:165} God promises that **EVERYTHING will work together for His glory:** *For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen.*^{Rom.11:36} But God also promises that **EVERYTHING will work together for our good** as well! *And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.*^{Rom.8:28} *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*^{Phil.4:19-20} This promise of peace in the midst of trouble is not just positive thinking but is a proven principle based on a personal trust in a personal God—and it is also backed up by personal testimonies: *While King David was living in his house, the LORD gave him peace with all his enemies around him.*^{2Sam.7:1}

Yes, we are already so blessed—more than we can ever comprehend: *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} Although we should aim to have an enjoyable life, ultimately the real quality of our life will be assessed by God. So let's aim to please Him in everything we think, say and do—then we will eventually hear Him say: *You have done well, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!*^{Matt.25:21} **That is the ultimate blessing** and it has nothing to do with chance or luck—this blessedness is the result of making the right choices and staying faithful to the very end.

March

But I trust in Your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for He has been good to me. Psalm 13:5-6

Sunday 1st March 2020. Ps.8.

Seeing the Unseen (Part 1)

People who are blind can live fairly independent lives but they are still dependant on others for many things. So it is not surprising that when blind Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was passing by, he was insistent that Jesus helped him—and Bartimaeus received his physical sight! *"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Be quiet!" many of the people yelled at him. But he only shouted louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" When Jesus heard him, he stopped and said, "Tell him to come here." "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked. "Rabbi," the blind man said, "I want to see!" And Jesus said to him, "Go, for your faith has healed you." Instantly the man could see, and he followed Jesus.*^{Mk.10:47-52} John Newton was a typical seaman of the C18th and had a reputation for profanity, coarseness and debauchery. But during a severe storm at sea Newton thought he would drown—and that prompted him to think about his spiritual condition. The result was a genuine conversion to Christ—Newton received his spiritual sight! John Newton eventually became a Church minister, but he never forgot the miracle of receiving his spiritual sight. This prompted him to write, what is probably the most well-known of all hymns, *Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.* Unlike physical blindness (which is obvious), most people who are spiritually blind are not aware of their blindness. This is because spiritual life is only understood by people with the Holy Spirit: *Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help.*^{1Cor.2:14}

Both Bartimaeus and Newton were brought out of darkness and into God's light when they saw Jesus. Newton received his spiritual sight and Bartimaeus received his physical sight and his spiritual sight—but both were made whole and showed their appreciation by following Jesus. God has also brought us out of darkness into His glorious light: *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}

And the Church's ministry is to help others see these unseen spiritual realities of God's Kingdom by introducing them to Jesus: *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.26:18} *And you will be a light for the other nations. You will open eyes that can't see. You will set prisoners free. Those who sit in darkness will come out of their prisons.*^{Is.42:6-7}

This is what Phillip did when some people asked him: *We want to see Jesus. Can you help us?*^{2Jn.12:21} And this is the ministry (the work) of each one of us, because we are the Church—we who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and are born-again.

When our spiritual eyes were opened to see the unseen spiritual realities of God's Kingdom, this made us different and distinct from the rest of the world: *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.*^{Heb.11:1-3} *By faith [Moses] persevered because he saw him who is invisible.*^{Heb.11:27} Our spiritual sight is a personal experience, not just hearsay or theory: *I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes.*^{Job.42:5} And like Moses, we too are distinct and different from the rest of the world because we have seen the unseen spiritual realities of God's Kingdom. *By faith Moses... chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 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.^{Heb.11:24-26} After all, God's saving kindness has appeared for the benefit of all people. It trains us to avoid ungodly lives filled with worldly desires so that we can live self-controlled, moral, and godly lives in this present world. At the same time we can expect what we hope for—the appearance of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us to set us free from every sin and to cleanse us so that we can be his special people who are enthusiastic about doing good things.^{Tit.2:11-14}

It is easy to take something we see every day for granted, but our natural environment is so diverse that it should be difficult to take that for granted. The planets are so vast and far away and the plants are so small and nearby and yet they all point to their Creator. *Everything of God gets expressed in Christ, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.*^{Col.2:9-10} Like David, we should take time to contemplate creation and give thanks to our Creator for His handiwork: *When I look at your heavens, the creation of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have set in place—what is a mortal that you remember him or the Son of Man that you take care of him? You have made him a little lower than yourself. You have crowned him with glory and honour. You have made him rule what your hands created. You have put everything under his control: all the sheep and cattle, the wild animals, the birds, the fish, whatever swims in the currents of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth!*^{Ps.8:3-9}

When we appreciate the creation surrounding us, we will appreciate the Creator who made it and sustains it. *Remember your Creator while you are young... When you get old, you'll wake up when a bird starts singing, but you will barely hear singing.*^{Ecc.12:1-4} But sadly many people don't appear to even hear the birds singing—and that is before grow old and lose their hearing! However, regardless of how much we appreciate our natural environment, let's be sure to appreciate our spiritual environment—especially the greatest blessing of all, which is the forgiveness of sins. *King David said that people are truly blessed when God, makes those people right with himself. But they don't have to do anything in return. David says: Blessed are those whose disobedience is forgiven and whose sins are pardoned. Blessed is the person whom the Lord no longer considers sinful.*^{Rom.4:6-8} To clearly see the unseen spiritual realities of God's Kingdom, we must keep our spiritual sight sharp and focused. This involves discipline and hard work—but it is not wearying, hard work. *I also pray that your mind might see more clearly. Then you will know the hope God has chosen you to receive. You will know that the things God's people will receive are rich and glorious.*^{Eph.1:18} All we need to do, is to **INTENTIONALLY** appreciate God, His Word and His people—we call that “**fellowship**”! All Believers have a ready access to God (an open heaven): *Then as I looked, I saw a door standing open in heaven, and the same voice I had heard before spoke to me like a trumpet blast. The voice said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this." And instantly I was in the Spirit, and I saw a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it.*^{Rev.4:1-2} We don't need to be able-bodied to be spiritually sighted and appreciate God's physical and spiritual creation—however, if we do have a healthy body, we will be able to enjoy God's blessing without the distraction of pain! *We don't give up. Our bodies are becoming weaker and weaker. But our spirits are being renewed day by day. Our troubles are small. They last only for a short time. But they are earning for us a glory that will last forever. It is greater than all our troubles. So we don't spend all our time looking at what we can see. Instead, we look at what we can't see. What can be seen lasts only a short time. But what can't be seen will last forever.*^{2Cor.4:16-18} But we should watch our life and our doctrine closely: *Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity... Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*^{1Tim.4:12-16}

Although God is unseen, we can see Him in Jesus, the Son of God: *No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.*^{Jn.6:46} *No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*^{Jn.1:18} *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*^{1Jn.4:12} The Son

is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.^{Col.1:15} Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.^{Jn.14:9} So spiritual vision is actually being able to see Jesus: *I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet... I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw...*^{Rev.1:10-12} But we also know that God sees us—even when no one else see us: *When you pray, go into your room. Close the door and pray to your Father, who can't be seen. He will reward you. Your Father sees what is done secretly... Only your Father, who can't be seen, will know it. He will reward you. Your Father sees what is done secretly.*^{Matt.6:6;18}

Yes, God has shone His light into our heart and opened our spiritual eyes, *“Let light shine out of darkness.” He made his light shine in our hearts. It shows us the light of God's glory in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:6} So let's continue to see the unseen spiritual realities of God's Kingdom through our spiritual eyes—and also recognise that there is spiritual harvest ready and waiting for us to gather in: *Jesus said, “My food is to do what my Father sent me to do. My food is to finish his work. You say, ‘Four months more, and then it will be harvest time.’ But I tell you, open your eyes! Look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest right now. Those who gather the crop are already getting paid. They are already harvesting the crop for eternal life. So those who plant and those who gather can now be glad together.”*^{Jn.4:34-36}

Sunday 8th March 2020. Ps.76:6-12 Lk.10:25-42

What must I do to inherit eternal life?^{Lk.10:25}

No one wants to die and the desire to live forever is within most people—but without looking like it! And pharmaceutical companies make a fortune selling their rejuvenating potions. But disease and old age catch up with everyone sooner or later. Sometimes an epidemic (i.e. affects the whole country)—and occasionally a pandemic (i.e. affects the whole world)—occurs and most people panic. The Spanish flu (1918-1920) caused the early demise of up to 50 million people—some say 100 million! The Asian flu (1957-1958) caused 1-2 million deaths and the Hong Kong flu (1968-1969) caused 1-4 million deaths. Already this winter over 100 people have died from the common flu! If someone could produce a vaccine for Covid-19 today—or even by tomorrow—the whole world would applaud them as achieving the greatest accomplishment of this century. (Covid-19 is nowhere near as lethal as Measles or Whooping Cough but there are still many people who choose not to use vaccines for these diseases!) Actually, war and disease do not increase death because death is total in every generation—war and disease just brings death sooner than expected!

There have been some incredible accomplishments by people and we call them “*heroes*”—but most of them are “*need specific*”. For instance, if you need to speak to someone far away, then the telephone or radio might be the greatest invention for you at that moment; if we need to visit someone, then the car, train or aeroplane might be the greatest invention. If we are hungry and need a meal in a hurry, then perhaps the microwave might be the greatest invention. If we have a serious infection, then antibiotics might be the greatest discovery. However, Jesus said that the **greatest** thing we can ever do, is to **love God** with everything we have: *“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}

⁴⁰To love God is not “*need specific*”—something to do when we are lonely, or hungry or sick. To love God is a **command**—a command for all people, for all circumstances and for all time. The Sadducees had just asked Jesus a question about the resurrection (which they didn't believe in) and when a Lawyer (who was a Pharisee, and did believe in the resurrection) saw how Jesus had silenced them, he thought he could trip Jesus up with a question about the most important Law. But after Jesus answered the question from the Bible, He then silenced the lawyer with this question *“whose Son is the Christ?”* The outcome was: *No one could answer him with a single word. From that day on, no one dared to ask him any more questions.*^{Matt.22:46}

The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel has a similar theme to the story in Matthew's Gospel—the most important Law is to love God and the second most important Law is to love our neighbour. But this story differs because it starts with the question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* Although both Jesus and the lawyer agreed that we must love God and our neighbour if we are to inherit eternal life, the lawyer wanted to know who our neighbour is. So Jesus told a parable, that we now call "*the Good Samaritan*". Here Jesus explains that our neighbour is not the person who lives next door and that we must do more than be nice to people if we are to inherit eternal life. Of course, we should love the person next door—but we will never get to heaven by being nice to others or by helping the poor and needy. The only way to get to heaven is to be born-again. So in this story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus explains who our neighbour is, so that we can inherit eternal life.

The story involves different kinds of people—a person going away from Jerusalem (no wonder he got into trouble when he was walking away from God!); a Priest (whose whole life was dedicated to serve God and so he should have shown compassion); a Levite (a sort of Deacon and so he too was familiar with the religious requirement to help those in need); and a Samaritan (a foreigner who was rejected by the Jews and treated as an outcast). The robbers were hurtful, the robbed was hurt, the religious were heartless but the rejected was helpful! However, this story is not about loving the hurting and helpless (although we should do that); this story is about loving the **One who helps the hurting and helpless**. Our Neighbour is the One who helps the hurting and helpless: "*Of these three men, who do you think was a neighbour to the man who was attacked by robbers?*" *The expert said, "The one who was kind enough to help him."*^{Lk.10:36-37} **Our neighbour is Jesus! It is Jesus** who found us "*on the Jericho road*" spiritually hurting and helpless, bruised and battered, barely alive. **It is Jesus** who poured in the oil and wine (the healing balm of the Holy Spirit). **It is Jesus** who has put us in a place of safety (the Church). It is Jesus who has paid for us. **It is Jesus** who will return for us. **It is by loving God and our Neighbour Jesus** that we will inherit eternal life.

[The 2 drachma coins paid to the Innkeeper had the same value as the Temple Tax: *But we don't want to offend these tax collectors. So go to the lake and fish. After you catch the first fish, open its mouth and you will find a coin [a shekel worth four drachma, or two payments of the Temple tax. Take that coin and give it to the tax collectors for you and me.*^{Mat.17:27} The Temple Tax (½ a silver shekel) was the ransom for a person's life: *each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted... Each one... is to give a half shekel... Receive the atonement money from the Israelites and use it for the service of the tent of meeting. It will be a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD, making atonement for your lives.*^{Ex.30:12-16}

Thus in the story of the Good Samaritan, the **Neighbour is Jesus!** But instead of redeeming us with ransom money, Jesus redeemed us with His own life!]

We are spiritually helpless and hopeless because we are born separated from God and so spiritually dead. We are unable to do anything to meet God's pure and holy standards—even our good works are polluted: *We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags.*^{Is.64:6} But although our good works can never outweigh our bad works, we can receive **God's provision of Jesus' atoning sacrifice made on the cross**, which is a free gift to all who place their trust in Him! And our response to our redemption is **to love God and our Neighbour** (Jesus Christ, God's Son and our Saviour). But however good our love is, what really matters is **God's love for us**: *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*^{1Jn.4:10} **God is love**: *God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.*^{1Jn.4:16-17} *Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not*

leave the guilty unpunished.^{Ex.34:5-7} **God loves the world:** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.^{Jn.3:16} **God loves the Church:** Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.^{Eph.5:25-27} **God loves me:** I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.^{Gal.2:20} **God's love is wonderful and extreme:** For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.^{Rom.8:38-39}

And while God's love is wonderful and compassionate, it is always sound but never sentimental: God is kind, but he's not soft. In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life-change. You're not getting by with anything. Every refusal and avoidance of God adds fuel to the fire. The day is coming when it's going to blaze hot and high, God's fiery and righteous judgment. Make no mistake: In the end you get what's coming to you—Real Life for those who work on God's side, but Fire to those who insist on getting their own way and take the path of least resistance.^{Rom.2:4-8}

We can't just say that we love God and think that all will be well with us. Christianity is a heart religion and our worship of God is literally our "worthship" of God—worship is our expression of what God is worth to us. And God sees our heart—our inmost thoughts: *The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*^{1Sam.16:7} *She gave a name to the LORD who spoke to her. She called him "You are the God who sees me." That's because she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."*^{Gen.16:13} So we can't manipulate God by pretending to be religious. If we go through the rituals of religion but don't mean what we do, it may deceive others but it will never deceive God: *LORD, you have seen what is in my heart. You know all about me. You know when I sit down and when I get up. You know what I'm thinking even though you are far away. You know when I go out to work and when I come back home. You know exactly how I live. LORD, even before I speak a word, you know all about it.*^{Ps.130:1-4} God does not respond to our emotions or even to our enthusiasm—but **God does respond to our FAITH.** Just "saying prayers" will not persuade God: *When you pray, do not keep talking on and on the way ungodly people do. They think they will be heard because they talk a lot. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need even before you ask him.*^{Matt.6:7-8} When we trust (believe) God, our prayers are powerful because He counts us righteous (holy or acceptable): *The righteous will live by faith.*^{Gal.3:11} *The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*^{Jas.5:16} *The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*^{Pron.15:29} Although we inherit eternal life by loving our Neighbour Jesus, we are also commanded to go and behave in the same way as our Neighbour Jesus behaved. "Of these three men, who do you think was a neighbour to the man who was attacked by robbers?" The expert said, "The one who was kind enough to help him." Jesus told him, "**Go and imitate his example.**"^{Lk.10:36-37} The proof that we love God is that we love others: *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} *I am writing to remind you, dear friends, that we should love one another. This is not a new commandment, but one we have had from the beginning. Love means doing what God has commanded us, and he has commanded us to love one another, just as you heard from the beginning.*^{2Jn.1:5-6} The love that God expects from us is described like this: *Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.*^{1Cor.13:4-7} And this love is modelled on God—who is love.^{1Jn.4:16}

Yes! What a Friend we have in Jesus! So let's be like Jesus to those around us, helping the hurting with the resources we have available to us—but especially with our spiritual resources:

And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world. Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. We love each other because he loved us first.^{1)Jn.4:17-19}

Sunday 15th March. Ps.77:1-6. Lk.11:29-54

The hypocrisy of religion.

Because of their spiritual rebellion and infidelity, the Israelites were exiled in Babylon for about 70 years: *And though the LORD has sent all his servants the prophets to you again and again, you have not listened or paid any attention... They said, "Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them; do not arouse my anger with what your hands have made. Then I will not harm you." "But you did not listen to me," declares the LORD, "and you have aroused my anger with what your hands have made, and you have brought harm to yourselves." Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words... This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt," declares the LORD, "and will make it desolate forever."*^{Jer.25:4-12} When Israel returned from exile, they brought many of the Babylonian customs with them (the "Star of David" is thought to have come from Babylon): *Many of the people of Israel, and even some of the priests and Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the other peoples living in the land. They have taken up the detestable... the holy race has become polluted by these mixed marriages. Worse yet, the leaders and officials have led the way in this outrage.*^{Ezra.9:1-2} Ezra headed up the restoration of Israel to faith by strict enforcement of the Old Covenant. *Then Ezra the priest stood and said to them: "You have committed a terrible sin. By marrying pagan women, you have increased Israel's guilt. So now confess your sin to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do what he demands."*^{Ezra.10:10-11} Ezra was a Priest and a Scribe: *Ezra the priest, a teacher of the Law, a man learned in matters concerning the commands and decrees of the LORD for Israel.*^{Ezra.7:11} And he was the son of Seraiah^{Ezra.7:1}—the last High Priest of the 1st Temple.^{2Kg.25:18} Ezra wrote Chronicles (they are just one book in the Hebrew Bible) and also the Books of Nehemiah and Ezra (these are also just one book in the Hebrew Bible).

After the Exile, there evolved 4 main religious groups within Judaism—Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots. The **Sadducees** worked tenaciously to preserve the Word of God, particularly the first 5 books of the Bible. They had a liberal theology: *for the Sadducees say there is no resurrection or angels or spirits.*^{Acts.23:8} With no belief in life after death, they were free to live how they liked because they did not believe in Judgement! The Sadducees were the ruling party of the Sanhedrin and were responsible for the maintenance of the Temple in Jerusalem, including performing sacrifices—the High Priest and his associates were Sadducees: *Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.*^{Acts.5:17} The Sadducees ceased to exist after the Temple was destroyed in A.D.70, when most were annihilated by Titus. The **Pharisees'** religion was more focused on the synagogue which was a legacy from the Exile when they could not attend the Temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees applied the Jewish law to mundane activities in order to sanctify the every-day world and they allowed the performance of worship rituals by all adult Jews rather than just Aaron's descendants. The Pharisees preserved the written law (the first 5 books of the Bible) but they also added thousands of other oral laws to explain the written laws in the Bible. These added rituals and traditions made their religion impossible for anyone to keep—resulting in Jesus' condemnation of them as hypocrites. The Pharisees are the most important group because they are the spiritual fathers of modern Judaism. The **Essenes** are not mentioned in the Bible but emerged out of disgust with the Sadducees and Pharisees, believing that they had corrupted the city and the Temple. The Essenes moved out of Jerusalem and lived a monastic life in the desert, adopting strict dietary laws and a commitment to celibacy.

The earliest known copies of parts of the Old Testament were discovered 1947 in some caves that were used by the Essenes at Qumran, near the Dead Sea and these fragments of manuscripts confirm the authenticity of the Bible that we use today. The **Zealots** are the fourth group and Jesus chose one of these to be His Disciple: *Simon the Zealot.*^{Mat.10:4} As their name suggests, they were zealous and they fought to defend the Jewish way of life. Like the Sadducees and Essenes, the Zealots did not survive beyond A.D.70.

The liberal Sadducees and conservative Pharisees were very different in their outlook, so it was little wonder that they found it difficult to work together—except when it came to opposing Jesus Christ and His followers: *But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.*^{Jn.11:46-47} *The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.*^{Acts.5:27-34} Jesus warned against the teachings of both the Sadducees and the Pharisees: *“But watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”* Then the disciples understood that Jesus was not telling them to watch out for the yeast used in bread. He was warning them against what the Pharisees and Sadducees taught.^{Mat.16:11-12} But it was the hypocrisy of the Pharisees that Jesus warned against the most—the word “hypocrite” is used 14 times in Matthew’s Gospel because the Pharisees had made their religion so complicated when God had made it so easy—it is summed by: *“Love God personally and passionately!”* The Pharisees heard that the Sadducees weren't able to answer Jesus. So the Pharisees got together. One of them was an authority on the law. So he tested Jesus with a question. “Teacher,” he asked, “which is the most important commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your mind.’ This is the first and most important commandment. And the second is like it. ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ Everything that is written in the Law and the Prophets is based on these two commandments.”^{Mat.22:34-40} *You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’*^{Mat.15:7-9}

A “hypocrite” is someone who is a counterfeit and the word means “actor”—someone who speaks behind a large mask. *Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*^{Mat.6:1} Jesus highlighted the hypocrisy of the Pharisees’ religion by describing them as cups that were clean on the outside but dirty on inside: *I know you Pharisees burnish the surface of your cups and plates so they sparkle in the sun, but I also know your insides are maggoty with greed and secret evil. Stupid Pharisees! Didn't the One who made the outside also make the inside? Turn both your pockets and your hearts inside out and give generously to the poor; then your lives will be clean, not just your dishes and your hands.*^{Lk.11:39-41} He then went on to give 6 woes to the Pharisees and their legal experts (Scribes)—“woe” means grief, indignation, misery, disaster, calamity: *How terrible for you Pharisees....!*^{Lk.11:42f}

1. Beware of the hypocrisy of religious giving. *You are careful to tithe even the tiniest income but you ignore justice and the love of God.*^{Lk.11:42} Our giving is an act of worship—but like all worship, giving must be from the heart. God wants spiritual worship not social religion. *So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others.*^{Mat.6:2} The Biblical principle of giving is: *You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. “For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.” And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.*^{2Cor.9:7-8} God doesn’t need our money or anything else from us because He is needy—God wants our heart first and then He accepts what we give.^{Heb.11:4} If we follow the rituals of religion but *neglect justice and the love of God*, we are hypocrites!

2. Beware of the hypocrisy of seeking social status. *You love the most important seats.*^{Lk.11:43} Paul the apostle was brought up as a Pharisee and he knew the hypocrisy of social pride: *I have many reasons to trust in my human nature... As far as the law is concerned, I am a Pharisee... As far as keeping the*

Law is concerned, I kept it perfectly. I thought things like that were for my benefit. But now I consider them to be nothing because of Christ.^{Phil.3:4-7} God does not differentiate between people—we are all under the same condemnation of unbelief until we are born-again: *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*^{Jn.3:18} Once we become a Christian, all of God's promises become ours: *There are neither Jews nor Greeks, slaves nor free people, males nor females. You are all the same in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants and heirs, as God promised.*^{Gal.3:28-29} For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.^{2Cor.1:20} So we should be on our guard against prejudice and favourites: *My brothers and sisters, practice your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ by not favouring one person over another. For example, two men come to your worship service. One man is wearing gold rings and fine clothes; the other man, who is poor, is wearing shabby clothes. Suppose you give special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say to him, "Please have a seat." But you say to the poor man, "Stand over there," or "Sit on the floor at my feet." Aren't you discriminating against people and using a corrupt standard to make judgments?*^{as.2:1-4}

3. Beware of the hypocrisy of pretending to be spiritually alive whilst being spiritually dead and contaminating others. *You are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it.*^{Lk.11:44} The Pharisees were meticulous in keeping the minutest details of their added oral laws so they could be seen as religiously clean but actually they were religiously contaminated—and they also contaminated those they associated with! *Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?*^{Ezek.34:18-19}

4. Beware of the hypocrisy of imposing unbiblical conditions on people. *You load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.*^{Lk.11:46} When people are concerned about their eternal welfare, they can easily become victims of emotional and spiritual abuse. Some extreme abuses such as "indulgencies" are easy to identify. (Indulgencies are "a way to reduce the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sins" and were sold by the Roman Catholic Church so people could reduce the time they spent in "purgatory". St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was partly funded by the selling of indulgences and Johann Tetzel's salesmanship was so oppressive that it prompted Martin Luther to write his "95 Theses" which became the catalyst for the Reformation in the C16th.) However, there are other more subtle abuses in the Church—even Pentecostal Churches! So-called "prophecies" are often involved, using the leverage of calling it "a word from God"—so if people don't follow the "prophetic word", they are either "opposing God" or calling the "prophet" a liar! *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*^{2Cor.1:24}

5. Beware of the hypocrisy of honouring martyrs but having the same values as their murderers. *The tombs you build are monuments to your murdering ancestors more than to the murdered prophets.*^{Lk.11:48} It is easy to revere the past—because there are no consequences to memories! But it is our actions today that show who we really are. We like to think of the wonderful people in our Church history who, in the face of great opposition, did exploits for God—but we forget their determination to finish the race so they could hear God's commendation: "Well done good and faithful servant." We need to: *Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*^{1Tim.4:16} *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.*^{1Cor.16:13}

6. Beware of the hypocrisy of hiding the truth. *You don't enter the Kingdom yourselves, and you prevent others from entering.*^{Lk.11:52} A mature Christian is someone who is established in their faith and cannot be easily manipulated by false teachers or unsettled by false doctrines: *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. Then we will no longer be immature like children. Then we will no longer be little children, tossed*

and carried about by all kinds of teachings that change like the wind. We will no longer be influenced by people who use cunning and clever strategies to lead us astray.^{Eph.4:12-14}

Let's make our religion real by living out our religion (our trust in God) through our everyday ups-and-downs. As we intentionally involve Jesus in our decisions and activities each day, we will become more like Him and be transparent—and instead of being a performer who recites our lines, we will, like David, be people of “*integrity of heart and skilful hands.*”^{Ps.78:72}

Wednesday 18th March 2020

The Coronavirus Pandemic

Following the Prime Minister's advice and guidance from Assemblies of God, we will not be meeting at Mill Hill during the Coronavirus pandemic—instead we will be Church in our own homes and try to maintain our routine of Church there.

So here's the plan:

Each Sunday at 10.30am, stop what you are doing and

- **Read the appointed Psalm out loud,**
- **Begin to praise God** i.e. say some good words about Him.
- **Pray**—please include the members of our congregation in Deal and those across the world in your prayers. (You will find the “*Personal Prayer and Devotions*” helpful and is available to download from our website or I can give you a printed copy.)
- **Recite (or read) the Memory Verse.**

I will continue to send out study notes by email for you to prayerfully consider—I *remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired,*^{Ps.77:6} and for those who don't have internet access I will deliver printed copies of the notes.

Communion: We are not “*sacramentalists*” who need a “*priest*” to “*consecrate*” the bread and wine. We believe that the bread and wine are emblems that represent Jesus' death and all those who have placed their trust in Him should continue to remember His death by eating and drinking the bread and wine (or juice) until Jesus returns. And there is a great blessing in doing this: *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*^{1Cor.10:16} So please share “*communion*” at home by remembering Jesus' death as you eat and drink some bread and wine (or juice)—even if there is only just one of you.

Offerings: Of course our Offerings support the running of our Church and its associated ministries but we give our money in appreciation to God and as an act of worship. *You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.*^{2Cor.9:7-8} So I suggest that you continue to give your Offerings—please put them in an envelope and post it through the Church letter box (or to my home) or you could save it up until we return to normality. For those who use internet Banking you could pay money straight into the Church Bank Account—which is Barclays Bank, Account № **60663107** and Sort Code: **20-17-92**

And finally, if you do need anything, please let me know and I will try to facilitate a solution! It would be prudent if I did not make any general pastoral visits—but I am still available should any emergency arise. Do stay in touch with each other by phone, text or email (I have included a list of names and address). We also have a *WhatsApp* group—if you want to join this group, then please let me know. Be wise and use this time to renew your strength by keeping your trust in God vibrant: *Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The eternal God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, doesn't grow tired or become weary. His understanding is beyond reach. He gives strength to those who grow tired and increases the strength of those who are weak. Even young people grow tired and become weary and young men will stumble and fall. Yet, the strength of those who wait with hope in*

the LORD will be renewed. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and won't become weary. They will walk and won't grow tired.^{Is.40:28-31}

Your Pastor

Sunday 22nd March (on Zoom). Ps.77:7-12

**Almighty God, we bring You praise for Your Son, the Word of God.
By whose power the world was made; by whose blood we are redeemed.
Morning Star, You're the Father's glory; we now worship and adore You.
In our hearts Your light has risen, Jesus, Lord we worship You!**

Church—but not as we know it!

Reflecting over the past few weeks, the sermons have established a good foundation for the situation we find ourselves in right now. Last week we saw that the Jews had to change their *modus operandi* of worship when they went into Exile because they had no access to the Temple (which was where God said He would meet with them). This resulted in the development of the Synagogue and a home-based religion where ordinary people can lead worship. Although their religion became diffused with rituals instead of a relationship with God, there was always a remnant who remained true to God and lived by faith—see the list of named people in Hebrews chapter 11!

The 2 types of Churches that we looked at in February is also especially relevant to our current situation as it helps us discern between the legacy from the Old Covenant and the reality of the New Covenant.

Institutional Church (Conformist)	Gathered Church (Non-conformist)
Adheres to tradition rather than Bible)	Adheres to Bible rather than tradition
Services are Formal	Services are Informal
Hierarchy of priesthood (sacerdotal)	All Believers are priests
Building must be consecrated	Believers must be consecrated
Emphasises Rituals	Emphasises Relationships
Bread & wine, baptism, etc. are Sacraments	Bread & wine, baptism, etc. are Ordinances
Passive involvement of congregation	Personal involvement of congregation
Personal faith is not required	Personal faith is required

The Old Covenant was based at a place (the Temple in Jerusalem) and a person (a priest). In order for people to approach God, a priest had to repeatedly perform sacrifices and ritualist ceremonies. The New Covenant is also based at a Place (Calvary in Jerusalem) and a Person (Jesus Christ). In order for people to approach God, our great High Priest had to offer His own life as the perfect Sacrifice. Although this once-for-all Sacrifice has been offered, the New Covenant still requires action from us. However, the Temple is not a building but body of a Believer: *Don't you know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit? The Spirit is in you.*^{1Cor.6:19} And the place is not the old Jerusalem but the New Jerusalem (the Redeemed from every nation and every age). *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.*^{Rev.21:2-3} The sacrifices and ceremonies are not rituals of liturgy but the offering of ourselves to God. *Brothers and sisters, God has shown you his mercy. So I am asking you to offer up your bodies to him while you are still alive. Your bodies are a holy sacrifice that is pleasing to God. When you offer your bodies to God, you are worshipping him. Don't live any longer the way this world lives. Let your way of thinking be completely changed. Then you will be able to test what God wants for you. And you will agree that what he wants is right. His plan is good and pleasing and perfect.*^{Rom.12:1-2} As partakers of the new Covenant, we stress the necessity of a genuine Christian experience (conversion) because no one can be physically born into God's

family. We can only be part of the Church through a conscious conversion by the re-birth of the Holy Spirit. *I can guarantee this truth: No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Flesh and blood give birth to flesh and blood, but the Spirit gives birth to things that are spiritual. Don't be surprised when I tell you that all of you must be born from above.*^{Jn.3:5-7}

Because we are a voluntary community and our members join of their own free-will, we are used to being in comparatively small groups—but over these next few weeks (and maybe months), we will have to get used to being in even smaller groups (and for some of you, it will mean meeting with God by yourself). And to help, I will produce some notes each week and for those without easy internet access, I can print them off and hand deliver them to you. These will be reflective thoughts *as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles.*^{2Pet.3:1-2} We already have a good grasp of the Christian faith and now we must put our doctrine into practice. So like Peter, *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.*^{2Pet.1:12-13}

We are people of faith but *if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all,*^{Is.7:9} so we must be careful what we read and hear. There are a lot of emotional platitudes being promoted (especially on the internet) by immature Christians who haven't learnt to discern between faith and fate or even between fact and fiction. Many people are mis-applying Bible passages because they haven't really understood their real purpose—which is to communicate God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. *You received Christ Jesus as Lord. So keep on living in him. Have your roots in him. Build yourselves up in him. Grow strong in what you believe, just as you were taught. Be more thankful than ever before. Make sure no one captures you. They will try to capture you by using false reasoning that has no meaning. Their ideas depend on human teachings. They also depend on the basic things the people of this world believe. They don't depend on Christ.*^{Col.2:6-8} Thoughts and ideas that are not soundly based on the New Covenant may have some moral and emotional value but they will not give sustenance to our spirit and may well prove to be a distraction to our faith—or most likely, a disruption to our faith! This is especially applies to songs!!! God is not only “*God most high*” but He is also “*God most nigh*”: *I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.*^{Is.57:15} God is actually nearer than our hands and our feet—He is in our heart and our mouth: *Christ has completed the law. So now everyone who believes can be right with God... But what does [the Bible] say? “The word is near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart.” That means the word we are preaching. You must put your faith in it. Say with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord.” Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Then you will be saved. With your heart you believe and are made right with God. With your mouth you say that Jesus is Lord. And so you are saved.*^{Rom.10:4-10} So let's draw near to God with complete assurance and confidence—whether we are by our self or with a small family group: *Let us then approach the 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} *So let us come near to God with an honest and true heart. Let us come near with a faith that is sure and strong. Our hearts have been sprinkled. Our minds have been cleansed from a sense of guilt.*^{Heb.10:22}

Although we don't **need** a written liturgy to draw near to God, having a structured plan will prove helpful in this time of “*social distancing*”. Reading the Psalms (as we have done in our congregational meetings) and using some of the “*Personal Prayer and Devotions*” (a collection of Puritan Prayers from “*Valley of Vision*” that I have modernised), will keep the link between us until we can worship together in one congregation. (The “*Personal Prayer and Devotions*” is available to download from our website or I can give you a printed copy.) Andrew Corbett's *Read Through the Bible in One Year* is worth using:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/DrAndrewC/videos>

So, although we are not meeting collectively as a congregation for a while, we will still meet with Jesus our Saviour and we will pray for each other. Of course, I am available should any

emergency arise and if you need anything, please let me know and I will try to facilitate a solution. Do stay in touch with each other by phone, text, email, or even letter—and we also have a *WhatsApp* group.

So, *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.*^{Cor.16:13-14} *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9} **But,** *I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way.*^{Phil.1:27-28}

Sunday 29th March (on Zoom). Ps.77:13-20

What would you do if you couldn't meet as Church?

This was a question that we tried to answer a couple of years ago when we were praying for the persecuted Church—but we never expected to find ourselves in that situation in “*England's green and pleasant land*”! We looked at “*Secret Church*” in far off lands where Christians have to hide their Bibles and sing their praise silently. Although our situation is different because there is no restriction on our faith—we still can't meet together! And meeting together is integral to Church, because Church is when “*citizens are called out of their homes into a public place for the purpose of deliberating!*” Christianity is an inward “*heart*” religion but it is also an outward religion where our faith is expressed openly *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.*^{Lk.9:26} So we must find ways of being Church even if we can't meet together physically. We can keep our identity as Deal Pentecostal Church by keeping to our Church routine and meet at the same time (even though we are physically apart) and try to maintain our usual pattern of Church. Although we don't use a written liturgy, we do have an unwritten liturgy of singing praises together, of praying together, of reading the Scriptures together, of reciting a Scripture verse together and also of studying the Bible together—either through the preached sermon or the Bible Study times. And so, even though we can't meet together physically, we can still keep to our usual Church routine each **Sunday at 10.30am** and each of us **read the appointed Psalm, praise God** by saying good words about Him and **pray for one another** (but remember, prayer is primarily worship—it is yielding to God, not yelling to God!). Last Sunday we trialled **Zoom Video Conferencing**—which went really well for our first attempt! So we will continue to do this for our Sunday meetings and also for our Bible Study on Wednesdays.

Disasters and diseases affect everyone, whether they have lived a good life, a bad life or not yet lived much of a life at all! Very soon every one of us will know someone who has been infected by the Coronavirus and sadly some of us may lose a relative or close friend as well. Having a rich relationship with God should always be our priority but during this coronavirus pandemic, let's really focus on this—because our relationship with God is the only thing that is of any lasting benefit. *"Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God." Then, turning to his disciples, Jesus said, "That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food to eat or enough clothes to wear. For life is more than food, and your body more than clothing. Look at the ravens. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for God feeds them. And you are far more valuable to him than any birds! Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And if worry can't accomplish a little thing like that, what's the use of worrying over bigger things? ... Why do you have so little faith? "And don't be concerned about what to eat and what to drink. Don't worry about such things. These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers all over the world, but your Father already knows your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need. So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom."*^{Lk.12:21-32}

When Jesus was asked to comment on a recent massacre, He responded by pointing out that death will come to each of us—but if we have not turned to God, we will have no eternal future: *At that time some people reported to Jesus about some Galileans whom Pilate had executed while they were sacrificing animals. Jesus replied to them, "Do you think that this happened to them because they were more*

sinful than other people from Galilee? No! I can guarantee that they weren't. But if you don't turn to God and change the way you think and act, then you, too, will all die. What about those 18 people who died when the tower at Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more sinful than other people living in Jerusalem? No! I can guarantee that they weren't. But if you don't turn to God and change the way you think and act, then you, too, will all die.^{2Lk.13:1-5} C.S.Lewis said: "War doesn't increase death—death is total in every generation!"

And we could also include diseases, disasters, pandemics—and even Covid-19! The circumstances make no difference—we must all deal with it's reality. *What person can live and not die? Who can escape the power of the grave?*^{2Ps.89:48} *Everyone will die someday. Those who are still living should really think about that.*^{Ecc.7:2} *There's a proper time and way for people to do everything. That's true even though a person might be suffering greatly. No one knows what lies ahead. So who can tell a person what's going to happen? He can't stop the wind from blowing. And he doesn't have the power to decide when he will die.*^{Ecc.8:6-8}

And just as it is destined that each person dies only once and after that comes judgment, also Christ died only once as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again but not to deal with our sins again. This time he will bring salvation to all those who are eagerly waiting for him.^{Heb.9:27-28} Death is the enemy of life, but for us Christians, death is a defeated enemy because Jesus has conquered sin and death: "Death is turned into victory! Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" *Sin gives death its sting, and God's standards give sin its power. Thank God that he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. So, then, brothers and sisters, don't let anyone move you off the foundation «of your faith». Always excel in the work you do for the Lord. You know that the hard work you do for the Lord is not pointless.*^{1Cor.15:54-58}

Although these verses are easy to read, they are more difficult to live. But if we learn the truths they are communicating, when difficulties come our way, we will stand and having stood firm, we will keep standing—in faith: *Stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then,*^{Eph.6:13-14} *By standing firm you will gain life.*^{Lk.21:19} *So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*^{2Thes.2:15-17}

In response to the question we started with: **What would you do if you couldn't meet as Church?** I hope that your answer would be something like: ***I would still be Church because I belong to Jesus Christ*** and so I will still worship God with all of my heart; I will still praise God with all of my soul. I will still love my Neighbour as myself and I will still go and do the same as my Neighbour did for me.

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**

In response to the question we started with: **What would you do if you couldn't meet as Church?** I hope that your answer would be something like: ***I would still be Church because I belong to Jesus Christ*** and so I will still worship God with all of my heart; I will still praise God with all of my soul. I will still love my Neighbour as myself and I will still go and do the same as my Neighbour did for me.

Below are some questions for you to ponder over (and hopefully they will also motivate you to study further). The Bible is unlike any other book because the very words were breathed (inspired) by God and they still contain God's breath (His life) and they are our spiritual food: *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, the servant of God can be completely prepared to do every good thing.*^{2Tim.3:16} *Life is spiritual. Your physical existence doesn't contribute to that life. The words that I have spoken to you are spiritual. They are life.*^{Jn.6:63} Jesus answered, *'It is written: Man doesn't live only on bread. He also lives on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*^{Matt.4:4} But remember the difference between **exegesis** and **eisegesis**. Exegesis is the process of getting "out" ("ex") of the text what is truly there in the first place. The opposite to **exegesis** is **eisegesis** which is the process of putting "into" the text something that wasn't intended by the author and is almost a "*blank cheque*" for you to make the Bible say whatever you want!

To do **exegesis**, the correct principles of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) need to be understood. **The first principle is context.** Always read the entire passage/chapter/book before preaching from a single verse. **The second principle is consistency.** Never interpret a text so that your interpretation contradicts the overall message of Scripture.

Base your answers on clear New Testament teaching (it's alright to use OT references to illustrate NT doctrine, but don't base your doctrine only on OT verses). Don't be afraid of using other references studies besides the Bible—even Paul did that: *When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.*^{2Tim.4:13} But just be careful that you don't get side-tracked from the main purpose of the Bible—which is to explain God's plan of salvation to mankind through Jesus Christ, His Son and our Saviour!

If you would find it helpful, you could write out the answers and send them to me.

Questions

1. What is a Christian?
2. What happens to Christians when they die?
3. What happens to non-Christians when they die?
4. How is human life different from animal life?
5. What is the difference between our physical life and our spiritual life?
6. When does our physical life begin and when does our spiritual life begin?
7. Our physical life ends when we stop breathing—but does our spiritual life end?

Explain

April

My heart says of You, “Seek His face!” Your face, LORD, I will seek. Psalm 28:7

Sunday 5th April (on Zoom). Ps.78:1-11

You prepare a feast for me right in front of my enemies.^{Ps.23:5}

There are many English translations of the Bible—Alfred the Great translated parts of the Bible into Anglo-Saxon English—and each one has brought its own blessing and benefit. The first English Bible to contain verse numbers was the Geneva Bible first published in 1576 (I have a Geneva Bible that was published in 1581). The Geneva Bible was the Bible of William Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell, John Knox, John Donne and John Bunyan and it was the first mechanically printed, mass-produced Bible that was made available directly to the general public—and it came with a variety of scriptural study guides and notes. These study notes were Puritan in character and opposed the Episcopalian and sacramental emphasis of the Church of England—which led to King James replacing it with his “*Authorized Version*” in 1611. This is the Geneva Bible’s preface to Psalm 23: *Because the Prophet had proved the great mercies of God at divers times and in sundry manners, he gathers a certain assurance, fully persuading himself that God will continue the very same goodness towards him for ever.* In other words, we can have confidence in God for the future because we have proved Him faithful in the past. *Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.*^{Ps.119:140} We are tested in many ways—sad times and glad times, persecution and praise: *Fire tests silver. Heat tests gold. But a man is tested by the praise he receives.*^{Pron.27:21} But until our theology is tested, it remains just theory but when our theology is tested it will become trust—which is what faith is. *But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold. My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside. I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.*^{Job.23:10-12}

The devil opposes God (satan means “opposer”) and so he is obviously God’s enemy—and he is our enemy too! The devil is a defeated enemy, but he is still a dangerous deceiver: *This great dragon—the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world.*^{Rev.12:9} *Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him and be strong in your faith. Remember that your family of believers all over the world is going through the same kind of suffering you are.*^{1Pet.5:8-9} And because the devil is a defeated deceiver, he has no authority over us Believers—unless we believe his lies: *We know that God's children do not make a practice of sinning, for God's Son holds them securely, and the evil one cannot touch them. We know that we are children of God and that the world around us is under the control of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come, and he has given us understanding so that we can know the true God.*^{1Jn.5:18-20} But mostly our enemy is not the devil but a mere distraction! “*Good, better, best, let us never rest, till our good is better and our better, best!*” Sometimes we settle for the mediocre instead of the majestic—sometimes we are content with God’s permitted will instead of God’s perfect will! But whoever or whatever our enemy is, the enemy’s ploy is to try to make us afraid—which is why we are told: *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.*^{Josh.1:9} To be strong and courageous is a not a suggestion from God but it is a command from God! And the reason we can be strong and courageous is **because God is with us**: *Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.*^{Is.43:1-3} *They will call him Emmanuel”—which means, “God with us.”*^{Mat.1:23} *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*^{Col.1:27} And we must overcome our enemy if we are to inherit the promises of God. Jesus said: *To him who overcomes, I will give...*^{Rev.2-3}

God has provided a feast for us and invites us to join Him—regardless of our enemies around us. *You prepare a feast for me right in front of my enemies.*^{Ps.23:5} The comment on this verse in the Geneva Bible is: *Albeit his enemies fought to destroy him, yet God delivers him and deals most liberally with him despite of them.* A NT parallel to this verse is: *If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*^{Rom.8:31-32} This feast that God has prepared for us is a feast of delights and is linked with God’s love, God’s life and God’s light (His glory and His holiness): *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} Isaiah says that this rich feast is for all peoples and is prepared for us on the mountain where death is destroyed: *On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.*^{Is.25:6-8} Paul quotes this verse to explain what will happen to our mortal bodies at the final resurrection: *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?” Sin gives death its sting, and God's standards give sin its power. Thank God that he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. So, then, brothers and sisters, don't let anyone move you off the foundation of your faith. Always excel in the work you do for the Lord.*^{1Cor.15:53-58} Clearly, this “feast” that God prepares for us, is our eternal life which was procured for us at Calvary—which is why David concludes his Psalm with: *I am sure that your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will live in the house of the LORD forever.*^{Ps.23:6}

So, whether our enemy is temptation, oppression, lack of resources, poor health (including coronavirus), we must resist the natural response of fear and make the supernatural response of faith—of placing our trust in God. Let’s not be like the soldiers of Ephraim in our Psalm who were *armed with bows—but they ran away on the day of battle.*^{Ps.78:9} These were the descendants of Joseph to whom God had promised: *Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough near a spring whose branches climb over the wall. The archers will attack him, they will shoot at him and oppose him. But his bow will remain steady, and his hands will be skilful; because of the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.*^{Gen.49:22-24} But instead of receiving God’s promises, they rejected God’s promises! Instead, let’s be like Eleazar, one of David’s mighty men, who *stood his ground and struck down the enemy.*^{2Sam.23:10} And let’s be like the early Church who, when they faced enemies, they too stood their ground, knowing that they will eventually receive what God had promised them: *Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. . . You knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.*^{Heb.10:32-36}

Yes, because God is with us, we can be at peace, even in the midst of our enemies. *Because the Prophet had proved the great mercies of God at divers times and in sundry manners, he gathers a certain assurance, fully persuading himself that God will continue the very same goodness towards him for ever.*

I'm not alone for my Father is with me, with me, wherever I go; Speaking words of faith, of courage and love, He's with me, He loves me wherever I go.

All of my life, everywhere that I go, I will walk with Him, Praising Him and blessing His Name—He's with me, He loves me wherever I go.

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!

Questions

Because the Prophet had proved the great mercies of God at divers (various) times and in sundry manners, he gathers a certain assurance, fully persuading himself that God will continue the very same goodness towards him for ever. (Preface to Psalm 23 in the Geneva Bible)

1. Find some verses that describe what satan is like.
2. Find some verses that describe satan's defeat.
3. Find some verses that describe satan as a deceiver.
4. What “enemies” have you had to face in your life?
5. Can you recall a specific instance when you had God's assurance through a difficult time because you had already proved His faithfulness and mercy in your life?
6. What is the feast that God has prepared for you in the midst of your enemies?
7. What would help to bring you to the place of confidence that the Commentator on Psalm 23:5 in the Geneva Bible had: *Albeit my enemies fought to destroy me, yet God delivers me and deals most liberally with me despite of them.*
8. The sons of Ephraim ran away^{Ps.78:9} when the enemy came—in spite of God's specific promise that they would be victorious ((Ephraim is Joseph's son^{Gen.49:22-24}) but Eleazar stood his ground.^{2Sam.23:10} What would help you to stand firm when trouble comes?
9. Perhaps the greatest “enemy” we will have to face is death. How can we prepare face this last foe with confidence and assurance?

Easter Sunday 12th April (on Zoom). Ps.24.

Resurrection Day

It is true! The Lord has risen.^{Lk.24:34}

Today is probably the first Easter Day that the majority of Christians across the world have not been able to meet together to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. But the early Church did not celebrate Jesus' resurrection just once a year—they celebrated Jesus' resurrection whenever they met together in the Name of Jesus (but especially on the first day of the week): *On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people...^{Acts.20:7} Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.*^{1Cor.16:1-2} Under the Old Covenant, the Jews had religious festivals and sabbaths where they treated certain days as “holy”—but that Old Covenant is now obsolete and we are under the New Covenant: *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.8:13} The New Covenant is based on better promises than the Old Covenant and for Christians, every day should be holy (dedicated to the Lord). Zechariah prophesied about this: *On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty, and all who come to sacrifice will take some of the pots and cook in them. And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite [this could mean either an “unbeliever” or possibly a merchant]*

in the house of the LORD Almighty.^{Zech.14:20-21} Paul warned about going back to making certain days “holy”: *You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid for you. I am afraid that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.*^{Gal.4:10-11} *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*^{Col.2:16-17} *One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord.*^{Rom.14:5-6} The New Covenant was implemented through Jesus’ blood (His death) but it was ratified through Jesus’ resurrection—and because Jesus is alive; because Jesus is alive, our faith is alive. *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. He is the first of all those who will rise.*^{1Cor.15:17-20}

Because we have become so used to the word “resurrection” we sometimes talk about Jesus’ resurrection as if it were just an ordinary event—but the resurrection of Jesus was unique. In the Bible, at least 8 people were raised from the dead—3 people in the OT (1 through Elijah and 2 through Elisha and probably Jonah as well); and 5 people in the NT (Jesus raised 3 people, 1 through Peter and 1 through Paul)—but all of people these were “resuscitated” (their bodies were revived only to die again at a later date). However, Jesus was raised from the dead, He was resurrected with 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. Jesus ate real food and yet He did not need to eat. Jesus’ clothes were real and yet not made of natural material. And Jesus was seen by His Disciples ascending physically into heaven! Jesus was seen and touched by many after His resurrection—by individuals, by small groups and by a crowd of over 500 people at one time.^{1Cor.15:6} With the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection so overwhelming, we base our faith in Jesus on verified fact not hearsay—and Jesus’ resurrection is proof of our own salvation from sin: *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}

But Jesus’ resurrection isn’t just an historical fact—it is a personal fact and guarantees our own personal 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 And Jesus’ resurrection also affects us today because when He ascended to the Father, He sent the Holy Spirit to reside in all Believers. *Christ is in you. He is your hope of glory.*^{Col.1:27} The presence of the Holy Spirit within us assures us of our own eternal life: *Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*^{2Cor.1:21-22} *You heard and believed the message of truth, the Good News that he has saved you. In him you were sealed with the Holy Spirit whom he promised. This Holy Spirit is the guarantee that we will receive our inheritance. We have this guarantee until we are set free to belong to him. God receives praise and glory for this.*^{Eph.1:13-14}

When we place our trust (faith) in Jesus, we believed in His bodily death and resurrection and the facts of the **history** of God's redemption (His Story) became **our story** of redemption. *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} The faith of our parents and friends are a great advantage because we can learn the facts about Christianity from them—but we must still make our own decision to follow Jesus Christ. *I remember your genuine faith, for you share the faith that first filled your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice. And I know that same faith continues strong in you. This is why I remind you to fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you when I laid my hands on you. For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. So never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord.*^{2Tim.1:5-8} *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*^{2Tim.3:14-17}

Faith in Jesus Christ starts with hearing about Jesus Christ: *So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.*^{Rom.10:17} Then when faith arises, we receive a revelation that Jesus is the Christ—God's Son and our Saviour: *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being.*^{Matt.16:16-17} **Revelation comes from meditation:** *Think about what I am saying. The Lord will help you understand all these things.*^{2Tim.2:7} Christian meditation is **filling your mind with God's Word** (not emptying your mind, as in Eastern religions): *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*^{Phil.4:8-9} Meditation is “chewing the cud”. For ruminants (such as cows and sheep) to properly digest their food, they regurgitate and then re-eat the grass as they rest—this is called “chewing the cud”. God is our Shepherd and we are His spiritual sheep, so if we are to properly digest our spiritual food, we must “chew the cud”. We do this by listening to God's Word, and then resting our mind from other activities and ponder over what we have heard, thinking about what it means and how we can apply it to our life. The Psalmist uses the word “Selah” to describe this (*Selah* means “think about what you have just read, ponder it and muse over it”). *But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah.*^{Ps.3:3-4} As we muse over God's Word we will feed our spirit and strengthen our faith. *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} *Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*^{Lk.11:28} *Don't be too proud to accept the word that is planted in you. It can save you. Don't just listen to the word. You fool yourselves if you do that. You must do what it says. Suppose you listen to the word but don't do what it says. Then you are like a man who looks at his face in a mirror. After looking at himself, he leaves. Right away he forgets what he looks like. But suppose you take a good look at the perfect law that gives freedom. You keep looking at it. You don't forget what you've heard, but you do what the law says. Then you will be blessed in what you do.*^{Jas.1:21-25}

As we celebrate Jesus' resurrection today, let's make the facts of His Story become our story—and then, like the early Church, let's treat every day as a “holy-day” as we live in fellowship with the Risen Lord and ponder the implications of His resurrection. *I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired,*^{Ps.77:6}

Questions.

1. Find some Bible verses that describe what Jesus was like before His resurrection (i.e. in His mortal body).

2. Find some Bible verses that describe what Jesus was like after His resurrection (i.e. in His immortal body).
3. What does Jesus' resurrection mean to you?
4. How does Jesus' resurrection affect your life?
5. How do you imagine the final resurrection will be like for you?
6. How are you preparing for that final resurrection?

He's alive, He's alive, He's alive forever more. Jesus is risen from the dead!
 He's alive, He's alive, He's alive forever more. Now He's become our Living Head.
 Death no longer has dominion, satan's power is broken down,
 He has triumphed, Hallelujah! And He wears the Victor's crown.
 He's alive, He's alive, He's alive forever more. Jesus is risen from the dead!

Sunday 19th April (on Zoom). Ps.79:9-13

Holy Days or Holidays?

A week later... Jesus came and said, "Peace be with you!"^{Jn.20:26}

Last week I made the point that the early Church treated every day as a holy day—that every day was dedicated to God: *All the believers kept meeting together, and they shared everything with each other. From time to time, they sold their property and other possessions and distributed the money to anyone who needed it. The believers had a single purpose and went to the temple every day. They were joyful and humble as they ate at each other's homes and shared their food. At the same time, they praised God and had the good will of all the people. Every day the Lord saved people, and they were added to the group.*^{Acts.2:44-47} This had been prophesied by Zechariah: *On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty.*^{Zech.14:20} And so Easter was not a yearly event but a daily celebration. The New Covenant had replaced the Old with its religious festivals, sabbaths and other holy days because they were only shadows and pictures of Jesus: *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*^{Col.2:16-17}

Jesus made an agreement with His Father and ratified it with His blood and called it the **New Covenant**—which became the source of our **salvation**: *Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*^{Matt.26:27-28} So now, instead of keeping the festivals of the Old Covenant, we have their fulfilment—**Jesus! Jesus is our Passover**: *Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.*^{1Cor.5:7-8} **Jesus our Bread of Life**: *Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."*^{Jn.6:35} **Jesus our source of Living Water**: *On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.*^{Jn.7:37-39} **Jesus our Light**: *Jesus spoke to the people again. He said, "I am the light of the world. Those who follow me will never walk in darkness. They will have the light that leads to life."*^{Jn.8:12}

When Jesus came to earth, He fulfilled the Scriptures, including the prescribed religious festivals: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.*^{Matt.5:17} And Jesus came to reveal His glory: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*^{Jn.1:14} *For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the*

Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”^{2Pet.1:17} But Jesus also came to share that glory with us. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.^{Jn.17:24} He shares that glory with us through the Gospel by living within us: He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.^{2Thess.2:14} Christ in you, the hope of glory.^{Col.1:27} The prophet Ezekiel saw the glory of God in a vision—he saw the glory leave the Temple: Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple.^{Ezek.10:18} But he also saw the glory of God return to the Temple: I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory. The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the Kebar River, and I fell facedown. The glory of the LORD entered the temple through the gate facing east. Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.^{Ezek.43:2-5} However, the Glory of God did not return to a place but to people—God’s glory now rests in Believers: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.^{Is.60:1} Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?^{1Cor.3:16} 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} Before Jesus came, God would visit people, speak to them: The Word of the Lord came to...; The Spirit came to... But then God would leave them: In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.^{1Sam.3:1} But he did not know that the LORD had left him.^{Jdg.16:20} David’s prayer was that God would not leave him: 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} When Jesus was born, God was with Him in a way that God had never been with anyone else—**Jesus was the first person in whom God dwelt!** And before He returned to His Father, Jesus breathed on His Disciples for them to receive the Holy Spirit, so God could dwell in them too: And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”^{Jn.20:22} And now God is not just **with us**, God is **within us**—like He was within Jesus. Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love him. We will come to him and make our home with him.”^{Jn.14:23} God had breathed into Adam to make him spiritually alive: the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.^{Gen.2:7} But Adam sinned and God banished him from His presence. When Jesus breathed on His Disciples, He made them spiritually alive: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.^{1Cor.15:45} Now we have been born-again through the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, we have God’s life within us and we are spiritually alive: For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.^{1Pet.1:23} 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 God’s promise to never leave us is a reality under the New Covenant: God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”^{1Heb.13:6} 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 early Church treated every day as holy because they had been made holy—every Believer is a “saint” (saint means “holy-one”, someone who is consecrated to God). To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.^{Phil.1:1} But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”^{1Pet.1:15-16} But the early Church chose to meet on the first day of the week because that was the day of Jesus’ resurrection: After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb... The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.”^{Matt.28:1-6} It was the first day of the week when Jesus appeared to His Disciples: On the evening of that first day of the week, when the

disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.^{Jn.20:19-20} And on the first day of the week Jesus appeared again to His Disciples: *A week later... Jesus came said, "Peace be with you!"*^{Jn.20:26} The first day of the week was also when the Church was birthed. At Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' resurrection, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all people: *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them... In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people... And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*^{Acts.2:1-4;17;21}

And on the first day of the week God created light: *God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.*^{Gen.1:3-5} And when God re-created us, He spoke light into our lives: *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:6} Now the light of God is within us in the Person of the Holy Spirit. *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.38:8-9}

Although Jesus is always with us, it is good to meet together on the first day of the week—and if we can't meet physically on the first day of the week, at least we can meet virtually on the first day of the week (thanks to modern technology)! So today, we meet to celebrate Jesus' resurrection, to celebrate Jesus bringing us peace, to celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and to celebrate the re-creation of our spiritual life through God's light spoken into our hearts. Amen!

Questions:

Why do Christians meet together on a Sunday instead of Saturday (the Sabbath)?

Do Christians have to keep the 4th Commandment? (Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.^{Ex.20:8-11}) See also: Ex.35:1-3; Nu.15:32-36; Mk.2:22-28; Heb.4:1-11

What does "holy" mean?

Who is a "saint"?

What does it mean to "keep the [Passover] Festival"? (*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.*^{1Cor.5:7-8})

How do you understand this verse? *And with that he [Jesus] breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."*^{Jn.20:22}

Sunday 26th April (on Zoom). Ps.81:1-7

Statistics—What's so special about 153?

Jesus said: "Throw your net on the right side of the boat. There you will find some fish." ... Simon Peter climbed into the boat. He dragged the net to shore. It was full of large fish. There were 153 of them. But even with that many fish the net was not torn.^{Jn.21:6-11}

Our News headlines are full of statistics (especially in this Coronavirus pandemic) but numbers are not always the main point of the story. And numbers can very easily be used to manipulate the story and mislead people unless their context is explained.

When something dramatic or life-changing happens to us, the circumstances will often remain clear and vivid for the rest of our life. For experienced fishermen to catch nothing all night and then to be told by a "Stranger" to *throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some [fish]*^{Jn.21:6} was extraordinary—but when they did, *they were unable to haul the net in because of the large*

number of fish! That was an extra-extraordinary and memorable event—the actual number of fish caught remained imprinted in John’s mind and he could remember it years later when he wrote the Gospel. The 153 fish were only an introduction to even more dramatic events that would unfold that morning—the restoration of Peter—and they pointed to the abundance of God’s grace. Abundance means “*fullest measure*”, “*plenty*”, “*lots of*”, “*enough and plenty to spare*”. Peter had denied Jesus 3 times leading up to the Crucifixion just as Jesus had predicted. Peter was remorseful and feeling guilty about letting Jesus down. Remorse and guilt are natural emotions, but they can be debilitating if not dealt with. Jesus was using the 153 fish to help restore Peter as He had foretold: *Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*^{Lk.22:31-32}

As a side issue, when the Disciples gave their offering of cold fish to Jesus, He transformed it by fire—He cooked the fish for breakfast: *When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” . . . Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.*^{Jn.21:9-13} George Canty wrote: *Bible religion is a fire faith. Fire translates into exuberant generosity, joy, praise and worship, an “I’ve got to, I want to, I must, I will” attitude. Not an occasional bit of service attitude, but one ablaze for God, in giving, praying, working and loving. People sing ‘send the fire’. They mean on the unconverted world, on God’s work, on their church. But why not on themselves? A cold offering is better than no offering at all, I suppose; just doing what we should, attending worship, helping a bit here and there, doing things at and for the church. But when the God of the burning bush, the God of Pentecostal tongues of fire comes, offerings become fire offerings. (Contemporary Issues as seen by George Canty available from our Website under [What We Teach/Resources](#)).*

God is a God of Abundance—a God of Plenty! It is recorded at least 8 times in the OT that God abounds in love: *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*^{Ps.103:8} (Also *Ex.34:6; Nu.14:18; Neh.9:17; Ps.86:5; Ps.86:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2*) God’s abundance is available to all who find shelter in the shadow of God’s wings. *Both high and low among men find 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} God’s abundance to us is rarely in natural possessions: *Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*^{Lk.12:15} *The sleep of a labourer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.*^{Ecd.5:12} **God’s abundance is in His love, grace and peace:** *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*^{Ps.103:8} *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2}

But God does not help us in order that we may just feel good. He helps us so we can remain faithful witnesses to His love, grace and peace and He also helps us so that we can “*feed*” others (that is, to strengthen, encourage and support them): *Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*^{Rev 1:5} *Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.*^{Rev.2:12} God wants us all to be mature and so He gave *the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, 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.4:11-13} Too often we only focus on honouring God with our lips instead of our lives but we need to honour God with our lips **and** our lives if we are to become the people God expects us to! *The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*^{Matt.13:11-13} Jesus instructed Peter to feed (*tend and shepherd*) His sheep **and** to follow Him.^{Jn.21:15-19} If the abundance received from God does not overflow into action we will lose what we do have. *As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to*

each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.^{Ezek.33:30-32} 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. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.^{Matt.7:24-27} Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says... But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.^{Jas.1:22-25} British Christians are too busy singing dreamy individualistic praise songs to stand up for the King of kings in the real world. So evil goes unopposed—except by a few. It is a good job we serve a God of miracles. But will our mighty God look at the church in Britain and conclude that we might as well be given over to wickedness for all the use we are in proclaiming his kingdom on earth?^{Christian Voice}

We are not all called to be Pastors or Church leaders but we are all called to care for others and be leaders of our own life! The best way we can do this is by sharing the abundance that God has given us—especially the abundance of God's love, grace and peace. When the boy shared his food, it fed over 5000 people and there was also 12 baskets left over!^{Jn.6:5-15} When we share what God has given us, it will bless others and there will still be some left over: *God will give you his constantly overflowing kindness. Then, when you always have everything you need, you can do more and more good things. Scripture says, "The righteous person gives freely to the poor. His righteousness continues forever." God gives seed to the farmer and food to those who need to eat. God will also give you seed and multiply it. In your lives he will increase the things you do that have his approval. God will make you rich enough so that you can always be generous. Your generosity will produce thanksgiving to God because of us. What you do to serve others not only provides for the needs of God's people, but also produces more and more prayers of thanksgiving to God. You will honour God through this genuine act of service because of your commitment to spread the Good News of Christ and because of your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else. With deep affection they will pray for you because of the extreme kindness that God has shown you.*^{2Cor.9:8-14}

So what's so special about 153? Nothing really—other than that was the number of fishes John and the other Disciples caught when Jesus reinstated Peter and instructed him to feed His sheep. **Will you remember just the statistics, or will you remember the instructions too? Let's continue to follow Jesus and feed others** in the knowledge that He is the God of Abundance and that He *will supply our every need according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.4:19} Numbers in the Bible are not doctrinal statements but they are often used to illustrate truths—however, we must be careful not read significance into every number.

Here is a list of numbers and their usual meanings:

- 1 = Absolute**, i.e. *one God*.
- 2 = unity**, i.e. *two witnesses*.
- 3 = ultimate**, i.e. *holy, holy, holy*.
- 4 = earth**, i.e. *four corners/winds of the earth*.
- 5 = grace**, i.e. *five curtains, frames, posts etc Ex.26*
- 6 = sin/man**, i.e. *created on 6th day*.
- 7 = complete, ending**, i.e. *7th day is end of the week*.
- 10 = human government**, i.e. *Ten kings*.
- 12 = redemption**, i.e. *12 Tribes, 12 Apostles*.

1000 = large number that is not meant to be counted; i.e. *2Pet.3:8*. When linked with years 1000 is a long time and it equates to “*the Kingdom of God*”, i.e. *Rev.20:1-10*.

Questions:

What are the Biblical principles of stewardship?

God is a God of abundance but what does the Bible say that God given us an abundance of?

Should we only give when we have more than enough for ourselves?

Who are Jesus' sheep?

What do Jesus' sheep eat?

How can we tend Jesus' sheep?

Personal reflections:

Recall a dramatic or lifechanging incident in your life. What unusual specifics can you remember about the event?

Can you remember a time when you had a lack of something? What did you do? Do you have a lack of something now?

Can you recall an instance when you had an abundance of something? Did you share it with others?

May

But I trust in You, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in Your hands.

Psalms 31:14-15

Sunday 3rd May (on Zoom). Ps.84:1-4

VE (Victory in Emmanuel) Day

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Gal.5:1

May Day (May 1st) is celebrated as a public holiday in many countries and our traditional English May Day celebrations included the crowning of a May Queen and maypole dancing. The Puritan parliaments abolished May Day during the Commonwealth and Interregnum (mainly due to its pagan connotations and the excesses associated with its celebrations) but with the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, May Day was reinstated. In the late C19th May Day was chosen as the date for International Workers' Day by the Socialists and Communists of the Second International to commemorate the Haymarket affair in Chicago (where several people died and many were injured at a demonstration in support of an 8 hour working day). In England we have a Spring bank holiday on the first Monday in May and so May 1st is not a public holiday (unless it falls on a Monday). [The May Day holiday should not be confused with the distress call “*mayday, mayday*”—from the French *m'aider* meaning “*help me*”—which was first used in 1921 at Croydon Airport where most of the air traffic was between there and Paris.] This year our Spring Bank Holiday has been changed to a Friday (8th May) so we can celebrate VE (Victory in Europe) Day which took place on Tuesday, May 8, 1945 when the allied forces announced the surrender of Germany in Europe.

Our democracy (which is based on the Magna Carta) enables us to live according to our conscience without the fear of intimidation because the rights of individuals are guaranteed, and whether Monarch or labourer, employed or unemployed, **everyone** is subject to the law—and **everyone** has the right to justice and the right to a fair trial. And so, when either people or countries, have tried to interfere with our rights or impose different values upon us, we have resisted them—even if it meant going to war. But the democratic liberty and political freedom that we enjoy today in the West is expensive, because it has cost millions of human lives (either directly or indirectly)! And throughout the world, oppressors have abused and destroyed countless people—Mao Zedong was responsible for between 50 and 100 million deaths, Stalin was responsible for up to 40 million deaths, Hitler for over 6 million deaths... (the list is endless), but each oppressor has eventually been defeated and right has ultimately triumphed over wrong. Although the fight for political liberty and justice brings disruption, disorder and even death, we should never forget that there is also a fight for spiritual liberty and spiritual justice—but our fight is to let people know about the victory that Jesus has already won, not to bring the victory! Jesus has already defeated the devil and the spiritual disease of sin and Jesus demonstrated His victory by rising from the dead as King of kings: *but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.* Rev.17:14 Jesus is King over God's Kingdom which is an everlasting Kingdom that will never be defeated: *Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.* Ps.145:13 *In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.* Dan.2:44-45 Jesus' Disciples expected a political kingdom but God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom not a political Kingdom: *Jesus said, “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} Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”^{Act.1:6-8}

However, the authority that God has given to Jesus also includes authority over the nations of this world: Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...”^{Matt.28:18-19} Christ will hand over the kingdom to God the Father as he destroys every ruler, authority, and power. Christ must rule until God has put every enemy under his control.

The last enemy he will destroy is death... God had put everything under the Son's authority.^{1Cor.15:24-28} The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign for ever and ever.^{Rev.11:15}

But the Lordship and authority of King Jesus is most especially seen in the lives of Believers: This is the message of faith that we spread. If you declare that Jesus is Lord, and believe that God brought him back to life, you will be saved. By believing you receive God's approval, and by declaring your faith you are saved. Scripture says, “Whoever believes in him will not be ashamed.”^{Rom.10:8-11} The Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come. He answered them, “People can't observe the coming of the kingdom of God. They can't say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ You see, the kingdom of God is within you.”^{Lk.17:20-21}

God is Sovereign and when we confess “Jesus is Lord”, we are willingly submitting to God's authority as His servants. However, although we are God's servants, we are also God's sons because He is our Father: You are all God's children by believing in Christ Jesus.^{Gal.3:26} 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.6:8-9}

Unfortunately, some Christians only live as servants and not as sons: What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.^{Gal.4:1-7}

When we were born-again, we became God's children and were given a permanent place in God's family: 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}

When we realise that we are actually God's sons as well as His servants, we will never doubt that that God accepts us God. He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence.^{Eph.1:4-8}

We will be quick to ask God for help: Let us then approach the 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}

We will not be anxious about our past, our present or our future: But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.^{Matt.6:33}

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.^{Gal.5:1} Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.^{Phil.1:18-19}

We will be content and at peace in every situation: I've learned to be content in whatever situation I'm in. I know how to live in poverty or prosperity. No matter what the situation, I've learned the secret of how to live when I'm full or when I'm hungry, when I have too much or when I have too little. I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.^{Phil.4:11-13} Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.^{Ps.119:165}

If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea.^{Is.48:18} We will spend time in fellowship with God. We proclaim to you what we have

seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.^{1Jn.1:3} We will be full of joy (even through the sad times) because we are in God's presence: *You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*^{Ps.16:11} *Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him. For he will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease. He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you with his wings. His faithful promises are your armour and protection.*^{Ps.91:1-4}

As we enjoy the spring Bank holiday this week, let's take the best concepts of all of the May Day celebrations and give thanks for our new life in God's Kingdom, for our rights as God's workers (and also as God's children). And as we celebrate VE (Victory in Europe) Day and appreciate our political freedom, let us also celebrate the spiritual victory that Christ has given us—VE (Victory in Emmanuel) Day: *Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you. I am emphatic about this... When you attempt to live by your own religious plans and projects, you are cut off from Christ, you fall out of grace. Meanwhile we expectantly wait for a satisfying relationship with the Spirit. For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion nor disregard of religion amounts to anything. What matters is something far more interior: faith expressed in love.*^{Gal.5:1-5} And if we are ever in distress, we also know that if we call out "mayday, mayday" (help me, help me) to God, He will hear our call and save us. *I call on the LORD in my distress, and he answers me.*^{Ps.120:1}

Questions

Give a brief description of the Kingdom of God

What does the Bible say about the Kingdom of God?

How is the Kingdom of God different from the kingdoms of this world?

How is the Kingdom of God similar to the kingdoms of this world?

Are there any rules for the Kingdom of God?

Who are citizens of the Kingdom of God?

What role do you have in the Kingdom of God?

Sunday 10th May (on Zoom). Ps.84:5-8

Sons and Servants.

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.^{1Jn.8:34-36}

When we were born-again, we placed our trust in the resurrection of Jesus^{Rom.10:9-10} and asked God to forgive our sins. Jesus' resurrection confirms that His death paid the penalty for our sin and that we are now forgiven: *Brothers and sisters, I'm making known to you the Good News which I already told you, which you received, and on which your faith is based. In addition, you are saved by this Good News if you hold on to the doctrine I taught you, unless you believed it without thinking it over. I passed on to you the most important points of doctrine that I had received: Christ died to take away our sins as the Scriptures predicted. He was placed in a tomb. He was brought back to life on the third day as the Scriptures predicted... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.*^{1Cor.15:1-20} At conversion, we also acknowledged that Jesus is Lord and submitted to His authority. That means we now have an obligation to serve our Saviour instead of serving sin. Sin is not just doing bad things like murdering, stealing, hating, hurting, etc.—sin is anything that misses God's standard of glory: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*^{Rom.3:23} It is obvious that none of us can meet God's standard of glory and holiness—which is why God forgives our sin and credits us with righteousness. In this great transaction, God makes some incredible exchanges:

God exchanges our Sin for His Righteousness: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.*^{2Cor.5:21} *So that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*^{2Cor.5:21}

God exchanges our Punishment for His Forgiveness: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*^{Is.53:5} *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace.*^{Eph.1:7}

God exchanges our Death for His Life: *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*^{Rom.5:8} *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{Rom.6:23}

God exchanges our Poverty for His Riches: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor.*^{2Cor.8:9} *so that you through his poverty might become rich.*^{2Cor.8:9}

God exchanges our Shame for His Glory: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*^{Heb.12:2} *In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.*^{Heb.2:10}

God exchanges our Rejection for His Acceptance: *About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*^{Matt.27:46} *to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves (to the praise of the glory of his grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved)*^{Eph.1:6}

God exchanges our Curses for His Blessings: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*^{Gal.3:13} *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.3:14}

God exchanges our old heart of stone for a new heart of flesh (an unregenerate spirit for a holy spirit): *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*^{Ezek.36:26-27} *This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:10-13} By writing His laws on our heart, God gave us the desire to honour Him and then He gave us the Person of the Holy Spirit to empower us to honour Him and to live to His standard of righteousness. That is why the Christian life is 100% supernatural—God changes us from within by the miracle of new-birth and then He resides within us. That means we are never alone because God Himself is with us in the Person of the Holy Spirit—and He will never leave us: *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper who will be with you forever. That helper is the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it doesn't see or know him. You know him, because he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you all alone... You will live because I live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father and that you are in me and that I am in you.*^{Jn.14:16-20} *God has said, "I will never leave you. I will never forsake you." So we can say boldly, "The Lord helps me. I will not be afraid. What can a mere man do to me?"*^{1Ieb.13:5-6} But if we "miss the mark" of God's glory, there is forgiveness: *God is faithful and reliable. If we confess our sins, he forgives them and cleanses us from everything we've done wrong. If we say, "We have never sinned," we turn God into a liar and his Word is not in us. My dear children, I'm writing this to you so that you will not sin. Yet, if anyone does sin, we have Jesus Christ, who has God's full approval. He speaks on our behalf when we come into the presence of the Father. He is the payment for our sins, and not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.1:9-2:2}

As servants of God we have a duty to honour Him and represent Him respectfully, but it is also a pleasure to honour Him and represent Him. The same joy that Jesus had from loving

righteousness and hating wickedness is now our joy: *You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.*^{Heb.1:9} *You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*^{Ps.16:11} Serving God should be a pleasure and our strength comes from the enjoyment of fellowship with Him: *for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*^{Neb.8:10} *The LORD made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and joy in his dwelling place. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength, ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name.*^{1Chron.16:26-29} *“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”*^{Jn.4:34}

King David adopted Mephibosheth as his son for the sake of his friend Jonathan and this story is also an allegory to illustrate that although we are servants, we are adopted as God’s sons because of Jesus: *David said, “Mephibosheth!” “Your servant,” he replied. “Don’t be afraid,” David said to him, “for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table.” ...So Mephibosheth ate at David’s table like one of the king’s sons.*^{2Sam.9:6-11}

In the story of the two brothers^{Lk.15:11-32} (often known as the Prodigal son), the younger brother left home, showing no respect for his father or his family values as he squandered his inheritance in wasteful living. (The word “wasteful” actually “un-saved”—“saved” with the negative prefix—*i.e.* the opposite of a saved life!) When the younger brother came to his senses, he returned home as a servant but was received as a son. Although the older brother stayed at home as a son, he was no different from a servant because he didn’t understand his father’s love—instead of enjoying being family, he thought being a son was like being a slave and became bitter: *The older brother became angry. He refused to go in. So his father went out and begged him. “But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve worked like a slave for you. I have always obeyed your orders. You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But this son of yours wasted your money with some prostitutes. Now he comes home. And for him you kill the fattest calf!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me. Everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad. This brother of yours was dead. And now he is alive again. He was lost. And now he is found.*^{Lk.15:28-32} But God has redeemed us from the legalistic servitude of religion and the intimidation of fear: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”*^{Gal.3:13} *For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.*^{2Tim.1:7} (The word “self-discipline” is literally a “saved-mind”.) We need to have a “salvation” mindset, *i.e.* think of ourselves as saved and redeemed by the blood of Jesus. We do this by renewing our minds, cleaning our thoughts with the water of the Word: *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} But as well as **thinking** salvation, we must **live** salvation. **We must live a saved life**—unlike the younger son who lived an un-saved life! If we don’t live a saved life, then we will die like mere people instead of the sons of God that we are: *I said, ‘You are “gods”; you are all sons of the Most High.’ But you will die like mere men,*^{Ps.82:6-7} We are more than just human beings—we are Holy Spirit filled Believers who are sons of God. *For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?*^{1Cor.3:3-4}

So let’s strive for maturity, by thinking, speaking and acting as sons of God—whilst keeping a servant’s heart. Then we can enjoy fellowship with God and live in the blessings of God’s family—both now and forever.

Questions

How does the Bible define “sin”?

What does the Bible say about being without sin?

Why does God call us holy if we are still capable of sinning?

What is a “Christian”?

Can we be a Christian but live like a non-Christian?

How can we become a mature Christian (*i.e.* grow up in the faith)?

What are the standards that God expects from His servants?

What are the standards that God expects from His sons?

Sunday 17th May (on Zoom). Ps.84:9-12

God is our Shield

But You, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.^{Ps.3:3}

We always need God’s protection but it is in times of trouble that we are usually more aware of our need. When we became a Christian, we trusted God to save us. We accepted that God was our Shield, trusting Him to save us and protect us spiritually, emotionally and physically. *Look upon our shield, O God; look with favour on your anointed one. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favour and honour.*^{Ps.84:9-11} Now that we are saved, we should have a “*saved*” mindset (*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound [saved] mind/self-discipline.*^{1Tim.1:7}) And we should also have a “*saved*” lifestyle (unlike the younger brother in the story of the Prodigal son who had a wasteful and “*un-saved*” lifestyle). God has made us holy: *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} But none of us really live a totally “*saved*” and holy life. We were all born sinners: *As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one,*^{Rom.3:10}—and even after conversion, we are still capable of sinning. Those who do claim to be without sin, are deluded and make God out to be a liar: *God is faithful and reliable. If we confess our sins, he forgives them and cleanses us from everything we've done wrong. If we say, “We have never sinned,” we turn God into a liar and his Word is not in us. My dear children, I'm writing this to you so that you will not sin. Yet, if anyone does sin, we have Jesus Christ, who has God's full approval. He speaks on our behalf when we come into the presence of the Father. He is the payment for our sins, and not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.1:9-2:2}

When God saved us it was pure grace on His part—there was no requirement for God to even help us: *Finding someone who would die for a godly person is rare. Maybe someone would have the courage to die for a good person. Christ died for us while we were still sinners. This demonstrates God's love for us.*^{Rom.5:7-8} Although we can’t demand God’s love, we can accept His love: *So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord... who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.*^{2Tim.1:8-9} We esteem God’s love as a great privilege because His love for us was the reason that He exchanged our sin for Jesus’ righteousness: *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} Because God has credited us with Jesus’ righteousness, we can legitimately call ourselves “*holy*” and “*righteous*”. *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.*^{Rom.4:3-6} Therefore, *holy brothers*, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.^{Heb.3:1} To the *holy and faithful brothers in Christ*.^{Col.1:2} But if we miss the target of God’s glory, Jesus forgives us and can put us back on course: *But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*^{1Jn.2:1-2}

Although God credits us with righteousness, we still have to receive the Righteous One (Jesus) to access His righteousness: *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*^{Jn.1:11-13} Receiving Jesus the Righteous One is by **faith**: *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} For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.^{Rom.10:10} Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”^{Lk.7:49} **Faith** is that simple and yet profound trust in God, based on who **He is** (His Character) and **what He has said** (His Word). **Faith** is how we are saved: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*^{Eph.2:8-9} **Faith** is how we overcome the world and its control over us: *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.5:4-5} **Faith** is one of the three great attributes of maturity: *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*^{1Cor.13:13} **Faith** is a shield because it can protect us: *In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.*^{Eph.6:16} Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.^{1Pet.1:3-5} Ancient armour and defences (like shields), were made from leather and leather needs oiling to keep it protected and effective—hence the command: *Get up, you officers, oil the shields!*^{Is.21:5} David's lament over Saul was that his shield was no longer cared for: *For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil.*^{2Sam.1:21} Oil in the OT is often used to illustrate the Holy Spirit and we need the **anointing** of the Holy Spirit to keep our faith protected and effective. *Anointing* means to *rub, smear or pour*. *Take the anointing oil and anoint him by pouring it on his head.*^{Ex.29:7} And “Christ” or “Messiah” means *Anointed One*. We need Jesus' Presence through the **indwelling** of the person of the Holy Spirit—and the **application** of His Presence keeps our faith active and effective. The anointing (application) of the Holy Spirit will break every yoke: *And the yoke will be destroyed because of the anointing (the yoke will be broken because you have grown so fat[NIV]).*^{Is.11:27} A shield's effectiveness is never really known until it is tried and tested. Our faith remains theory until it is tried and tested—then we know how effective our faith really is. *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*^{Is.7:9} *In 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 your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and 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 goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*^{1Pet.1:6-9}

We don't need lots of faith but we do need living faith—faith that is growing: *The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.*^{Lk.17:5-6} *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.*^{Matt.13:31-32} Our faith grows by **feeding** on God's Word—both the **Living Word** (Jesus) **AND** the **Written Word** (the Scriptures). *My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.*^{Jn.4:34} *I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.*^{Jn.6:32-35} *Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of*

God.^{Mat.4:4} Our faith grows by **fellowship**—both fellowship with God and fellowship with God’s people. *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*^{2Cor.13:14} *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ... But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*^{1Jn.1:3-7} Our faith also grows by **following** Jesus and obeying His instructions: *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you... Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*^{1Jn.13:15-17} *But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.*^{Jas.1:25}

When we build ourselves up in the **faith** we can **pray** in (or with) the Holy Spirit. *But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.*^{Jude.1:20} It is in **prayer** that we worship God for all that He is and for all that He has provided for humanity. It is in **prayer** that we thank God for His gifts and callings in our lives—and listen for His directions in how and where to use those gifts for the good of our hurting world. It is in **prayer** that we assimilate faith, hope and love from His Person and through His Word. It is in **prayer** that we intercede for the needs of fellow-believers, then listen for God’s ideas of what we can do about them—of ways we can be part of the answer. **Prayer** is a hallowed season—it is never pleading and begging for divine favours—which is why we need to build ourselves up in the **faith** so we can **pray** with the Holy Spirit.

Yes, God is our Shield and our faith grants us access to His Protection—so let’s face every day with confidence as we appreciate God’s favour and honour: *Look upon our shield, O God; look with favour on your anointed one. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favour and honour;*^{Ps.84:9-11}

Questions

But You, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.^{Ps.3:3}

God is a Shield around us—in what way does God protect us?

Is God’s protection always guaranteed?

How do we access God’s protection?

How much faith do we need to access God’s promises?

How do we grow our faith?

Explain in your own words what you think this verse means: *But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.*^{Jude:}

Sunday 24th May 10.30am (on Zoom). Ps.85:1-7

Is Revival the answer?

Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?^{Ps.85:6}

We have often been encouraged to pray for revival with the expectation that when revival comes, all our problems will disappear. This coming “*revival*” will be like heaven on earth—our churches will be full, our communities will be changed and we will all be happy! We have looked for patterns in past revivals and have been encouraged to copy them with the hope that this “*revival*” will come for us. In any scenario, if you look long and hard enough for a pattern, you will find one somewhere. This can often be useful, for instance, Governments across the world have analysed information about Covid-19 and tried to predict possible eventualities so they can offer the best advice on how to deal with the pandemic. Most organisations have to make economic forecasts based on patterns of behaviour—and then they set their budgets accordingly. But when it comes to God’s Kingdom, there is an unseen, spiritual dimension that cannot be predicted and does not conform to any quantifiable pattern: *Flesh and blood give birth*

to flesh and blood, but the Spirit gives birth to things that are spiritual. Don't be surprised when I tell you that all of you must be born from above. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you don't know where the wind comes from or where it's going. That's the way it is with everyone born of the Spirit.^{Jn.3:6-8} Of course there are some fundamental characteristics of God's Kingdom that are easily identifiable and conform to the basic Christian doctrines of our Redeemer, of righteousness, of repentance and of reconciliation—but revival is different and doesn't fit into any natural pattern.

People often reminisce about the 1904/5 Welsh Revival when prayer meetings lasted all night, political rallies and football matches were suspended, pubs were closed, etc. But in reality, although the Revival saw many thousands of converts, life went on as normal for most of the country. The meetings were predominately in the Welsh language and although the memories lasted decades, the actual revival lasted less than 18 months. For those involved, it was life-changing but many of the converts were unable to be assimilated into the established churches because they were deemed too fanatical—they had had an encounter with God! However, **supernatural encounters don't produce maturity.** The Israelites were emancipated from Egyptian slavery with incredible miracles. They saw and heard God speaking with Moses and they experienced God's miraculous protection and provision every day for 40 years—but they still did not trust God: *Who were those who heard and refused to obey? Weren't they all the people Moses led out of Egypt? Who was God angry with for 40 years? Wasn't it with those who sinned? They died in the desert... So we see that they weren't able to enter. That's because they didn't believe. God's promise of enjoying his rest still stands. So be careful that none of you fails to receive it. The good news was preached to our people long ago. It has also been preached to us. The message they heard didn't have any value for them. They didn't combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enjoy that rest.*^{Heb.3:16-4:3} Solomon had at least 2 face-to-

face encounters with God and still turned away from Him: *The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.*^{1Kgs.11:9} When Jesus healed the ten lepers, only one even took the trouble say “*thank you*” to Him. God's Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom and it is experienced with spiritual senses. When Jesus reigns in peoples' hearts it always results in worship as people show their appreciation of God: *Jesus asked, “Weren't all ten healed? Where are the other nine? Didn't anyone else return and give praise to God except this outsider?” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.” ... “The coming of God's kingdom is not something you can see just by watching for it carefully. People will not say, ‘Here it is.’ Or, ‘There it is.’ God's kingdom is within you.*^{Lk.17:17-21}

So, *Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*^{Ps.85:6} But actually, revival isn't even a NT concept—neither Jesus or the Apostles taught about expecting a “*revival*”—and the early Church was too busy spreading the Gospel in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit were too busy preaching the Gospel to be concerned about revival! However, there have been some incredible “*outpourings*” of heaven on earth. Perhaps the most widespread was in the 1850's when many thousands were converted on nearly every continent. With a population of 27,000,000 in Britain, it is estimated that 500,000 people were converted in England, 30,000 in Scotland, 100,000 in Wales during that decade—and another 100,000 in Ulster! In September 1857 a noon day prayer meeting was started on Wednesdays in a New York church. They decided to meet daily in October and within six months over 10,000 businessmen were praying in similar meetings across America. It was a lay-led movement that saw a million conversions in two years. In 1858, from February to June, around 50,000 people a week were added to the church—in a nation whose population was only 30,000,000. Between 1857 and 1858 it is estimated that in America a million people were converted and another million re-dedicated their lives to Christ. And then in April 1861—just over three years later—the American Civil War began!!! Revival continued on both sides and in the winter of 1863/4, some 7,000 soldiers were converted among Robert E. Lee's forces and nearly as many in the Union Army as well! E.M.Bounds—author of the classic *Power through Prayer*—was a Chaplain in the Confederate

Army and the Evangelist D.L. Moody was a Chaplain in the Union Army. Sometimes preaching and praying continued 24 hours a day and the chapels were unable to hold the soldiers who wanted to get inside. It is estimated that 620,000 soldiers from both sides died the that civil war and over 300,000 soldiers were converted to Christ!

There was a man in the Bible times who was waiting for a supernatural move of God—for revival—but it never came! But then Jesus came by and met his need: *From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.*^{Jn.5:4-9} If you are waiting for a supernatural move of God—for “*revival*” you are wasting your time because *revival* may never come—and if *revival* does come, it won’t be the answer to your needs. **Jesus is the answer to our need!** Jesus declared Himself to be the “**I Am**”—*I am... the Bread of Life; the Light of the world; the Gate; the good Shepherd; God's Son; the Resurrection and the Life; the Way and the Truth and the Life; the First and the Last; the Living One; the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End; the Root and the Offspring of David and the bright Morning Star.*

Although God’s Kingdom has a spiritual dimension that cannot be predicted or measured by natural means, it does have spiritual principles that are clearly identifiable. These principles include honouring Jesus Christ as God’s Son, yielding all to God, fellowshiping with God, His Word and His people. In God’s Kingdom less is more and more is less—God can do more with our little than we can do with our lots: *Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"*^{Mk.8:17-21} When we are weak, God’s grace is our strength: *But the Lord said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me... For when I am weak, then I am strong.*^{2Cor.12:9-10} When we have troubles, God’s presence is our comfort: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*^{2Cor.1:3-4} God’s Kingdom is a real Kingdom, with real people in real time—and it will last forever. *In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, [ascending] with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*^{Dan.7:13-14} *Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does.*^{Ps.145:13} We don’t know how this virus pandemic will evolve or when it will eventually evaporate but waiting for a supernatural move of God or “*revival*” is not God’s answer to this (or any) problem. God’s answer is **His divine power**—the Holy Spirit, who was given to us at conversion—when we were born-again: *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*^{2Pet.1:3-4}

So, let’s take God at His Word and be the “*more than*” person that He says we are, rather than a “*can’t do*” person or even a “*just about get through*” person: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your*

sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” **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.8:35-39} **Then we will rejoice because God is with us** not because revival is with us—and if revival does come, we will rejoice even more!

Questions

What is the greatest thing God could ever do for someone?

What is the greatest thing someone can ever do for God?

What could you do to achieve this?

What could you do to help others achieve greatness in God’s Kingdom?

Suggested references: Jn.3:30; Eph.1:17-19; Matt.18:1-4; Matt.5:19-20

What 3 “R’s” in 2Pet.1:12-15^{NIV} help us make our election and calling sure?

We are more than conquerors through Christ. What else do we have more than through Christ (*i.e.* plenty or an abundance of)?

Sunday 31st May (on Zoom). Ps.85:8-13

Promises or Presumptions?

I will listen to what God the LORD will say; He promises peace to His people, His saints—but... Ps.85:8

Some of you may remember the “Promise-Box” that contained rolled up pieces of paper with Scripture verses written on them that you could take and apply to you that day. These promise boxes had some value as people actually read a portion of Scripture and then pondered over it during the day. At their best, they were similar to “*thought for day*” on a daily calendar—or our Church’s monthly “*Memory Verse*”—but they often ended up being no more than religious “*fortune-cookies*”! But actually, not everything in the Bible is a promise from God—some Scriptures are divine possibilities or potential and some are divine warnings! *These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.*^{1Cor.10:11} Biblical promises are only ours “*in Christ*”: *For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.*^{2Cor.1:20} So if we aren’t “*in Christ*” we can’t claim God’s promises!

We are constantly being reminded that a good diet is an essential ingredient for good health but that principle is often overlooked when it comes to our spiritual health. We need a good spiritual diet that is balanced and includes both “*milk*” and “*meat*” of God’s Word—the *milk* is the basic truths such as God’s love and the *meat* is the harder truths such as God’s judgement: *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as 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.*^{1Cor.3:1-3} *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.5:12-14}

Tight-rope walkers use a long pole to help them keep balance—a little pole would never stop them from falling! Just a little bit of God’s Word will not keep us stable—we need to know as much as we can of God’s truth to keep us balanced and to stop us from falling. *To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*^{Jude.24} The BBC is renowned for its so-called “*balance*” where they counteract nearly every story with an interview of someone who brings an opposite view—even if the “*counterbalance*” turns out to be false! We need to focus on what God says, not on what unbelievers say! We need to know all we can about what God says about His love **and**

His judgement; about giving **and** receiving; about sickness **and** health; about poverty **and** prosperity; about living **and** dying; about blessings **and** curses (the word “*curse*” in the Bible means *trifling, easing of a burden, lighten, abated, etc.* rather than some evil oppression from the devil). Most of us enjoy an occasional snack of “*junk food*” because junk food has a feel-good factor—it is “*comfort-food*”. But if we continually snack on comfort foods, we are likely to become unhealthy and then we are vulnerable to diseases! It is the same with our spiritual food—individual verses of Scripture are easy to ponder over and they have a *feel-good* factor—they are spiritual “*comfort-foods*”! But if we only snack on God’s Word, we are vulnerable to all sorts of “*spiritual diseases*” such as doubt, unbelief, moaning, complaining, bitterness, hate, etc. Our spiritual diet should be more than reading an occasional individual verse but a serious study of Scripture that gives us the whole counsel of God. *For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.*^{Acts.20:27} *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} Don’t just read a Bible verse—read the whole chapter!

In our Psalm this morning, we read: **I will listen to what God the LORD will say.** In Revelations, Jesus ends each of His 7 letters with: “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*” And this instruction to listen to the Holy Spirit is linked with overcoming: *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.2:7} If we are to overcome—to be spiritually mature and rise above our circumstance—we must listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. We are God’s children and we have a spiritual heritage that lifts us above the world’s standard of basic living and of just getting by—we are a **more-than** people, who carry God’s glory: *Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honour at God’s right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.*^{Col.3:1-4} *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.*^{Is.60:1} God awakens us each morning with a reminder to listen to Him so that we can be sustained and then we can sustain others: *The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.*^{Is.50:4} *God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.*^{2Cor.1:3-4}

We also read that **God promises peace to His people, His saints—but let them not return to folly.** Unstable people regularly lose their balance and fall—often with painful results. Being mature will keep us stable and balanced and if we are right with God, He will keep us from falling: *If the LORD is pleased with the way a man lives, he makes his steps secure. Even if the man trips, he won’t fall. The LORD’s hand takes good care of him.*^{Ps.37:23-24} Being born-again involves both repentance and conversion—repentance literally means to change our mind; conversion literally means to turn around and go the other way. So when we were born-again, we changed our mind about God, about sin and about ourselves and we turned around from living for ourselves and our gratification to living for God and His glory. *Every wrong thing we do is sin... We know that God’s children do not make a practice of sinning, for God’s Son holds them securely, and the evil one cannot touch them.*^{1Jn.5:17-18} Jesus was God’s Son as well as Mary’s son and so He was the very best Teacher and only taught the truth. If we accept anything that Jesus rejected, not only are we deceived but we reject Jesus’ authority and make Him out to be a liar. *All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they had been baptized [by John]. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized [by John].*^{Lk.7:29-30} *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.*^{Jn.3:36} *He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who*

rejects me rejects him who sent me.^{Jn.10:16} So, if anyone promotes teachings that are contrary to Jesus' clear teaching, we should reject both the teacher and their teaching: *For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.*^{1Thess.4:7-8} Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.^{1Tim.1:18-19} There are many believers, especially converts from Judaism, who are rebellious. They speak nonsense and deceive people. They must be silenced because they are ruining whole families by teaching what they shouldn't teach. This is the shameful way they make money... For this reason, sharply correct believers so that they continue to have faith that is alive and well. They shouldn't pay attention to Jewish myths or commands given by people who are always rejecting the truth. Everything is clean to those who are clean. But nothing is clean to corrupt unbelievers. Indeed, their minds and their consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but they deny him by what they do. They are detestable, disobedient, and unfit to do anything good.^{Ti.1:10-16} God is the God of Peace: *The God of peace be with you all. Amen.*^{Rom.15:3} For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.^{1Cor.14:33} And 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.6:9} True peace only comes through knowing both God and Jesus Christ, and also from loving God's Word: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2} Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.^{Psa.119:165} Although God does promise us peace, we must not return to our folly. Folly is the behaviour of a fool and in the Bible, a fool is some who ignores God: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."*^{Psa.14:1} *A fool finds pleasure in wicked schemes.*^{Prov.10:23} *But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.*^{Lk.12:20-21}

Runners, run; walkers, walk, swimmers, swim—and Believers, believe! Let's continue to live as Believers by believing God as we consciously place our trust in Him in every situation. It doesn't take any faith to thank God after we have come through a difficult time—although most people don't even do that! But it takes a **mature Believer** to thank God whilst we are still in the midst of trouble—which is why we need both the Scriptures and the saints to encourage us: *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.15:4-6} Let's grow up in the faith as we stay balanced by learning all we can about the whole counsel of God from His Word. Then we will enjoy His peace—regardless of our circumstances. And remember, Jesus is the Prince of Peace and He is our Saviour.

Questions

Name some of the divine promises in Scripture.

Name some of the divine possibilities or potential in Scripture.

Name some of the divine warnings in Scripture.

Maturity involves being balanced—having an understanding of all of God's counsel (will). There is no short-cut to maturity and Church leaders are called "Elders" not because of their age but because of their experience.

What are some of the characteristics of spiritual maturity?

What are some of the characteristics of spiritual immaturity?

June

Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in Him. Psalm 32:10

Sunday 7th June (on Zoom). Ps.86:1-5

What makes you happy?

Bring joy to your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you. ^{Ps.86:4-5}

Last week I talked about “*comfort-foods*” that give a feel-good factor. Cakes have been advertised to entice us to try them—and even if they aren’t very healthy for us, they are supposed to make us happy: “*A cake so yummy, it will fill your tummy.*” “*A little bliss in every bite.*” “*A slice of heaven.*” “*Making your life sweeter one bite at a time!*” “*Everyone is happy with a cupcake in their hand.*” “*Stressed is Desserts Spelled Backwards.*”

John Denver wrote (and sang):

Sunshine on my shoulders makes me happy; Sunshine in my eyes can make me cry.

Sunshine on the water looks so lovely; Sunshine almost always makes me high.

If I had a day that I could give you I'd give to you the day just like today.

If I had a song that I could sing for you; I'd sing a song to make you feel this way.

Gene Kelly wrote (and sang):

I'm singin' in the rain; Just singin' in the rain. What a glorious feeling I'm happy again.

I'm laughin' at clouds, So dark up above; The sun's in my heart And I'm ready for love.

Let the stormy clouds chase Everyone from the place. Come on with the rain.

I've a smile on my face I'll walk down the lane; With a happy refrain Just singin', Singin' in the rain.

Happiness is defined as causing joy or gladness and although sponge-cakes, sunshine and showers can help us **feel** happy, they are all external factors and cannot really change us on the inside—in our soul. To be happy inside, our soul needs to be comforted and only God can truly comfort our soul: *God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.* ^{2Cor.1:3-4} God the Holy Spirit is a Comforter and He brings us comfort: *Unless I go away, the Counsellor [or Comforter] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.* ^{Jn.16:7} But the Holy Spirit is also a Convicter and He brings conviction: *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.16:8-11} Until our sin has been exchanged for Jesus’ Righteousness we remain under God’s condemnation. *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.* ^{Jn.3:18} But when we are made right with God, we have peace and joy because all three—righteousness, peace and joy—are integral to the Kingdom of God: *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.* ^{Rom.14:17-18} *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* ^{Rom.15:13}

So, we can only receive comfort from God if we are at peace with God and we can only be at peace with God if we know God the Father AND Jesus Christ: *Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.* ^{2Pet.1:2} And when we know God the Father and Jesus Christ, we have eternal life: *Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.* ^{Jn.17:3} And through our trust in God (which is what faith is) our souls are saved: *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 goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* ^{1Pet.1:8-9}

When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word, what a glory He sheds on our way!

While we do His good will, He abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies, but His smile quickly drives it away;

Not a doubt or a fear, not a sigh or a tear, can abide while we trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Not a burden we bear, not a sorrow we share, but our toil He does richly repay;

Not a grief or a loss, not a frown or a cross, but is blessed if we trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

But we never can prove the delights of His love until all on the altar we lay;

For the favour He shows, for the joy He bestows, are for them who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at His feet or we'll walk by His side in the way.

What He says we will do, where He sends we will go; never fear, only trust and obey.

Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

God's blessings never bring any trouble: *The blessing of the LORD makes a person rich and he adds no sorrow with it.*^{Prov.10:22} So to be blessed is to be truly happy: *Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them! Happy are those who mourn; God will comfort them! Happy are those who are humble; they will receive what God has promised! Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires; God will satisfy them fully! Happy are those who are merciful to others; God will be merciful to them! Happy are the pure in heart; they will see God! Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children! Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them! Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted.*^{Matt.5:3-12 GNB}

When we believe God, He counts us righteous—which is the greatest blessing we can ever receive: *David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."*^{Rom.4:6-8} God calls us "saints" because we are made right with Him and we dedicated to His service—and so we are already blessed beyond measure: *To the saints in [Deal] the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*^{Eph.1:3} Wisdom is the **application** of knowledge and to know that we are blessed is good but to act on that knowledge is wisdom: *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} And if we are to enjoy God's blessings and be truly happy, we must act on what we believe and be able to set our hearts at rest: *This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*^{1Jn.3:19-20}

We set our hearts at rest by delighting ourselves in God and His salvation: *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 righteousness.*^{Is.61:10} *Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD and delight in his salvation.*^{Ps.35:9} *Be happy with the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Entrust your ways to the LORD. Trust him, and he will act on your behalf. He will make your righteousness shine like a light, your just cause like the noonday sun.*^{Ps.37:4-6} Like David, we settle our hearts by finding strength in God—even in the most distressing of times: *David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God.*^{1Sam.30:6}

An important part of the Church's ministry is to help others to be settled, strong and secure in their faith. So once we have settled our hearts in God, we can then encourage others settle their

hearts and find strength in God: *Jonathan went to David... and helped him find strength in God.*^{1Sam.23:16} We can help others settle their hearts by sharing the Living Word (Jesus) through our testimony—which is our story of our relationship with God. We can share what God has done for us with enthusiasm because what God has done for us, He can do for others:

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.

Our testimony will interest people enough for them to want to know the reason for our story—which is 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.*^{1n.4:42} And it is the Gospel that 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} Gospel means “good news” and the gospel saves because it is the Good News about Jesus Christ. And faith comes when the message of Jesus Christ is heard: *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}

As we share our faith (what we believe about Jesus Christ), we will see God's Kingdom grow in others—numerically because sinners are being saved—and in us—because we will have a better understanding of the good things we have in Christ (which is maturity): *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}

Happiness doesn't come from sponge-cakes, sunshine or showers but from the Saviour who has saved us. So, **let's lift up our soul to Him because He is forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to Him.**^{Ps.86:4-5}

Questions

Is there a difference between happy, joyful and blessed?

How is Jesus is our Example

Find Bible references of Jesus being blessed, joyful and full of grace and truth

Find Bible references of Jesus being hungry, tired, heavy hearted, sad, grieved.

Can we still be hungry, tired, heavy hearted, sad and grieved at the same time as being blessed joyful and full of grace and truth?

Is there a difference between being hungry, tired, heavy hearted, sad, grieved and being dominated by hunger, tiredness, heavy heartedness, sadness, grief?

How can we overcome doubts, fears, emotions, temptations or the world's influence?

(see *Rev.12:7-12; 1Jn.4:4; 1Jn.5:1-5; Heb.2:14-18*)

In Revelation 2-3, what 7 things does God promise to those who overcome?

Sunday 14th June (on Zoom). Ps.86:6-12

Give me an undivided heart. *Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear Your name. I will praise You, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify Your Name forever.*^{Ps.86:11-12}

We are a *spirit-soul-body* being not just a *spirit* being that has a *personality* and *body*—we are the sum of **spirit, soul and body**. **It is the physical and the non-physical components in a person that combine together to form the integrated unity of a human being.** *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{1Thess.5.23} When God created Adam, He breathed His life into him and Adam was became a **living being** that was distinct from the rest of Creation: *the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being [soul].*^{Gen.2:7} Although Adam was made in God's image, he was still a man not a god—a creation, not the Creator. We are not divine—we are Christians and

followers of Christ not “*little Christs*” and **we possess no supernatural or superhuman powers of ourself**. Any notion that we have inherent supernatural or god-like powers is un-Biblical and a heresy that will expose us to the influence of deceiving spirits. The Bible teaches that we all need God’s supernatural help and that we cannot rely on any inherent powers latent within ourself—even after conversion. We are made for God’s glory and we are totally dependent upon Him. That means our proper role is found only in submission to God (which is totally contrary to the idea that man has infinite potential within his own personality).

However, when a person becomes a Christian, God does take up residence within them—in the Person of the Holy Spirit and He **empowers** them to live for God. And because God resides within every Christian, we never have to face life alone—or death! *The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel—which means, “God with us.”*^{1Matt.1:23} *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*^{1Jn.14:16-18} *God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”*^{1Heb.13:5-6}

At conversion, God brought us into His New Covenant, and wrote His laws on our heart: *This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*^{1Heb.8:10-12}

The word “*heart*” in the Bible can mean either “*spirit*” or “*soul*”—but there is a real distinction between spirit and soul. *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*^{1Heb.4:12-13}

Our spirit is the God-conscious part of us—which God imparted to Adam when He breathed His Spirit into him: *the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*^{1Gen.2:7} God gave Adam (not animals) personal instructions about accountability because only humans have a spirit (a consciousness of God). *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”*^{1Gen.2:15-17} God dwells in a Christian’s spirit (which makes our body God’s Temple) which is why **God’s will** is in **our spirit** (although **our will** is in **our soul**).

Our soul (*psyche*) is our personality which includes our will, emotions and intellect. Praise and thanksgiving are decisions of **our will** in **our soul**: *Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits...*^{1Ps.103:1-2} Praise and thanksgiving releases God’s will—and not giving praise or thanksgiving quenches God’s will: *Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit.*^{1Thes.5:16-19} Animals have souls (they have personalities with a will, emotions and desires) but they have no spirit and so they have no morality and no sense of what is right or wrong—indeed, there is no right or wrong for animals! When people live from their soul and ignore God and His instructions, they are behaving like animals, not humans. *These false teachers insult what they don’t understand. They are like animals, which are creatures of instinct that are born to be caught and killed. So they will be destroyed like animals and lose what their wrongdoing earned them. These false teachers are stains and blemishes. They take pleasure in holding wild parties in broad daylight. They especially enjoy deceiving you while they eat with you. They’re always looking for an adulterous woman. They*

can't stop looking for sin as they seduce people who aren't sure of what they believe. Their minds are focused on their greed. They are cursed. ^{Jude.12-14}

Jesus set a high moral standard for His followers: *You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'Never murder. Whoever murders will answer for it in court.' But I can guarantee that whoever is angry with another believer will answer for it in court. Whoever calls another believer an insulting name will answer for it in the highest court. Whoever calls another believer a fool will answer for it in hellfire... You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But here is what I tell you. Do not even look at a woman in the wrong way. Anyone who does has already committed adultery with her in his heart... You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour. Hate your enemy.' But here is what I tell you. Love your enemies. Pray for those who hurt you. Then you will be sons of your Father who is in heaven.* ^{Mat.5:21-45} However, some Christians still live like “ordinary” human beings (or worse, like animals) instead of the “extra-ordinary” human beings they are—people who are redeemed by the Blood of Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit: *Brothers and sisters, I couldn't speak to you as if you were guided by the Holy Spirit. I had to speak to you as if you were following the ways of the world. You aren't growing as Christ wants you to. You are still like babies. The words I spoke to you were like milk, not like solid food. You weren't ready for solid food yet. And you still aren't ready for it. You are still following the ways of the world. Some of you are jealous. Some of you argue. So aren't you following the ways of the world? Aren't you acting like ordinary human beings? One of you says, "I follow Paul." Another says, "I follow Apollos." Aren't you acting like ordinary human beings?* ^{1Cor.3:1-4}

People under the Old Covenant were not “born-again” and so they did not have the new, undivided heart that the Prophets had spoken of. That is why Nichodemus, a religious teacher, didn't understand what Jesus meant by being “born-again”: *“What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can see God's kingdom without being born again.”* *“How can I be born when I am old?”* Nicodemus asked. *“I can't go back inside my mother! I can't be born a second time!”* 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.3:3-7} David longed for a “new heart”: *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.* ^{Psa.51:10-12} Isaiah foresaw the time of when Jesus would give people an undivided heart: *But the people couldn't believe, for as Isaiah also said, "The Lord has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts—so that their eyes cannot see and their hearts cannot understand and they cannot turn to me and have me heal them." Isaiah was referring to Jesus when he said this, because he saw the future and spoke of the Messiah's glory. Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn't admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue.* ^{Jn.12:39-42}

Ezekiel prophesied about the time when God would give His people an undivided heart: *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.* ^{Ezek.11:19-20} Jesus was the first human in which God actually dwelt and since then God dwells in every Christian. And so now, under the New Covenant, we are spiritually born-again into God's family and can now legitimately call God, “our Father”: *Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You didn't receive a spirit that makes you a slave to fear once again. Instead you received the Holy Spirit, who makes you God's child. By the Spirit's power we call God “Abba.” Abba means Father. The Spirit himself joins with our spirits. Together they give witness that we are God's children. As his children, we will receive all that he has for us. We will share what Christ receives. But we must share in his sufferings if we want to share in his glory.* ^{Rom.8:14-17} This new-birth under the New Covenant, gives us an undivided heart. We have been given a heart (spirit) that is like flesh (it is alive and responsive to God). Our old heart (spirit) that was like stone (i.e. cold and unresponsive) was replaced with the new undivided heart (spirit): *You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of*

our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.^{2Cor.3:2-3}

So let's take heed to the warnings in Scripture: *See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*^{Heb.3:12-13} *Stay away from lusts which tempt young people. Pursue what has God's approval. Pursue faith, love, and peace together with those who worship the Lord with a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments. You know they cause quarrels. A servant of the Lord must not quarrel. Instead, he must be kind to everyone. He must be a good teacher. He must be willing to suffer wrong. He must be gentle in correcting those who oppose the Good News. Maybe God will allow them to change the way they think and act and lead them to know the truth. Then they might come back to their senses and God will free them from the devil's snare so that they can do his will.*^{2Tim.21:22-26} And let's also take heed to Martin Luther's warning: *You think like a man instead of thinking like God. Your thoughts concerning God are too human!*" Then, by God's grace we will live as New Covenant Believers who have an undivided heart. And as we follow Jesus with a spirit of unity among ourselves, we will bring glory to God: *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. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{Rom.15:4-6}

Questions

In what ways do humans differ from animals?

Find some Bible references which show that praise and thanksgiving are decisions of our will.

What are the results of giving praise and thanks to God?

What are the results of not giving praise and thanks to God?

How do you define "undivided heart"? (c.f. *Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear Your name.*^{Ps.86:11} *I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them.*^{Ezek.11:19})

What does God write on our heart?

How can we maintain an undivided devotion to the Lord?

Sunday 21st June (on Zoom). Ps.86:6-12

Give me a sign of Your goodness

Give me a sign of your goodness, that my enemies may see it and be put to shame, for you, O LORD, have helped me and comforted me.^{Ps.86:17}

At the daily N° 10 Downing Street Covid-19 briefings, we are regularly told that the advice we are given is based on science and evidence. It is obvious that we need to base any important decision on the best evidence available and when that evidence is limited, we should look for some clues or signs to help us make an appropriate choice. And the same is true when it comes to spiritual matters—we should look for evidence, or at least some clear signs to point us in the right direction, about our relationship with God and our eternal destiny. And God has already given us a clear sign—Jesus: *Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "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} *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}

When people wanted evidence of Jesus' authority, He said that the only evidence or sign they would be given was Jonah: *One day some teachers of religious law and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority." He responded, "The people of an evil and unfaithful era look for a miraculous sign. But the only sign they will get is the sign of the prophet Jonah.*

Just as Jonah was in the belly of a huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. The men of Nineveh will stand up with you at the time of judgment and will condemn you, because they turned to God and changed the way they thought and acted when Jonah spoke his message. But look, someone greater than Jonah is here!¹*Mat.12:38-41* Jonah, was from Gath Hopher, a small town 3 miles NE of Nazareth in Galilee. When Jonah preached to Israel's enemies in Nineveh, they repented and so God did not destroy them in judgement even though they were exceptionally barbaric. *When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*²*Jon.3:10* Because Jonah saved the people in Nineveh from judgement, the Jews more or less discounted him as a prophet and used this as an excuse for not accepting Jesus as the Christ: *They replied [to Jesus], "Are you from Galilee, too? Search the Scriptures and see for yourself—no prophet ever comes from Galilee!"*³*Jn.7:52* The sign of Jonah was that Jesus would be dead in the grave for 3 days just as Jonah was dead in the fish for 3 days. *Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.*⁴*Jn.2:18-22* However, unlike Jonah, Jesus did not run away from doing God's will. Instead, Jesus **delighted** in obeying God: *Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "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, O God.'*⁵*1*⁵*Heb.10:5-7* This quote is from the Psalms: *Then I said, "Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. **I delight to do Your will, O my God and Your law is within my heart.**"*⁶*Ps.40:7-8*

People are still seeking signs about spiritual matters—about their eternal destiny and our relationship with God. And God's answer is still the same—**Jesus Christ**: *This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.*⁷*Jn.2:11* *Men of Israel, listen to what I say: Jesus from Nazareth was a man whom God brought to your attention. You know that through this man God worked miracles, did amazing things, and gave signs.*⁸*Acts.2:22* *This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*⁹*1*⁹*Heb.2:3-4* *A feeling of fear came over everyone as many amazing things and miraculous signs happened through the apostles.*¹⁰*Acts.2:23* But to the doubter and unbeliever, no proof of God is ever enough: *Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.*¹¹*Jn.12:37*

Miracles, signs and wonders were an important part of Jesus' ministry because miracles are signs to make you wonder! A true miracle is when God does something that we cannot do ourselves—and God specialises in miracles: *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*¹²*Ps.77:14* *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*¹³*Jn.21:30-31* But signs and wonders cannot save us—**it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that saves those who believe**: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes... For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.*¹⁴*Rom.1:16-17* *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.*¹⁵*2*¹⁵*Tim.2:8* *For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*¹⁶*1*¹⁶*Cor.1:21-25* Signs and wonders confirm what If people don't believe God's Word, a miracle will rarely make them change their minds. *"Abraham replied, 'They have*

Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" ^{Lk.16:29-31} Gideon was told by an Angel that he would save Israel: *The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"* ^{Judg.6:14} But Gideon's response was to ask for a sign: *Gideon replied, "If now I have found favour in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me."* ^{Judg.6:17} When fire appeared and burnt up the food, Gideon realised that it was an Angel from God who had spoken to him: *Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared. When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"* ^{Judg.6:21-22} However, when it came to actually doing what God said, Gideon still wanted another sign—and then another sign! *Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." ... Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece."* ^{Judg.6:36-39} However, Gideon believed an unbeliever's dream! *Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. "I had a dream," he was saying. "A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed." His friend responded, "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon... God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands." When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped God. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands."* ^{Judg.7:13-15} And even today some people are more likely to believe a dream from an unbeliever than to believe what God has already spoken clearly in His Word!

To take God at His Word is maturity. Maturity has a quiet confidence in God that is based on a trust in God that has been proven by experience—not on a sign or a dream or a "prophecy" (even if they come from a Believer): *But godliness with contentment is great gain.* ^{1Tim.6:6} *For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.* ^{Phil.4:11-12} *In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.* ^{Is.30:15} Mature Christians not only have a quiet confidence in God but also have the ability to impart that confidence to others as well: *A church leader is trusted with God's work. That's why he must be without blame. He must not look after only his own interests. He must not get angry easily. He must not get drunk. He must not push people around. He must not try to get money by cheating people. Instead, he must welcome people into his home. He must love what is good. He must control his mind and feelings. He must do what is right. He must be holy. He must control what his body longs for. The message as it has been taught can be trusted. He must hold firmly to it. Then he will be able to use true teaching to comfort others and build them up. He will be able to prove that people who oppose it are wrong.* ^{Tit.1:7-9} Maturity allows us to put God's Kingdom first and then confidently trusting God to take care of our own situation: *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. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.* ^{Matt.6:31-34} Maturity and being Bible-literate go hand-in-hand and our maturity is seen when we add godly values to our faith: *For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, 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.* ^{2Pet.1:5-8}

David prayed: *Give me a sign of your goodness, that my enemies may see it and be put to shame, for you, O LORD, have helped me and comforted me.* ^{Ps.86:17} And God answered that prayer in Jesus Christ—it is through Jesus Christ that God has helped us and comforted us. So let's continue to point others

to Jesus so they too can be helped and comforted by Him: *We are servants of Christ, not his masters. We are guides into God's most sublime secrets, not security guards posted to protect them.*^{1Cor.4:1}

Questions

1. What Biblical evidence is there for God and His plan of salvation?
2. What evidence is there outside of the Bible for God?
3. How can we discern what is a genuine and/or relevant evidence about spiritual matters?
4. What does the Bible say about miracles, signs and wonders?
5. What does the Bible say about maturity?
6. What could you do to develop further in your Christian faith (develop your maturity)?

Sunday 28th June 10.30am on Zoom. Ps.87

This Sunday we have Ian Aldersley from Chesterfield speaking so I have adapted this article by Andrew Corbett.

Questioning God or Questions to God?

Why God? How God? Where are You God? When will this end God?

The account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead has many parallels with today, especially the questions surrounding Covid-19. We can well imagine what Martha and Mary of Bethany must have been experiencing especially after the tragic death of their brother, Lazarus, and the apparent indifference of Jesus to their plight. *So, when He heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was. Now when Jesus came, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.*^{Jn.11:16-17} Their questions may well have included some that many are asking today- "Why did God let this happen?" "Why didn't Jesus prevent this?" "Why didn't God answer my prayers?" "Doesn't God love us anymore?" "Why is Jesus taking so long to respond to our cries for help?"

Confusing Times: The questions that Martha and Mary of Bethany asked during their grief over the loss of their brother are questions that many of the psalmists asked as well, especially when God also seemed to them to be indifferent to their predicament and silent during their time of distress. *To you, O LORD, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit.*^{Ps.28:1} *Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*^{Ps.10:1}

Confusing Theological Questions: Before Jesus arrived at the home of Martha and Mary of Bethany, He was met by Martha who had what might be understood as angry questions for Christ. These questions sounded like "Where have You been!?" (Hurting and grieving people nearly always experience an anger that is often directed at God.) *And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met Him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."*^{Jn.11:19-21} Professor John Lennox, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University, has been one of the first Christian apologists to respond to how Christians should think about COVID-19 in his book *Where Is God In A Coronavirus World?* He refers to this episode in John 11 with Jesus meeting Martha as He approached their home in Bethany. Martha, Professor Lennox argues, seems to switch her line of questioning to a very intellectual level (as if she was almost embarrassed that she had shown any emotion to Christ). Sometimes people who raise intellectual objections about God are simply putting up a smoke-screen to hide their emotional ache. *Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."*^{Jn.11:23-27} But when Mary of Bethany comes to Jesus, she is distraught and

wearing her emotions on her sleeve. *Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in His spirit and greatly troubled.*^{Jn.11:32-33} Christ's response to Mary of Bethany was quite different to His theological response to her sister, but no less appropriate, Professor Lennox points out. Mary came weeping, and Christ's response to her was tender. *And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.*^{Jn.11:34-35} Jesus ministered to Martha's intellectual questions with profound theology. In a reflective moment, it's worth considering the enormous implications of what Jesus said to her about the eternal state and destiny of all who put their trust in Christ as their Redeemer. No matter what intellectual questions or objections people might proffer against God's goodness, there is always an intellectually and theologically satisfying response to be found in God's Word. And Jesus ministered to Mary's emotional questions (notice how similar sounding hers was to her sister's) in a way that shows some questions don't need answers—they need a hug and someone to weep with them. But Jesus did more than answer Martha and weep with Mary of Bethany. He did something.

Tragedies come to pass but Eternity is here to stay: What Jesus did for Martha and Mary of Bethany (and for Lazarus) was a foreshadow of what He will do for all who put their trust in Him as their Saviour. F.W. Boreham writes that Jesus wept outside of the tomb of Lazarus—not just because He was deeply moved by Mary's tears, but because of what He was about to do to Lazarus! (Jesus knew where Lazarus really was while everyone else thought he was a corpse in a tomb.) This reveals a profoundly different perspective on suffering and even death. For those who turn from their own self-reliance to trusting in the only offer available to enter into eternal life, what was said of Lazarus to Martha is also true for them— *"Your brother will rise again."*^{Jn.11:23} As this coronavirus kills thousands everyday around the world, we may well be asking God - *"Why?"* or, *"How did You let this happen?"* or, *"What have we done to deserve this?"* or, *"Where are You God?"* or, *"When will this end?"* But perhaps a better question is *"What would you have me do to help others in this trying time Lord?"* This pandemic is not the first one the world had endured, and it probably won't be the last one either. It's natural though that we and those around us ask these why/how/when/where questions of God during such times. But as we draw strength and insight from God's Word we are reminded that the things of this life are just *"momentary light afflictions"* and our ultimate destiny is to receive a body that will never perish or wear-out which will be perfectly fit for a dimension where time will always be today. *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*^{Rev.21:4}

About two weeks after Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, He suffered a horrible and humiliating treatment by the authorities which led to His execution, and then He was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit.^{Rom.1:4} But, unlike Lazarus, Christ's resurrection was a lasting one and the *"firstfruits"* of all who trust in Him.^{Col.1:18} Therefore, as the Apostle Paul told the Thessalonians about the resurrection that awaits all believers, *"Comfort one another with these words"*^{1Thess.4:18} This is why those who are called to heal — doctors, nurses, specialists, paramedics — are ministering the grace of God in a long line and tradition of how those who have been inspired by Christ. As with previous pandemics, this current pandemic is yet another example of how Christ calls His followers to minister to the hurting, confused, suffering, and dying. The next time you see a nurse, a doctor, a surgeon, or a paramedic—thank God for them!

Jesus is our healer, so we too should tend the sick. Bodily health is important because this body is important and so everywhere the Gospel has gone it has brought hospitals. *"Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come."* This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it. This is why we work hard and continue to struggle, for our

hope is in the living God, who is the Saviour of all people and particularly of all believers.^{1Tim.4:8-10} But our bodily life in this world is not of ultimate importance—our spiritual life is. *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*^{Mat.10:28-31} Our body is not an appendage but an integral part of us and after we die, we will receive a new body—a body without sin or sickness to affect us. Until then we have an obligation to care for our whole person—spirit, soul and body: *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*^{1Thess.5:23} Questions about life's dis-ease, discomfort and uncertainty remain unanswered, but role is to proclaim Jesus Christ and the hope He offers mankind. *I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.*^{2Tim.1:12} George Canty wrote: *My early ministry consisted largely of the whys and wherefores of suffering. Library shelves are full of volumes philosophising on the subject. With a shock, long ago, I saw my intellectualised concerns about the sick had little relevance and anyway the problem was beyond my poor brains. Jesus said "heal the sick!" It never entered my head to ask "Why?" Debating evil has little to do with faith, except knock it flat. We are ministers, not philosophers. Our calling is compassion, prayer, faith and the Word. Our terms, full Gospel or 'Foursquare' meant the proclamation of Jesus as Saviour, Baptiser, King and Healer. (from: "I was just thinking" available from our website).*

Questions:

- 1. Find some of the questions that people in the Bible asked God?**
- 2. What is the difference between asking God a question and questioning God?**
- 3. Do you think it is a lack of faith to ask God questions?**
- 4. How will God answer your questions?**
- 5. How can we remain faithful—both faithful (reliable) and faithful (full of faith)?**
- 6. Have you asked God this question: *What would you have me do to help others in this trying time Lord?*"**

July

O Sovereign LORD, You are God! Your words are trustworthy, and You have promised these good things to Your servant. 2Sam.7:28

Sunday 5th July. Ps.67 We are back at Mill Hill!

Hymn: I will be there

To be like Jesus: *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face shine upon us, Selah.*^{Ps.87:17} Our “theme-song” during lock-down has been “Let us bless one another” which is taken from the Priestly Blessing in the Book of Numbers: *The LORD said to Moses: 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.6:22-27} Priests under the Old Covenant had to come from the tribe of Levi—and not even Jesus had those credentials: *So if the priesthood of Levi, on which the law was based, could have achieved the perfection God intended, why did God need to establish a different priesthood, with a priest in the order of Melchizedek instead of the order of Levi and Aaron? And if the priesthood is changed, the law must also be changed to permit it. For the priest we are talking about belongs to a different tribe, whose members have never served at the altar as priests. What I mean is, our Lord came from the tribe of Judah, and Moses never mentioned priests coming from that tribe. This change has been made very clear since a different priest, who is like Melchizedek, has appeared. Jesus became a priest, not by meeting the physical requirement of belonging to the tribe of Levi, but by the power of a life that cannot be destroyed.*^{Heb.7:11-16} But now, both the Covenant and priesthood has changed and now, in of Jesus, all Believers are priests: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called 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} It is only those who are purchased by Jesus’ blood and freed from their sins (i.e. those who have received the benefits of His death and resurrection) who are saints and priests in God’s Kingdom: *To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*^{Rev.1:5-6} *And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’*^{Rev.5:8-10} Our conversion is the “first resurrection”. We were dead in our sins: *You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.*^{Col.2:13} But Jesus spoke to us and we became spiritually alive. *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, 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. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.*^{Jn.5:24-27} We identified with Jesus’ death and resurrection and now we are spiritually alive: *We died with Christ. So we believe that we will also live with him... consider yourselves to be dead as far as sin is concerned. Now that you believe in Christ Jesus, consider yourselves to be alive as far as God is concerned.*^{Rom.6:8-11} So, unless we have been born-again we cannot be a priest under the New Covenant: *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 for a thousand years.*^{Rev.20:6}

[The “second resurrection” is the final resurrection when people will come out of their physical graves. At this great Judgment, the deeds of all will be exposed—people will either be acquitted and enjoy eternal life or be found guilty and suffer eternal punishment: *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 good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.^{Jn.5:28-29]}

Under the Old Covenant the priests were to bless the people by being like God and showing them what God was like—and under the New Covenant we, the New Covenant priests, are also to bless people by being like God and showing them what God is like. We call this “*evangelism*”! Of course, there is more to the Christian life than just being blessed—but being blessed is fundamental to our relationship with God and we should never forget this: *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. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 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.*^{Eph.1:3-8} God blessed Abraham in order that he might be a blessing to others: *The LORD had said to Abram... ‘I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.’*^{Gen.12:1-2} And because Abraham is our spiritual father in the faith, God’s promises to Abraham also apply to his children: *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness... 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 [who believe]. That is what the Scriptures mean when God told him, ‘I have made you the father of many nations.’*^{Rom.4:3-17}

In order to be like God and show people what God is like, we must become like Jesus. Obviously, we don’t become like Jesus physically, but we must have the same attitude as Jesus and behave like Him. *So then, as Christians, do you have any encouragement? Do you have any comfort from love? Do you have any spiritual relationships? Do you have any sympathy and compassion? Then fill me with joy by having the same attitude and the same love, living in harmony, and keeping one purpose in mind. Don't act out of selfish ambition or be conceited. Instead, humbly think of others as being better than yourselves. Don't be concerned only about your own interests, but also be concerned about the interests of others. Have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.*^{Phil.2:2-5} Our attitude and behaviour will change to be like Jesus as we contemplate, meditate, muse and think on His glory. This is not a religious ritual but a basic requirement for Christians—it is our ministry and the way we serve God: *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect [or contemplate] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.*^{2Cor.3:18-4:1}

The ministry of reflecting God’s glory and becoming like Jesus was God’s original plan for us: *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*^{Rom.8:28-30} We started to become like Jesus at conversion: *You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*^{Col.3:9-10} And this transformation continues after conversion through our knowledge of God. We are saved to serve, not to stagnate—and our service is our spiritual worship.

As we learn about God, we get to know Him better and as we get to know Him better, we serve Him better—it is as we grow in the knowledge of Jesus that we become more like Him: *But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*^{2Pet.3:18} *We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great*

endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.^{Col.1:9-12}

Our transformation—our becoming like Jesus—will continue until it is completed at the final resurrection: *The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man... Listen! I am telling you a mystery. We will not all die. But we will all be changed. That will happen in a flash, as quickly as you can wink an eye. It will happen when the last trumpet sounds. The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised to live forever. And we will be changed. Our natural bodies don't last forever. They must be dressed with what does last forever. What dies must be dressed with what does not die. In fact, that is going to happen. What does not last will be dressed with what lasts forever. What dies will be dressed with what does not die. Then what is written will come true. It says, "Death has been swallowed up. It has lost the battle."*^{1Cor.15:47-54}

Yes, God is gracious to us and He will continue to shine His face upon us until His work is completed at the Day of Jesus Christ: *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.1:4-6} Then, when we see Jesus face to face, we shall finally be truly like Him. *But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.*^{1Jn.3:2-3}

To be like Jesus, to be like Jesus! My desire—to be like Him!

All thro' life's journey from earth to glory; My desire—to be like Him.

To be like Jesus, to be like Jesus! How I long to be like Him!

So meek and lowly, so pure and holy; How I long to be like Him.

Questions

1. What are some of God's characteristics that are mentioned in the Bible?
2. What are some of Jesus' characteristics that are mentioned in the Bible?
3. Who could be a priest under the Old Covenant?
4. What was the role of a priest under the Old Covenant?
5. Who can be a priest under the New Covenant?
6. What is the role of a priest under the New Covenant?
7. What sacrifices do we bring to God under the New Covenant?
8. What does it mean to be blessed?
9. How can we bless others?

Sunday 12th July. Ps.87. Lk.12:1-34

Hymn: I have decided to follow Jesus

What do you think of yourself? Do you have—low self-esteem, haughty self-esteem, or godly self-esteem? *You are worth more than a sparrow.*^{Lk.12:7}

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a young man who pined away through love for his own image in a pool of water and was transformed into the flower that bears his name. This myth is a warning against vanity and self-love. Sometimes we get so caught up in our self, in our own little ego, that we lose sight of the bigger picture—and as a result, we pass over the beauty and bounty that is life. Paradoxically, by being too wrapped up in ourselves, we actually restrict our range of perception and action and so, in a sense, we kill ourselves—like so many ambitious people! In the fairy-tale *Snow White*, the evil queen asked “*Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?*” And when she discovered that she was no longer the fairest of all, the evil queen planned Snow White's demise. Of course her plans backfired on her, and, as in all fairy-tales, she got her just deserts but the good people “*lived happily ever after*”!!! Although we want to live longer, none of us

want to look like it! This story highlights the fact that beauty is not how we **look** but how we **live**. True beauty comes from our character not our skin and from our disposition not our dress: *What matters is not your outer appearance—the styling of your hair, the jewellery you wear, the cut of your clothes—but your inner disposition. Cultivate inner beauty, the gentle, gracious kind that God delights in. The holy women of old were beautiful before God that way.*^{1Pet.3:3-5}

Our self-worth is based on the opinion we have about ourselves. People who have a **low self-esteem** usually live down to their expectations, resulting in a poorer quality of life than they need to have. And people who have a **haughty self-esteem** usually live up to their expectations, resulting in an arrogance that also leads to poorer quality of life than they need to have. But people who have **godly self-esteem** usually live up to their expectations, resulting in a higher quality of life than the rest of the world.

When we realise what God thinks of us we dare not have low self-esteem or a haughty self-esteem. God loved us so much—He loved us collectively as part of the whole world so much that He gave His Son for us: *For **God so loved the world** that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*^{Jn.3:16} God loved us specifically as the redeemed Church so much that Christ gave Himself for us: ***Christ loved the church** and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*^{Eph.5:25-27} And God also loved us individually so much that Christ gave Himself for us: *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}

Yes, we are worth much more than sparrows! *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?*^{2Matt.6:26-27} And we are worth much more than sheep! *What if one of your sheep falls into a pit on the Sabbath? Won't you take hold of it and lift it out? A man is worth more than sheep!*^{1Matt.11:11-12} *Suppose a man has 100 sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the 99 sheep grazing in the pasture and look for the lost sheep until he finds it? When he finds it, he's happy. He puts that sheep on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says to them, 'Let's celebrate! I've found my lost sheep!' I can guarantee that there will be more happiness in heaven over one person who turns to God and changes the way he thinks and acts than over 99 people who already have turned to God and have his approval.*^{Lk.15:4-7}

When we became a Christian, our self-image should have changed because our outlook is now based on God's evaluation of us. We should not be introverted like the mythical Narcissus, nor arrogant like the evil queen in the fairy-tale because we are modelling ourselves on Jesus: *So then, as Christians, do you have any encouragement? Do you have any comfort from love? Do you have any spiritual relationships? Do you have any sympathy and compassion? Then fill me with joy by having the same attitude and the same love, living in harmony, and keeping one purpose in mind. Don't act out of selfish ambition or be conceited. Instead, humbly think of others as being better than yourselves. Don't be concerned only about your own interests, but also be concerned about the interests of others. Have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.*^{Phil.2:1-5} Our old way of looking at life (including our own personal life) should have gone for ever and we should now see things from God's point of view: *So from now on we don't think of anyone from a human point of view. If we did think of Christ from a human point of view, we don't anymore. Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation. The old way of living has disappeared. A new way of living has come into existence. God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with him through Christ, and has given us this ministry of restoring relationships.*^{2Cor.5:16-18} Because we are citizens of heaven, we make ourselves familiar with the values of God's Kingdom—and align our values to those values.

This re-alignment of our values is done through fellowshiping with God, His Word and His people—we call **this Church!** The work and function of the Church is to facilitate both public and private worship, prayer and Bible study—and those Believers who participate, grow in their

knowledge and understanding of God. *I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.*^{Phil.1:9-11}

Sadly, not everyone lives like this—but we are to be different. That is why we should be careful how we feed our souls: *Brothers and sisters, imitate me, and pay attention to those who live by the example we have given you. I have often told you, and now tell you with tears in my eyes, that many live as the enemies of the cross of Christ. In the end they will be destroyed. Their own emotions are their god, and they take pride in the shameful things they do. Their minds are set on worldly things. We, however, are citizens of heaven. We look forward to the Lord Jesus Christ coming from heaven as our Saviour. Through his power to bring everything under his authority, he will change our humble bodies and make them like his glorified body.*^{Phil.3:17-21}

God's Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom and so we need to use our spiritual resources to access its spiritual benefits. In the UK our currency is £ sterling but in God's Kingdom the currency is **FAITH!** If we are going to get anything in God's Kingdom, we need to trust God: *And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.*^{Heb.11:6} *Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me; eat what is good and let your soul delight itself in abundance.*^{Is.55:1-2}

Our attitude will determine our altitude! And our mindset will determine our attitude or outlook. Both poverty and prosperity are mindsets—poverty is not a lack of money and prosperity is not an abundance of money. *One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.*^{Prov.11:24-25} Poverty is a lack of contentment and prosperity is an abundance of contentment. *Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.*^{3Jn.2} Paul had learned to be content in every situation—whether he had lots or little: *I've learned to be content in whatever situation I'm in. I know how to live in poverty or prosperity. No matter what the situation, I've learned the secret of how to live when I'm full or when I'm hungry, when I have too much or when I have too little. I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.*^{Phil.4:11-13} Paul's contentment came, not from his status or situation but from his trust in God.

In fact, the things that people usually consider to be the essentials for happiness or contentment—things like social status and religious status—Paul counted as worthless: *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.*^{Phil.3:7-10}

Wisdom is applied knowledge and true wisdom is found 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} And this wisdom (applied knowledge of Jesus) makes us truly prosperous: *With me [wisdom] are riches and honour. With me are lasting wealth and success. My fruit is better than fine gold. My gifts are better than the finest silver. I walk in ways that are honest. I take paths that are right. I leave riches to those who love me. I give them more than they have room for.*^{Prov.8:18-21}

Katherine Kuhlmann used to say: “If you only knew”. And when we realise how much we are worth to God—that He gave His One and Only Son for our salvation—we will never belittle our redemption by having a **low self-esteem** or a **haughty self-esteem** but we will have a **godly self-esteem** because we know **we are worth more than a sparrow.**^{Lk.12:7}

Questions

1. How would you define beauty?
2. How did the OT women make themselves beautiful? (see 1Pet.3:1-6)
3. How does God describe us? (see Eccl.3:11)
4. With Jesus as our role model, what should our attitude be like? (see Phil.2:1-5)
5. How can we change our attitude?
6. What role does the Holy Spirit have in our change?
7. What role do we have in our change?
8. How can we protect ourselves from wrong influences?

Sunday 19th July. Ps.89:1-8 Lk.12:35-59

Hymn: What a Friend we have in Jesus

Be dressed and ready for service.^{Lk.12:35}

When Jesus said *Be dressed and ready for service*,^{Lk.12:35} He was preparing His Disciples for the imminent judgement that was coming on the Jews because of their rejection of Him, the Messiah—God’s Son and our Saviour. A more literal rendering is “*Let your loins stay girded and keep your lamps burning*” and although this idiom is culturally foreign to us, it wasn’t to the Jews. Jesus was linking His instruction to the first Passover when the Israelites were to be ready to leave Egypt at a moment’s notice: “*Eat the meat while your coat is tucked into your belt [with your loins girded^{KJV}]. Put your sandals on your feet. Take your walking stick in your hand. Eat the food quickly. It is the LORD’s Passover...*” *During the night, Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron. He said to them, “Get out of here! You and the Israelites, leave my people! Go. Worship the LORD, just as you have asked.*^{Ex.12:11;31} Just as the judgement on the Egyptians emancipated the people of God and turned them into the nation of Israel, so the judgement on the Jews would emancipate the people of God and turn them into the holy nation of the Church: “*Look! I am placing a stone in Zion. It is a chosen and very valuable stone. It is the most important stone in the building. The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.*” *The stone is very valuable to you who believe. But to people who do not believe, “The stone the builders did not accept has become the most important stone of all.” And, “It is a stone that causes people to trip. It is a rock that makes them fall.” They trip and fall because they do not obey the message. That is also what God planned for them. 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.2:6-10} The imminent judgement that Jesus was preparing His Disciples for, culminated in A.D.70 when the Romans, under Titus, destroyed both the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. The historian Josephus claims that over a million people were killed during the siege of Jerusalem, after which the Romans took the remaining 97,000 people as slaves. No wonder Jesus had warned His Disciples: *The prophet Daniel spoke about ‘the hated thing that destroys.’ Someday you will see it standing in the holy place. The reader should understand this. Then those who are in Judea should escape to the mountains. No one on the roof should go down into his house to take anything out. No one in the field should go back to get his coat. How awful it will be in those days for pregnant women! How awful for nursing mothers! Pray that you will not have to escape in winter or on the Sabbath day. There will be terrible suffering in those days. It will be worse than any other from the beginning of the world until now. And there will never be anything like it again.*^{Mat.25:15-21} Although that Judgement has come and gone, there is another Judgement that is yet to come and so we should be always ready. Jesus is coming to judge the world and we don’t know **when** He will come—only that He **will** come! *Enoch was the seventh man in the family line of Adam. He gave a prophecy about those people. He said, “Look! The Lord is coming with thousands and thousands of his holy ones. He is coming to judge everyone. He is coming to sentence all ungodly people. He will judge them for all the ungodly acts they have done. They have done them in ungodly ways. He will sentence ungodly sinners for all the defiant words they have said about him.”*^{Jude.14-15}

The context of Jesus' warning to "be dressed and ready for service" was the Kingdom of God: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*^{Lk.12:32} God is Spirit^{In.4:24} and God's Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom: *I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.*^{In.3:5} And so the principles of God's Kingdom are spiritual principles—that is, principles that conform to God's character. As citizens of God's Kingdom, we should live by those spiritual principles of God's kingdom, not by the natural principles of this world. We can't live by our own ability or power in God's Kingdom and expect that everything will turn out well. We have to live in fellowship with God through worship (obedience) and trust—we call this "faith". Living by faith means trusting God in every situation, not just for our eternal salvation but for our daily needs—including our emotional needs. *So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body.*^{Ecc.11:10} *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.4:6-7} *And don't be concerned about what to eat and what to drink. Don't worry about such things. These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers all over the world, but your Father already knows your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need. So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven! And the purses of heaven never get old or develop holes. Your treasure will be safe; no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.*^{Lk.12:29-34} This "living by faith" involves **consciously rejecting** the old way of thinking—of living by this world's standards—and **consciously receiving** the new way of thinking—of living by God's standards: *Because of the law, I died as far as the law is concerned. I died so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ. I don't live any longer. Christ lives in me. My faith in the Son of God helps me to live my life in my body. He loved me. He gave himself for me.*^{Gal.2:19-20} We can keep our attention focused on Jesus through worship, prayer and fellowship: *Let us keep looking to Jesus. He is the author of faith. He also makes it perfect.*^{Heb.12:2} *Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face; And the things of this world grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.* We reject the old way of thinking and the world's standards of hopelessness, of prejudice, of poverty, of sin, self-gratification, of an undisciplined life-style because we have seen something of the beauty of God's Kingdom—of hope, of true prosperity, of wholeness and holiness, of self-control. No wonder the Bible says: *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.*^{Rom.14:17-18} When we became a Christian, we were emancipated from our slavery to sin and became a slave to righteousness: *Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.*^{Rom.6:16-18} Being born-again means that we are now much more than just children of human parents—we are children of God! And God the Holy Spirit dwells within us to challenge, convict, counsel and comfort us. *You have finished with sin. You won't spend the rest of your lives chasing your own desires, but you will be anxious to do the will of God. You have had enough in the past of the evil things that godless people enjoy—their immorality and lust, their feasting and drunkenness and wild parties, and their terrible worship of idols. Of course, your former friends are surprised when you no longer plunge into the flood of wild and destructive things they do. So they slander you. But remember that they will have to face God, who stands ready to judge everyone, both the living and the dead. That is why the Good News was preached to those who are now dead—so although they were destined to die like all people, they now live forever with God in the Spirit.*^{1Pet.4:1-7} We are worth more than a sparrow and we must never belittle our redemption by letting circumstances dominate us. *I'm so glad that Jesus set me free... satan had me bound **but Jesus set me free**... sickness had me*

bound **but Jesus set me free**... *poverty had me bound but Jesus set me free*. We have decided to follow Jesus regardless of our circumstances, because we know that: *What we are suffering now is nothing compared with the glory that will be shown in us.*^{Rom.8:18} Jesus now dominates us, not circumstances, because Jesus is Lord!

So, if we are to “*be dressed and ready for service*”, what are we to wear? We are to wear the “*garments of salvation*”: *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, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*^{Is.60:10} This is another way of saying that our faith must be seen by the way we live and act—our faith may be personal but it is not private! And our faith is seen by our joy: *May your priests be clothed with your righteousness; may your faithful people sing for joy.*^{Ps.132:9} *Awake, awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength! Put on your garments of splendour, Jerusalem, the holy city.*^{Is.52:1} *Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.) Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” And he added, “These are the true words of God.”*^{Rev.19:6-9}

Once we are dressed, we are ready for service and we can represent God proudly, with honour and dignity as we wear the “*uniform*” of our salvation! Jesus, our Commander-in Chief, may come for an unannounced inspection at any time—or He may choose to call us into His “*office*”! However, if we are wearing a clean “*uniform*” of salvation and are doing what He has told us to do, we will be ready. *And I will continue to be glad. I know that you are praying for me. I also know that the Spirit of Jesus Christ will help me. So no matter what happens, I'm sure I will still be saved I completely expect and hope that I won't be ashamed in any way. I'm sure I will be brave enough. Now as always Christ will be lifted high through my body. He will be lifted up whether I live or die. For me, life finds all of its meaning in Christ. Death also has its benefits. Suppose I go on living in my body. Then I will be able to carry on my work. It will bear a lot of fruit. But what should I choose? I don't know. I can't decide between the two. I long to leave this world and be with Christ. That is better by far.*^{Phil.1:18-23} *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*^{1Thes.4:16-18}

A lady once asked John Wesley how he would spend the intervening time, if he knew he would die at midnight tomorrow. His reply: “*Why madam, just as I intend to spend it now. I would preach this evening at Gloucester, and again at five tomorrow morning; after that I would ride to Tewkesbury, preach in the afternoon, and meet the societies in the evening. I would then go to Rev. Martin's house, who expects to entertain me, talk and pray with the family as usual, retire to my room at 10 o'clock, commend myself to my heavenly Father, lie down to rest, and wake up in Glory.*” Wesley was then asked what he would do if he knew his Lord would return at that time the next day and he replied: “*I would go to bed and go to sleep; wake up in the morning, and go on with my work, for I would want Him to find me doing what he had appointed.*”

Yes, we must remain ready because: *the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*^{Lk.12:40} **Be dressed and ready for service!**

Questions

Be dressed and ready for service.^{Lk.12:35}

1. **Can you find anyone who wore “spiritual clothes” in the Bible?**
2. **What are the “spiritual clothes” that we are to wear now?**
3. **What clothes will people wear in heaven?**
4. **What is the “service” that we are to dress for?**

5. What does “living by faith” mean (see: Gal.2:20)

6. If God has forgiven all our sins, will God still judge us?

Mike Petzer’s book “The Miracle of Judgment” available from me or to download from our website under What we teach/Resources or use this link:

<http://www.dealpentecostal.co.uk/Miracle%20of%20Judgement.pdf>

Sunday 26th July. Ps.89:8-18 Lk.13.

Hymn: His eye is on the sparrow

A picture paints a thousand words! *Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.*^{Lk.13:24}

The fascinating and detailed picture of the **Broad and Narrow Way** was used to illustrate sermons given by Mr Kirkham (an Open-Air Mission Evangelist), in the 1880s. Upon hearing him preach, one commentator wrote: “*this curious picture which Mr Kirkeham hangs up to view ... forcefully aids the impression produced by what he speaks*”. The picture of Broad and Narrow Way, is an illustration of Jesus’ words: *Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*^{Matt.7:13-14} People gather in the foreground of the picture as they contemplate which path to take. The Broad Way leads to Hell and is flanked by a tavern, theatre and gambling house. The wide archway through which it is accessed points to the ease with which one can fall into bad habits. The Narrow Way on the right leads to Heaven, has far fewer travellers and they pass a church and Sunday School at the beginning of their journey. The eye of God presides over the whole scene: *For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous ... but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*^{1Pet.3:12} Each action in the picture is accompanied by one of nearly 100 Bible references; for example, the people drinking outside the theatre has this reference: *Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may follow intoxicating drink; who continue until night, till wine inflames them!*^{Is.5:11} The man beating his donkey: *A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.*^{Prov.12:10} The man carrying a heavy burden waiting by the Narrow Door of Salvation: *My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.*^{Ps.38:4} And this Picture paints a thousand words around our text for today: **Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.**^{Lk.13:24}

Although our Salvation is completely free, it is not cheap—we are made in God’s image and so only God can ransom us. *No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough.*^{Ps.49:7-8} Our Salvation cost Jesus His life—He not only suffered the trauma of His own physical death on the cross but He also suffered the pain of the punishment for our sins: *Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*^{Is.53:4-6} *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.*^{1Pet.2:24} But our Salvation will also cost us our life—we have to die to self if we are going to live for Christ: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*^{Gal.2:20} *Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*^{Matt.10:38-39}

The Gospel is simple, but it is also spiritual—and when our spiritual eyes are opened, we have a different perspective on life. We realise that there is more to life than possessions or even happiness and comfort. *Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many*

years. *Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.*” But God said to him, *‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.*^{Lk.12:15-21}

Jesus came to give us abundant life: *I have come so they can have life. I want them to have it in the fullest possible way.*^{Jn.10:10} But we still have to choose to live in God’s blessings. We choose whether we live by our soul or by our spirit: *For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.*^{Rom.8:13-14} *For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.*^{Rom.14:7-8} God works our salvation in us, but we have to work our own salvation out of us: *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 according to his good purpose.*^{Phil.2:12-13} Augustine said: *Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.* Mother Teresa said: *There is always the danger that we may just do the work for the sake of the work. This is where the respect and the love and the devotion come in—that we do it to God, to Christ, and that’s why we try to do it as beautifully as possible.*

That is why the Christian life is costly—but although it takes time and effort, it does not take sweat! Sweat and arduous toil is the result of Adam’s sin: *So I am putting a curse on the ground because of what you did. All the days of your life you will have to work hard to get food from the ground. You will eat the plants of the field, even though the ground produces thorns and thistles. You will have to work hard and sweat a lot to produce the food you eat. You were made out of the ground. And you will return to it. You are dust. So you will return to it.*^{Gen.3:17-19} But this curse has been removed through Jesus’ death on the cross: *Christ set us free from the curse of the law. He did it by becoming a curse for us. It is written, “Everyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse.”*^{Gal.3:13} When God made us in His image, He made us to live forever: *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.*^{Ecc.3:11} We will either live with Him for eternity, in perfect peace—or live without Him for eternity, in absolute torment: If we don’t take God and eternity into account, we are fools: *The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”*^{Ps.35:1} But the exchange of our own old life for our new life with God is a “no-brainer”! Because our Heavenly Father looks after us, we have a quality of life—and quantity of life (eternity)—that is so much more that the world can only dream of.

Why should I feel discouraged? And why should the shadows come?

Why should my heart feel lonely And long for heavenly home.

When Jesus is my portion? And my constant friend is He

You know, his eye is on the little sparrow And I know he cares for you and me

I sing because my soul is a happy, I sing because I'm free

For His eye, it is on the little sparrow, And I know He's watching over you and me

For us Christians, the future is bright—not because we are looking forward to a comfortable life here and now, but because we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where we will be with Jesus for ever: *But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.*^{2Pet.3:13-14} So let’s make every effort to enter the eternal Kingdom of Jesus Christ and live in a way that honours God—that is not only the best way to live but it is the blest way to live. *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*^{Heb.12:14-15} *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. Therefore, brothers and sisters, use more effort to make God's calling and choosing of you secure. If you keep doing this, you will never fall away. Then you will also be given the wealth of entering into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.^{2Pet.1:4-11} I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.^{Eph.4:1-6} Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.^{Rom.14:19}

Questions.

1. What Bible reference best summarises the value of a human life?
2. How was Jesus' death on the cross different from the other people who were crucified?
3. What changed spiritually to you when you became a Christian?
4. Have you changed in other ways since you became a Christian?
5. What is the difference between working hard and hard work (especially in our Christian life)?
6. How did Jesus refresh Himself when He was tired (c.f. Jn.4:31-38)?
7. What will refresh us when we are tired (c.f. Jn.6:21-40; Is.61)?
8. What is your favourite cameo from the Broad and Narrow Way Picture?
9. How could you use that illustration to explain the way of salvation?

August

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD Himself, is the Rock Eternal.^{Is.26:3-4}

Thought for the Month: 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.^{M.Luther}

Sunday 2nd August. Ps.89:8-18 Lk.13

Hymn: Abide with me

The Ministry of Excuses. *Please excuse me.*^{Lk.14:18}

Jesus' main emphasis during His ministry was **the Kingdom of God**. Even from a boy, Jesus understood that He *must be about His Father's business.*^{Lk.2:49} After Jesus was baptised, He began His ministry of preparing people to enter His Father's Kingdom—the Kingdom of Heaven: *From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*^{Mat.4:17} *Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*^{Jn.3:3} *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} Jesus is Lord—that means He is Sovereign, He is Leader: *Jesus became 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 confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*^{Phil.2:8-11} But although Jesus is Ruler by right, it is only when people willingly submit to His rule that they enter God's Kingdom and so God's Kingdom is probably best summarised as "*the rule of Christ within a Believer's heart*". When Jesus came to His own people (the Jews), most rejected Him—but not all! *He was in the world, and the world came into existence through him. Yet, the world didn't recognize him. He went to his own people, and his own people didn't accept him. However, he gave the right to become God's children to everyone who believed in him. These people didn't become God's children in a physical way—from a human impulse or from a husband's desire to have a child. They were born from God.*^{Jn.1:10-13} However, there is coming a time when God's Kingdom—Christ's Rule—will be universal and include even death itself: *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.15:24-26}

Someone said to Jesus: *Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.*^{Lk.14:15} In His reply Jesus told the parable of the Great Banquet, where those who were invited to the feast refused to come: *One of the people at the table, said to Jesus, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in God's kingdom." Jesus replied, "A certain man was preparing a big dinner. He invited many guests. Then the day of the dinner arrived. He sent his servant to those who had been invited. The servant told them, 'Come. Everything is ready now.' But they all had the same idea. They began to make excuses."*^{Lk.14:15-18} Their explanations for not attending were not reasons but excuses: *The first one said, 'I have just bought a field. I have to go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five pairs of oxen. I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'*^{Lk.14:18-20} And people are making the same excuses today—their legitimate concerns become cares that choke the spiritual life out of them: *The seed planted among thorn bushes is another person who hears the teaching of the word. But the worries of life and the deceitful pleasures of riches choke the message so the teaching does not produce fruit in that person's life.*^{Mat.13:22} In Jesus' story, it was those who were thought to be unworthy of God's Kingdom who were welcomed in—and there was still room for more! *The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry. He ordered his*

servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the town. Bring in those who are poor. Also bring those who can't walk, the blind and the disabled.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done. But there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads. Go out to the country lanes. Make the people come in. I want my house to be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my dinner.'^{Lk.14:21-24} And the same principle applies today: Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: 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?^{Gal.2:5} The blessings of God's Kingdom, is not for those who listen but for those who do: 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.1:25}

Moses was probably the master of the "ministry of excuses." When God told him to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, he gave 5 excuses for not obeying God: *And now Israel's cry for help has reached me. I have seen the way the Egyptians are beating them down. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh. I want you to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. They are my people.*^{Ex.3:9-10} Moses' first excuse was that he was not up to the task: *But Moses spoke to God. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" he said. "Who am I that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*^{Ex.3:11} God's response was that He would be with Moses: *God said, "I will be with you. I will give you a miraculous sign. It will prove that I have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, all of you will worship me on this mountain."*^{Ex.3:12} That promise still stands for us today: *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*^{Heb.13:5-6} Moses' next excuse was that he didn't know what to say: *Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the people of Israel. Suppose I say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Suppose they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what should I tell them?"*^{Ex.3:13} And God's reply was that he should just tell them about Him: *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Here is what you must say to the Israelites. Tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*^{Ex.3:14} We should not get into big discussions about spurious issues but find ways to tell others about Jesus. Canty said: *Debating evil has little to do with faith, except knock it flat. We are ministers, not philosophers. Our calling is compassion, prayer, faith and the Word. Our terms, full Gospel or 'Foursquare' meant the proclamation of Jesus as Saviour, Baptiser, King and Healer.* (from: "I was just thinking" available from our website). Moses' third excuse was his poor self-esteem: *Moses answered, "What if the elders of Israel won't believe me? What if they won't listen to me? Suppose they say, 'The LORD didn't appear to you.' Then what should I do?"*^{Ex.4:1} But God told Moses to use what he had and He would affirm him: *The LORD said to him, "What do you have in your hand?"*^{Ex.4:2} God told Gideon to *Go in the strength you have... Am I not sending you?"*^{Jdg.6:14} God does not expect us to be authorities, just authentic: *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.*^{1Cor.4:2} Moses' fourth excuse was that he thought he wasn't eloquent: *Moses spoke to the LORD. He said, "Lord, I've never been a good speaker. And I haven't gotten any better since you spoke to me. I don't speak very well at all."*^{Ex.4:10} But God explained that it is not how we speak so much as who is speaking: *The LORD said to him, "Who makes a man able to talk? Who makes him unable to hear or speak? Who makes him able to see? Who makes him blind? It is I, the LORD. Now go. I will help you speak. I will teach you what to say."*^{Ex.4:11-12} As Christians, we are anointed to serve God in whatever capacity He chooses and He will give us the words to say: *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*^{Is.61:1-3} *You will be brought to kings and governors. All this will happen to you because of my name. In that way you will be witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry ahead of time about how to stand up for yourselves. I will give you words of wisdom. None of your enemies will be able to withstand them or oppose them.*^{Lk.21:12-15}

Eventually Moses gave his real reason for his excuses—he didn't really want to do it! *But Moses said, "Lord, please **send someone else** to do it."*^{Ex.14:13} Rebellion is a sure way of getting God angry! *Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses.*^{Ex.4:14} *What pleases the LORD more? Burnt offerings and sacrifices, or obeying him? It is better to obey than to offer a sacrifice. It is better to do what he says than to offer the fat of rams. Refusing to obey him is as sinful as using evil magic. Being proud is as evil as worshiping statues of gods. You have refused to do what the LORD told you to do. So he has refused to have you as king.*^{1Sam.15:22-23}

When Isaiah met with God and realised his unworthiness, God showed him that when we are forgiven, we are immediately ready for service: *"How terrible it is for me!" I cried out. "I'm about to be destroyed! My mouth speaks sinful words. And I live among people who speak sinful words. Now I have seen the King with my own eyes. He is the LORD who rules over all."* A seraph flew over to me. He was holding a hot coal. He had used tongs to take it from the altar. He touched my mouth with the coal. He said, *"This has touched your lips. Your guilt has been taken away. Your sin has been paid for."* Then I heard the voice of the Lord. He said, *"Who will I send? Who will go for us?"* I said, *"Here I am. Send me!"*^{Is.6:5-8} God is looking for people who want to work for Him—and there is a great reward for being willing: *If you'll willingly obey, you'll feast like kings. But if you're wilful and stubborn, you'll die like dogs.*^{Is.1:19-20} David realised that a willing person was a happy person and would be quick to obey: *Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.*^{Ps.51:12-13}

What's your excuse? I hope you haven't one! When we follow Isaiah's example of "Yes Lord", we will enjoy the blessings of obedience—which is fellowship with God now and forever: *The person who will be at the banquet in the kingdom of God is blessed.*^{Lk.14:15} *We find refuge in the shadow of God's wings and feast on the abundance of His house as He gives us drink from His river of delights. For with God is the fountain of life and in His light we see light.*^{Ps.36:7-9}

Questions.

1. What Bible references do you think best summarise God's Kingdom?
2. How is the Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about different from the Kingdom of Israel?
3. Who is invited to enter God's Kingdom?
4. How can you enter God's Kingdom?
5. Were the explanations as to why people wouldn't come to the Banquet in Lk.14 reasons or excuses? Explain
6. Why do you think Moses made his excuses (Ex.3-4)?
7. Why do you think that Isaiah so quick to say he would obey God's call (Is.6:8)?

Sunday 9th August Ps.91:1-8 Lk.15

Hymn: Amazing Grace

I once was lost but now am found.

Christians should be peaceful and contented in any situation: *I know what it's like not to have what I need. I also know what it's like to have more than I need. I have learned the secret of being content no matter what happens. I am content whether I am well fed or hungry. I am content whether I have more than enough or not enough. I can do all this by the power of Christ. He gives me strength.*^{Phil.4:12-13} This is because Jesus is Lord—and the catch-line "we enjoy God but take Him seriously" accurately summarises this truth. Although subjects such as life and death; justification and judgement; heaven and hell are serious, Jesus added life, liberty, blessings, celebration, joy and happiness to them. Because God's kingdom is inside of us rather than outside of us, we can face any situation with a peace

that passes understanding if we prayerfully and joyfully commit our ways to God: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.4:6-7} This is what our memory verse encourages us to do: *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD Himself, is the Rock Eternal.*^{Is.26:3-4}

We should always prepare for the worst yet hope for the best. None of us wants to experience trials, trauma or tragedy but we would be foolish if we didn't prepare for these. And the best way to prepare ourselves for them is to build ourselves up in our faith—in our trust of God: *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.*^{Jd.1:20-21} Last week's hymn—Abide with me—also reminds us of this: *I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless; Ills have no weight and tears no bitterness. Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory? I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.* If we know that God is with us, then we can sure that it will be well with our soul: *When peace like a river attended my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say It is well with my soul. Though Satan should buffet though trials should come, Let this blessed assurance control, That Christ has regarded my helpless estate, And hath shed His own blood for my soul.* On 2nd March 1791 John Wesley died at the age of 88 at his house in London. He had sung his favourite hymn (written by Isaac Watts): *I'll praise my Maker while I've breath; and when my voice is lost in death, praise shall employ my nobler powers. My days of praise shall ne'er be past while life and thought and being last, or immortality endures.* And as Wesley died, he said: **“Best of all is, God is with us.”** Wesley was not lost because he had been found many years before. In May 1738 Wesley went to a meeting in Aldersgate Street, London where someone was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans, describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ. He wrote: *“I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine and saved me from the law of sin and death.”* From that moment on, Wesley knew that it was well with his soul. He was prepared for trials, traumas and tragedies, including the greatest trial that each one of us must face—of death itself—and Wesley's hope was a sure hope, not an unsure hope.

Being lost can be a very frightening experience but being found is the opposite—it means relief, assurance, comfort, peace. When Jesus came to earth, He didn't just come to save the world in general terms or an impersonal way but He came to save the world in a very specifically and personal way—by showing us God's love. **Jesus shows us God's love for the world:** *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*^{Jn.3:16} **Jesus shows us God's love for the Church:** *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.*^{Eph.5:25-27} **Jesus shows us God's love for you and me:** *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*^{Gal.2:20} **God's love is wonderful and extreme:** *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*^{Rom.8:38-39} This is why Jesus came to seek those who are lost. *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*^{Lk.19:10} No wonder *grace and peace are ours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*^{2Pet.1:2}

To illustrate God's love for us, Jesus told these stories about finding a lost sheep, piece of silver and son. In all three stories the finder is overwhelmed with joy at finding that which was lost and this illustrates God's joy when a sinner comes to repentance—either at conversion or after

backsliding. The context of these stories was the muttering of the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes: *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Then Jesus told them this parable: *"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."*^{Lk.15:1-7}

The lost and found Sheep. As with all of Jesus' parables, this story was making a point rather than making a doctrinal statement. Here the 99 sheep are not righteous people who are happily on their way to heaven but the *self-righteous* religious people that Jesus was talking to (seen again in the elder brother in the third story). The religious self-righteous people thought that their ancestry and religious activity made them righteous, but Jesus explained that repentance is the requirement for righteousness—and when someone repents, there is great rejoicing in heaven. This story shows the compassion of the Great Shepherd in seeking out the lost. Jesus is the Good Shepherd: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*^{Jn.10:11} And this same Shepherd will equip us for everything that we need to do His will: *Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*^{Heb.13:20-21}

The lost and found Silver. In the Bible, silver is used to depict redemption (*The redemption price is five pieces of silver.*^{Nu.18:16}) and light is used to depict the Holy Spirit (*A new day will dawn on us from above because our God is loving and merciful. He will give light to those who live in the dark and in death's shadow. He will guide us into the way of peace.*^{Lk.1:78-79}) The Holy Spirit is at work in our redemption, showing our sin and cleaning our conscience: *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*^{2Cor.4:6} *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 lost and found Son. The third story shows a Father's love for a son—even a wayward son! In this story the self-righteous Pharisees and Scribes were depicted as the sullen, bad-tempered, mean, unforgiving, grumpy older son, who like them placed his confidence in following the letter of the Law without any compassion for others. And for those self-righteous Pharisees to have God depicted as a loving, forgiving Father was blasphemy—their God was so distant and holy that they wouldn't even speak His Name in case they offended Him by mispronouncing it. But the point of Jesus' story was that God is our Heavenly Father who is full of compassion, forgiving those who repent—and repentance leads to restoration. *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.*^{Ps.103:8-13}

All of these three stories end with the lost being found leading to great happiness: **Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep...** **Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin...** *We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*^{Lk.15:6;9;32} So let's remember, once we were lost but now we are found—**Amazing Grace!** Little wonder that Paul writes: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*^{Phil.4:4}

Questions.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.^{Lk.19:10}

There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.^{Lk.15:1-7}

1. What do think Jesus meant by “lost”?
2. How does Jesus seek and save us?
3. In what way is Jesus like a Shepherd?
4. Who do you think are the “99” people?
5. How would you describe heaven?
6. What should our attitude be towards others (including the Government)? (see *Matt.18:21-35; Rom12:10; Rom.13; Phil.2:3; Tit.3:1; 1Pet.2:13-17*)
7. How will our attitude affect our behaviour?

Sunday 16th August. Ps.91:9-16 Lk.16

Hymn: And can it be

When life is over, you will be welcomed into an eternal home.^{Lk.16:9}

Jesus often used parables as teaching aids to explain what the Kingdom of God was like: *Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like...^{Matt.13:24} The disciples came up and asked, “Why do you tell stories [speak to the people in parables]?” He replied, “You've been given insight into God's kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight; it hasn't been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That's why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight. In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they're blue in the face and not get it. I don't want Isaiah's forecast repeated all over again: Your ears are open but you don't hear a thing. The people have become close-minded! They stick their fingers in their ears so they won't have to listen; They screw their eyes shut so they won't have to look, so they won't have to deal with me face-to-face and let me heal them. But you have God-blessed eyes—eyes that see! And God-blessed ears—ears that hear! A lot of people, prophets and humble believers among them, would have given anything to see what you are seeing, to hear what you are hearing, but never had the chance.^{Matt.13:10-17}* The word “parable” literally means *the placing of one thing beside another with a view to comparison* and so Jesus used ideas and events that people could identify with—although they were not necessarily actual historical events. *Jesus spoke God's word to them using many illustrations like these. In this way people could understand what he taught. He did not speak to them without using an illustration [parable]. But when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them.^{Mk.4:33-34}* The Parables that Jesus used were intended to illustrate an aspect of God's Kingdom rather than to make a doctrinal statement. In other words, we can't take every detail from these stories and use them as a theological thesis—they are parables! However, unlike fables which are often fanciful and unnatural (c.f. Aesop's fables), Jesus' stories and illustrations, including His parables, were all true to life and factual. It would be incongruous for Jesus, who was full of grace and truth (as well as being truth itself) to use a falsehood to explain a truth! *From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.^{Jn.1:16-18}* But even though the main points of Jesus' stories were true, they were more than just nice non-fiction stories. Jesus told stories for a particular reason—to explain something about the Kingdom of Heaven and our eternal home. And so if we are to understand the parables in the Bible, we must see their spiritual application. Last week we looked at the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and this week we are looking at the journey to heaven—our eternal home. The first story in today's reading begins: *There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked*

him, *What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.*^{Lk.16:1-2} In the beginning our ancestors, Adam and Eve, were created directly by God—which means that every human being is an indirect creation of God. And so, everyone one of us is ultimately accountable to Him. God has given each one of us a life and one day He will call us to account for the stewardship of that life—of our personal development, of our character, of the choices we’ve made and of the opportunities we have had (and missed). *Yes, we are God's children. So we shouldn't think that God is made out of gold or silver or stone. He isn't a statue planned and made by clever people. 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.17:29-31} In this story, the Steward was determined to plan for the future and find a way to enjoy his retirement. *I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.*^{Lk.16:4} So he gained the favour of his master’s debtors by slashing their debts. Jesus was not promoting crooked dealing or stealing from employers but He was explaining that the Steward was shrewd enough to do something about his future. *For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their contemporaries than the people of light.*^{Lk.16:8} Jesus was speaking directly to the self-righteous religious people who thought that their ancestry and religious activity made them righteous and gave them a free pass into heaven. Jesus had previously explained that repentance is the requirement for righteousness and when someone repents, there is great rejoicing in heaven but now He was explaining that we can’t rely on our religion (even good religion) if we are going to get to heaven—we need to consciously plan our future and actually do something instead of just hoping for the best. *Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behaviour.*^{Lk.16: 8-9} The planning and preparing for our eternal future compliments the main message that Jesus taught—which was that God’s Kingdom could only be accessed through Him (the very person that the religious people had rejected): *Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father also. From now on, you do know him. And you have seen him.”*^{Jn.14:6-7} It is the convicted who become contented, not the complacent. The hungry are fed and the thirsty are satisfied but the full become empty. *He has filled those who are hungry with good things. But he has sent those who are rich away empty.*^{Lk.1:53} *Then Jesus said: I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever go hungry. And no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty. But it is just as I told you. You have seen me, and you still do not believe. Everyone the Father gives me will come to me. I will never send away anyone who comes to me.*^{Jn.6:35-37} If we are to lay up treasure in heaven, we need to do more than just give assent to the facts of Jesus—we must intentionally and practically place our trust in Jesus and then put His teachings into practice. This takes effort and training (discipline). *The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.*^{Lk.16:16} *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.*^{1Tim.6:17-19} *God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*^{Heb.12:10-11}

In the next story, Jesus tells the tale of two people—one who was very rich and lived in opulence but died as a spiritual pauper and one who was very poor and lived in pain and distress but died

as a spiritual potentate. The completely opposite destinations of these two people were not because of their different natural lifestyles but because of their different spiritual lifestyles. The rich man went to his eternal home in despair accompanied by everlasting torment but the poor man went to his eternal home in peace accompanied by everlasting comfort.

This story has to be seen in its chronological setting, which was **before Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension**. Up until the time that Jesus physically died, people's sins were only covered over—they were atoned for, not paid for. "Atonement" means "covering". *Put the atonement cover [atonement lid; mercy seat] on the ark of the Testimony in the Most Holy Place.*^{Ex.26:34} The Jewish sacrifices had to be repeated year after year but the people's guilty consciences were never put to rest because the sacrifices were sacrifices of atonement. Those sacrifices only covered up the sins—they never removed anyone's sins. *For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...* Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.^{Heb.10:1-10} But when Jesus came, He once and for all time, took away the sin of the world: *The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"*^{Jn.1:29} 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.9:28} Then after Jesus rose from the dead, He ascended to the Father, taking with Him all those people who had been captive to their sins. Jesus was able to take them right into the presence of God the Father because their sins were no longer covered over—their sins had been taken away and they were truly holy: *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)*^{Eph.4:7-10} And since then, when Believers die, they don't go to "Abraham's side" as the poor man did, but they go Jesus' side—they are immediately with Christ, who is at the Father's side: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.*^{Phil.1:21-24} No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.^{Jn.1:18} That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.^{Eph.1:19-21}

Yes, *When life is over, you will be welcomed into an eternal home.*^{Lk.16:9} So let's make sure our eternal home is a place of comfort and not a place of agony—because, as Abraham explained, *a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.*^{Lk.16:26v} And we can be sure of our destination because we have the Bible (Moses and the Prophets) to read. *Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'*^{Lk.16:29-31}

Questions.

When life is over, you will be welcomed into an eternal home.^{Lk.16:9}

10. What is the difference between a parable and a fable?
11. What can we do to plan for our spiritual future?

12. What sort of welcome to his eternal home did the rich man have (Lk.16:22)?
13. What sort of welcome to his eternal home did the poor man Lazarus have (Lk.16:22)?
14. What sort of welcome to his eternal home did Stephen have (Acts.7:54-60)?
15. How can we be sure what kind of welcome we will have to our eternal home?

Sunday 23rd August. Ps.46 Lk.17

Hymn: A mighty Fortress is our God

We are unprofitable servants: we have only done our duty. Lk.17:10

“England expects that every man will do his duty” was a signal sent by Admiral Horatio Nelson from his flagship HMS Victory as the Battle of Trafalgar was about to commence on 21st October 1805. Nelson died later that day and his body was returned to London for a 4 hour Funeral Service in St. Paul’s Cathedral. After Nelson was shot, he said: *“Hardy, I do believe they have done it at last my backbone is shot through.”* Nelson’s final words were, *“Thank God I have done my duty.”* Although his morals were not always compatible with NT teaching, Nelson was one of the great British patriotic heroes and his part in our history is pivotal to understanding the English mindset. As well as leading the victory at the Battle of Trafalgar near Gibraltar, Nelson is also remembered for *“turning a blind eye.”* At the Battle of Copenhagen, in 1801, Admiral Sir Hyde Parker sent a signal to Nelson's forces ordering them to retreat. Nelson lifted his telescope up to his blind eye, saying, *“I have a right to be blind sometimes. I really do not see the signal,”* The Royal Navy won a resounding victory, at no loss to themselves—Parker was recalled in disgrace and Nelson appointed Commander-in-Chief of the fleet!

In the story we read this morning, Jesus said that God expects us to do our duty—and our duty (our obligation) is to believe (trust) God. *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.6:28-29 We are not only to trust God for our **eternal** salvation but also for our **daily** salvation—to trust Him for our day-to-day cares and need. This involves a continual sharing of our life’s experiences with Him and a submission to His authority—we call this *“fellowship”!* *Brothers and sisters, we have a duty. Our duty [obligation] is not to live under the control of our sinful nature. If you live under the control of your sinful nature, you will die. But by the power of the Holy Spirit you can put to death the sins your body commits. Then you will live. Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You didn't receive a spirit that makes you a slave to fear once again. Instead you received the Holy Spirit, who makes you God's child. By the Spirit's power we call God “Abba.” Abba means Father. The Spirit himself joins with our spirits. Together they give witness that we are God's children.* Rom.8:12-16

Fellowship with God is glorious and enjoyable because we can only truly have fellowship with God when we have a good conscience—and we can only truly have a good conscience when we know that our sins have been taken away. The *Westminster Shorter Confession* succinctly puts it this way: ***Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever; and The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.*** The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* is a series of 107 questions and answers on Christian doctrine. When James VI of Scotland became James I of England in 1603, he ruled over the two countries separately. James upheld the *Divine Right of Kings*, which asserts that a monarch is not accountable to an earthly authority (including Parliament) because the king’s right to rule is derived from divine authority—this is clearly portrayed in the Preface to the KJV Bible. Because James was from Scotland, he had no understanding of the English *Magna Carta* and when his son became Charles I of England (as well as Charles I Scotland) he continued to ignore the *Magna Carta* thus forcing the country into Civil War. The main principle of the *Magna Carta* is that everyone is subject to the law—even the king. This principle guarantees the rights of individuals, the right to justice and the right to a fair trial. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* was completed by the *Westminster Assembly* in 1647

during the height of the Civil War and was an attempt to unite the English Church and the Scottish Kirk. It was not until the Treaty of Union in 1st May 1707 that England and Scotland was united into Great Britain.

However, although our *chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever*, none of us is able to do completely so that we can say that we have done all that God requires of us—that we have completely fulfilled our obligation or duty to God. Not even Paul the apostle reached that place of perfection: *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*^{Phil.3:12-14} But even if we were to do everything that God requires us to do, we would not be especially holy or spiritual—we would *have only done our duty!*^{Lk.17:10} Most of us (probably all of us!) have thought that if we only had more faith, then we might be able to do our duty; that if only we had more faith, then we could be better Christians; that if only we had more faith, then we could solve life's problems; that if only we had more faith, then we could be healed; that if only we had more faith, then we could be more successful; that if only we had more faith, then we could get out of our troubles; that if only we had more faith, then we could have a better life; that if only we had more faith, then we could... (the list is endless!) Even Jesus' disciples thought like that: *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"*^{Lk.17:5} But Jesus replied: *If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.*^{Lk.17:6}

When Jesus said that if we have faith as small as a mustard seed we could speak to a Mulberry tree and it would obey us, He obviously didn't literally mean that we could move a mulberry tree into the sea by our will power or even by "*spiritual*" power—that's metaphysics not faith! Faith isn't a party-game that we can use to disrupt the natural laws of physics! The mulberry tree (or mountain in Matthew's Gospel) represents obstacles and difficulties in our life. Some of you will remember *The Sacred Diaries of Adrian Plass* from the 1980's and especially the part that highlights how stupid and misguided Christians can be when it comes to applying faith:

Monday 6th January: *Bought a really good book on faith. It's called "Goodness Gracious – in God's name, what on earth are we doing for Heaven's sake?" A very witty title I feel. It's all about how Christians should be able to move mountains by faith, if they are really tuned into God. Very inspiring. Waited 'till there was no one around, then practiced with a paper clip. Put it on my desk and stared at it, willing it to move. Nothing! Tried commanding it in a loud voice.*

Tuesday 7th January: *Had another go with the paper-clip tonight. Really took authority over it. Couldn't get it to budge. Told God I'd give up anything He wanted, if he would just move it move half an inch. Nothing! All rather worrying really. If you only need faith the size of a mustard seed to move a mountain, what hope is there for me when it can't even get a paper-clip to do what it's told.*

Saturday 11th January: *Got up early today to have a last go at the blasted paper-clip. Ended up hissing viciously at it, trying not to wake everybody up. When I gave up and opened the door I found Anne and Gerald listening outside in their night-clothes, looking quite anxious. Anne said, "Darling, why did you tell the paper-clip you would straighten it up if it didn't get its act together?"*

And neither did Jesus mean that our faith was to be as ***small*** as a mustard seed! No, our faith is to be ***like*** a mustard seed—that is, a seed that would grow into a mature plant. In other words, **we don't need lots of faith but living faith!** The verses before this discourse puts Jesus' teaching on faith into context—He was referring to sin and forgiveness. *Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."*^{Lk.17:1-4} Matthew records an even greater standard of forgiveness: *Then Peter came to Jesus and*

asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."¹*Matt.18:21-22* The Disciples thought they needed lots of faith if they were to forgive someone 149 times in a day so they said: *Increase our faith!* But Jesus said they didn't need lots of faith—just a living faith that will grow. But our faith is in God not in our ability to believe! "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."²*Mk.11:22-25*

There are degrees of faith found in the Bible—**No faith:** "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"³*Mk.4:40* **Lack of faith:** He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm."⁴*Matt.8:26* **Little faith:** You of little faith, why did you doubt?"⁵*Matt.14:31* **Great faith:** Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."⁶*Matt.15:28* But whatever faith we have, we must stand firm in our trust in God or we have nothing: *Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*⁷*2Cor.1:24* *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.*⁸*1s.7:9* However, what we lack in faith, God makes up in grace. So like Paul, let's run the race, fight the fight and keep the faith: *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.*⁹*2Tim.4:7-8* Then we will be able to say with confidence that **we have done our duty:** *Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."*¹⁰*Acts.23:1*

Questions.

*We are unprofitable servants: we have only done our duty.*¹¹*Lk.17:10*

16. What is our duty (obligation) to God?
17. What work does God expect of us?
18. What is the difference between faith and wishful thinking?
19. Do you have enough faith to speak to Mulberry tree or mountain in our life?
20. Can you have faith in God and unforgiveness toward others at the same time? (see *Mk.11:22-25*)
21. How do you think you can grow your faith?
22. What is laid up for those who do fulfil their duty toward God?

Sunday 30th August. Ps.92:1-8 Lk.18

Hymn: Blessed Assurance Jesus is mine

*However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*¹²*Lk.18:8*

On June 30, 1859, Charles Blondin walked along a tightrope suspended above the rapids of Niagara Falls, becoming the first man to walk across the Falls. Blondin repeated the crossing several times after this, with different variations: blindfolded, in a sack, trundling a wheelbarrow, on stilts, sitting down midway while he cooked and ate an omelette, and standing on a chair with only one of its legs balanced on the rope. But just imagine you were watching Blondin, and he asked if you believed that he could cross the rapids again. Of course you would say "yes"—because you had seen him cross the Falls. But what if he asked you to prove your faith in him by allowing him to carry you over? That is exactly what happened to his manager, Harry Colcord—Blondin walked across the Falls on the tightrope with Colcord on his back!

Faith is a fairly common word and usually means "belief" or "trust" but to a Christian, faith means a personal belief and trust in Jesus Christ—who is God's Son and our Saviour. To believe

that God exists is not that kind of faith but just an acknowledgement of the facts—even devils believe in God. True faith will affect your behaviour: *It is the same with faith. If it doesn't cause us to do something, it's dead. But someone will say, "You have faith. I do good works." Show me your faith that doesn't do good works. And I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that. And they tremble!*^{Jas.2:17-19} However, the Christian “faith” is a personal trust in God, which changes the way we think, talk and behave. *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. By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*^{Heb.11:6-7} Every person has a conscience, which is a divinely given warning device. This internal alarm system bears witness to the soul of its condition and when we have sinned, our conscience accuses us. But the new birth cleanses the guilty conscience of wrong and faith keeps the conscience clear. The Holy Spirit removes the inward sense of condemnation from the guilt-laden conscience and those birthed into God’s kingdom are made pure—Believers’ baptism is an outward act and represents this inward reality that occurs in the new birth: *let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.*^{Heb.10:22} *Keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.*^{1Tim.3:9} *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*^{Eph.2:8-10} And it is through faith that we have peace 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}

Today, most people don’t believe in God or even think about Him or their spiritual health. And most of those who do think about God and their spiritual health, ignore the one true point of spiritual reference—the Bible. And yet our spiritual health is so important because it determines our quality of life in the here-and now and throughout eternity: *Dear friend, I know that your spiritual life is going well. I pray that you also may enjoy good health. And I pray that everything else may go well with you. Some believers came to me and told me that you are faithful to the truth. They told me that you continue to live by it. That gave me great joy. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are living by the truth.*^{3Jn.2-4} *What person can live and not die? Who can escape the power of the grave?*^{Ps.89:48} *Everyone will die someday. Those who are still living should really think about that.*^{Ecc.7:2} *There's a proper time and way for people to do everything. That's true even though a person might be suffering greatly. No one knows what lies ahead. So who can tell a person what's going to happen? He can't stop the wind from blowing. And he doesn't have the power to decide when he will die.*^{Ecc.8:6-8}

When Harry Colcord said that he believed in Blondin, he showed his faith by journeying with him across the great chasm of the Niagara Falls. We show our faith in Jesus Christ by journeying with Him through life and across the great chasm of death into our eternal home. Although life’s journey can be treacherous and troublesome—even dangerous at times—it can be a protected and peaceful one if we share it with Jesus our Shepherd and Guide. *Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.*^{Ps.23:4} We can be at peace in the midst of trouble: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*^{Jn.16:33} But this peace that Jesus promises is not mind-over-matter or a fatalistic attitude but is real and comes from a conscious act of submission to God, based on His revelation in the Scriptures: *Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*^{Ps.119:165} *But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and*

friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.^{Lk.21:14-19} Even death itself can be peaceful (notwithstanding the physical pain of the dying process)—as we saw the other week when Lazarus was escorted by angels to his eternal home. O God, most high and most glorious, the thought of Your infinite serenity cheers me—for when I am toiling and moiling, troubled and distressed, You are for ever at perfect peace! Grant me to know that I truly live only when I live to You—all else is trifling. Your Presence alone can make me holy, devout, strong and happy.

Righteousness and faith are linked together. After Jesus asked the question: *when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?* He then proceeded to differentiate between the *self-righteous* and the *God-made-righteous* by telling a story about a Pharisee and a Tax Collector: *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.* When we looked at the stories of the sheep, silver and son that were lost and then found, we saw that the ninety-nine sheep that were left in the wilderness represented the *righteous people who need no repentance.*^{Lk.15:7} These weren't righteous people who were happily on their way to heaven but the *self-righteous* religious people that Jesus was talking to (seen again in the elder brother in the third story). These self-righteous people thought that their ancestry and religious activity made them righteous but Jesus said they were left in the wilderness and wouldn't see heaven. *For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*^{Matt.5:20} *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*^{Matt.9:12-13} Repentance is the requirement for righteousness and when someone repents, there is great rejoicing in heaven. There is also great rejoicing in heaven for all the people who have been made righteous through faith and are steadfastly journeying through life. And of course, there is also great rejoicing in heaven when those people are finally welcomed into their eternal home. Whatever we face in the here-and-now, if we are *God-made-righteous* through faith (instead of *self-righteous*), we can be sure of a good welcome to our eternal home—as Stephen was (in spite of his cruel and painful death): *But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ... While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.*^{Acts 8:54-60}

Although it is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that saves us, it is our faith that applies God's remedy for sin: *However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.*^{Rom.4:5-6} *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*^{Rom.3:22} This application of our faith is called **Good News** (which what "Gospel" means). *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: 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} But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.^{Rom.10:7-10}*

Returning to Jesus' question: *when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*^{Lk.18:8} The answer is obviously "yes", but we must ensure that our righteousness is **given to us not gotten by us**—that we are **God-made-righteous** and not **self-righteous**. Our faith must change our attitudes and actions or we will end up like the Pharisee who had the talk but not the walk. He prayed **about himself** instead of praying **to God**: *The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself:*

'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.^{Lk.18:11-14} So, let's make every effort to gain Christ and be found in Him—and then we will be certain to attain the resurrection unto eternal life: *But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, 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. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*^{Phil.3:7-11}

Trouble Praying

You said you find it hard to pray; your prayer times empty pass;
The air, it feels like granite and the ceiling seems like brass!

You said your prayers don't go beyond the room; that you feel static.
The ceiling! Who told you that God lives inside your attic?

Who ever told had it wrong misplacing God's true venue:
The truth is, once invited there that God resides within you.

Wee Willie Winkie

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!

Gordon Bailey

Questions:

1. Find some Bible verses that explain the Christian meaning of “*faith*”
2. What did Jesus mean by: *However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*
3. How can we put our hearts at rest when we are troubled? (*Ps.42; Matt.11:28-30; 1Jn.3:18-20*)
4. What would you need to assess if you were doing a “*spiritual health check*”?
5. Is it wrong to thank God for all the good things in our life (like the Pharisee)?
6. What is the difference between praying **at** God and praying **to** God (*Lk.18:11-18*)

September

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 1Tim.6:6-8

Thought for the Month:

I prayed for faith and thought that someday faith would come down and strike me like lightning. But faith did not seem to come. One day I read in the tenth chapter of Romans, "*So faith comes from hearing the message. And the message that is heard is the word of Christ.*" I had closed my Bible and prayed for faith but I now opened my Bible and began to study—and faith has been growing ever since. *D. L. Moody*

Sunday 6th September. Ps.92:8-15 Lk.19

Hymn: It is well with my soul

Where do you live? *Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.* Lk.19:38

"Home is where the heart is and my heart is anywhere you are; anywhere you are is home!" This may be the beginning of a popular song from yesteryear but the sentiment is right—**home is where your heart is**. So the answer to the question: "Where do you live?" is—at my home! But because this is a sermon and we are at Church, it should be obvious that I'm not asking about your physical home but your spiritual home and a Christian's spiritual home is **heaven**: *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.* Eph.2:6 Jesus said: *where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Lk.12:34 Because heaven is our home, our heart, our desire and our passion should be focused on Christ and His heavenly Kingdom: *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.* Col.3:1-4 In our heavenly home, we are blessed with spiritual blessings: *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.* Eph.1:3 These spiritual blessings are the blessings of peace with God; the blessings of the desire for holiness; the blessings of the joy of our salvation; the blessings of God's protection; the blessings of God's provision; the blessings of enjoying God and the life He has given to us; the blessings of fellowship with God, His Word and His people—the list is endless! And these spiritual blessings overflow into our natural life that make us different. But if we are to appreciate and enjoy these blessings we must stay spiritually healthy and we stay spiritually healthy by being **nourished, nurtured and encouraged through fellowshiping with God and gathering together in the Name of Jesus—which is what Church is!**

Some people appear to be so "*heavenly-minded*" that they are actually of no earthly use! They isolate themselves from the gathering of the saints (the Church) but think that God is speaking to them. *An unfriendly person [a person who isolates himself] pursues selfish ends; he defies all sound judgment. A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.* Prov.18:1-2 God has never intended people to be isolated: *It is not good for the man to be alone.* Gen.2:18 *A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families.* Ps.68:5-6 God has given the gifts of ministry within the Church to equip the saints and bring them into maturity as well as to provide a place of security and protection from error: *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, 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.4:11-13 And it is through the Church (the gathering of the saints, not the organisation) that God wants to reveal His wisdom. *His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in*

Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.^{Eph.3:10-12} Both Jesus and Paul warned against people who had an appearance of spirituality but were actually ferocious wolves. *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”*^{Matt.7:15-20} For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.^{Acts.20:27-31} Although not everyone who is isolated is a ferocious wolf, isolation can easily lead to deception, bringing division and damage to others. But God’s antidote to deception is the Truth and His truth is found in Jesus and His body—the Church as the gathering of Believers. (That is why we came back together as the “gathering of the saints” as soon as it was possible after lockdown, rather than just watching or listening on Zoom.) Most of the religious deception comes from a poor understanding of the Bible or taking verses of Scripture out of context—which is why we should all aim to be Bible literate (to know how to interpret the Bible). We must only get out of the text of the Bible what God has put there in the first place (*exegesis*), not put something into the text something that wasn’t intended by the author (*eisegesis*). *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. Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.*^{Jer.7:4-11} But even without the influence of deception, we can easily be distracted from our heavenly home by over-valuing our natural possessions. *Don’t hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it’s safe from moth and rust and burglars. It’s obvious, isn’t it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being. Your eyes are windows into your body. If you open your eyes wide in wonder and belief, your body fills up with light. If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a dank cellar. If you pull the blinds on your windows, what a dark life you will have!*^{Matt.6:19:23} Just repeating Bible verses (or even paraphrasing those verses into colloquial English) is not being Bible literate. When the people shouted: *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”* they were quoting from the Bible (Psalm 118) and then they added: *“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”* But they didn’t understand what they were saying and were not aware of that peace that is in heaven. *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” 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. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”*^{Lk.19:38-44} Right up to the time of Jesus, the dwelling place of God with man was represented by the city of Jerusalem (Jerusalem means peace): *Praise be to the LORD from Zion, to him who dwells in Jerusalem.*^{Ps.135:10} However, after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, the geographical city of Jerusalem represented Judaism and apostasy but the dwelling place of God was referred to as the **New Jerusalem**: *I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,*

prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.^{Rev.21:2} These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.^{Gal.4:24-26} Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.^{Rev.11:8} Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters... Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."^{Rev.17:1-18} When Jesus came to earth He made peace between God and mankind: For he himself is our peace... 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.^{Eph.2:14-18} And now that Jesus has returned to heaven—the dwelling place of God—and it is called the New Jerusalem. This is our home and where our heart should be—which is why God gives us a new heart at conversion. The haunting guilt of sin that condemned us is removed, our defiled conscience is made pure, our sin-stained soul is purged and a sense of peace fills our innermost being. So, where's your home? Hopefully you can say with confidence My home is with Jesus in heaven—the New Jerusalem, that city of peace. So let's live in the peace and joy of a new heart and a good conscience within the security of the gathering of the saints because we know that we are citizens of heaven: *Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*^{Phil.3:17-21}

Questions:

1. What does "home" mean to you?
2. How would you describe heaven?
3. Find some Bible verses to support your definition of heaven
4. How can we be "heavenly-minded" **AND** also be of some earthly use?
5. How can we safeguard against deception?
6. What was so special about the city of Jerusalem?
7. What is the New Jerusalem?
8. What does the symbolism of Jerusalem say about our relationship with God?

Sunday 13th September. Ps.93 Lk.20:1-26

Hymn: Just as I am without one plea

Do we have to obey the Government? *Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*^{Lk.20:25}

The Bible says *you are not under the law, but under grace.*^{Rom.6:14} and some Christians have used this verse as an excuse for not obeying the Government—but whenever a verse is taken out of context it becomes a pretext! This is called *eisegesis* (which is putting something into the text that was never intended by the authors) as opposed to *exegesis* (which is taking out of the text what God did intend). When we were born again we were set free from the dominion of sin and

came under the jurisdiction of God and righteousness. *Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.*^{Rom.6:11-14} And so “the law” does not refer to the law of the government but the law of sin and death. *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.*^{Rom.8:1-2} However, Christians are not under the Law of Moses (the Old Covenant) either because that was given to Moses for the nation of Israel. The Old Covenant Law came in four categories: Moral Laws; Food Laws; Ceremonial Laws; Civil Laws. The Food, Ceremonial and Civil Laws were given exclusively to Israel and were a part of the (Old) Covenant that God established with them. The New Testament says that these ended when the Old Covenant ended. The moral laws (which are summed up in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5), are nearly all repeated in the New Testament, and so they are for us today. The Covenant God made with Israel was to set them apart as a holy nation and kingdom of priests: *Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*^{Ex.19:5-6} Israel should have been distinct from the rest of the world by worshiping the Lord—who is the only God—and then personally mediate God’s love to the whole world in their role as priests. Instead, they refused to meet with God and asked Moses to mediate between them and God: *When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”*^{Ex.20:18-19} Although God’s people rejected their mission under the Old Covenant, He has now restored that mission to His people under the New Covenant—**we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation:** *They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. 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. 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.2:8-10} And because we are God’s special possession, we are distinct—not distinct by the way we are treated, **but we are distinct by the way we behave!**

When the Jews returned from the Exile, they had been assimilated into the Babylonian culture and Ezra tried to return them to their original calling as a holy nation. In response to the liberal lifestyle of many of the Jews, the Pharisee sect began at this time. They were so intent on keeping the letter of the Law (Written Torah), that they invented thousands of other laws (Oral Torah or Mishnah) to explain what they thought the Written Torah meant! This led to an impossibly ridiculous burden on people that had no connection with God’s original purpose: *One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”*^{Lk.6:1-2} It was this hypocrisy of the Pharisees’ Oral Torah that Jesus criticised: *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.*^{Matt.23:13} However, Jesus and His Disciples kept the written Law of the Old Covenant. *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*^{Matt.5:17-19} [The phrase “heaven and earth” refers to

God's Covenant not the physical planets and when God's Old Covenant passed away, the rules and regulation of Moses' Laws became obsolete.]

The early Church struggled with the liberty of Believers from the Old Covenant and a Council was called at Jerusalem to debate the freedom of the New Covenant: *Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."*^{Acts.15:5} The Council reached a compromise and they decided that non-Jews had no obligation to keep the Law of Moses: *We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.*^{Acts.15:24-29}

Paul had greater insight into the New Covenant than the others at the Jerusalem—probably because he had only met Jesus after His ascension and so he only knew Jesus as the Glorified Son of God (unlike the others who had known Jesus as the Jewish Prophet from Galilee who had kept the Law).

But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.^{Gal.4:30-5:2} Paul realised that when the new came, the old was replaced: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*^{2Cor.5:17}

However, both the New and Old Covenants ran side-by-side for 40 years until the "the coming of the Lord", when the judgement of God came on apostate Judaism and the Temple was destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70. *By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.*^{Heb.8:13}

God's Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom with spiritual rules and spiritual values, but we also live in a civilian kingdom with civilian rules and civilian values. The leaders of our civilian kingdom have a God-given responsibility to uphold moral values and protect its citizens—and we have a God-given responsibility to live honourably under those civil authorities: *All of you must be willing to obey completely those who rule over you. There are no authorities except the ones God has chosen. Those who now rule have been chosen by God. So when you oppose the authorities, you are opposing those whom God has appointed. Those who do that will be judged. If you do what is right, you won't need to be afraid of your rulers. But watch out if you do what is wrong! You don't want to be afraid of those in authority, do you? Then do what is right. The one in authority will praise you. He serves God and will do you good. But if you do wrong, watch out! The ruler doesn't carry a sword for no reason at all. He serves God. And God is carrying out his anger through him. The ruler punishes anyone who does wrong. You must obey the authorities. Then you will not be punished. You must also obey them because you know it is right. That's also why you pay taxes. The authorities serve God. Ruling takes up all their time. Give to everyone what you owe. Do you owe taxes? Then pay them. Do you owe anything else to the government? Then pay it. Do you owe respect? Then give it. Do you owe honour? Then show it.*^{Rom.13:1-7} Christians have a spiritual duty (actually a command) to pray for our civilian leaders, but our prayers should be so that we can make Jesus known, not so that we can live a comfortable life! *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.*^{1Tim.2:1-6} However, if there comes a conflict between civilian authority and spiritual authority, we should obey God. (Note,

it was the religious authority, not the civilian authority, that tried to stop Peter from talking about Jesus!) *Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "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.4:18-20} Jesus is our example and He showed us how to submit to God our heavenly Father when we are faced with opposition. *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*^{1Pet.2:23}

So, although we are not under the Law of Moses, we do have an obligation to live by the **Holy Spirit**: *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law... Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*^{Gal.5:18;25} And we are also under the law of our country and we have an obligation to honour our rulers because their office is ordained of God. *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.*^{1Pet.2:13-17} So let's continue to **Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the king.**^{1Pet.2:17}

Questions:

1. Explain in your own words: *Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.*^{Lk.20:25}
2. What is the difference between the Moral Laws and the other Laws (Food Laws, Ceremonial Laws and, Civil Laws) of the Old Covenant?
3. What should have made the nation of Israel distinct from the rest of the world?
4. What makes Christians distinct from the rest of the world?
5. When did the Old Covenant end and when did the New Covenant begin?
6. What is the Christian's obligation to the civilian authorities?

Sunday 20th September. Ps.95:1-6 Lk.20:27-47

Hymn: I then shall live as one who's been forgiven

Is there life after death? *He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.*^{Lk.20:38}

Perhaps a better question would be "is there life before death?"—especially at the moment when so many people seem to be "brain-dead"! This "brain-dead" attitude is seen quite regularly in the numerous "protests" that are occurring at the moment. Although these protests often have a valid objective, they seem to be either organised by, or hijacked by, people whose values are the opposite of our Christian values. We live at a time when there has never been so much information available and yet so little understanding utilised! The (mis)use of media—both social media (which should be called *anti-social media*) and also traditional media (such as TV, radio and newspapers) seems to have drained people's ability to think rationally or sensibly! Everyone is now an "expert" on every subject but very few seem to even try to validate the information they share. To be credible, we must check what we are promoting and have it validated by others who have expertise and experience in that area. This is called a "peer-review" and is used for assessing all academic studies, including medical research—and this is especially important when promoting something different from the *status quo*. When people isolate themselves from the Church (the gathered Believers) and then think that God is speaking to them, it is usually their own imagination because they have disregarded God's way of validating His communication and they end up deceived! That is why we are instructed to test everything—retaining what agrees with God and His Kingdom, but rejecting what does not: *so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.*^{Matt.18:16} *Two or three people should speak what God has revealed. Everyone else should decide whether what each person said is right or wrong... All of you can take your turns speaking what God has revealed. In that way, everyone will learn and be encouraged. People who speak what God has revealed must control themselves. God is not a God of disorder*

but a God of peace.^{1Cor.14:29-33} Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.^{1Jn.4:1} Common sense and discernment go hand-in-hand: My child, don't lose sight of common sense and discernment. Hang on to them, for they will refresh your soul. They are like jewels on a necklace. They keep you safe on your way and your feet will not stumble. You can go to bed without fear; you will lie down and sleep soundly. You need not be afraid of sudden disaster or the destruction that comes upon the wicked.^{Prov.3:21-25} No wonder the Psalmist said: Give me the common sense to apply your rules to everything I do.^{Ps.119:125}

Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth to deal with their immaturity. Spiritual maturity has nothing to do with charisma but it has everything to do with character—and character comes from making the right choices. *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.5:14} God wants spiritual fruit not religious nuts! *Those who are spiritual can evaluate all things, but they themselves cannot be evaluated by others. For, "Who can know the LORD's thoughts? Who knows enough to teach him?" But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ. Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ.*^{1Cor.2:15-3:1}

Although every Believer has the Holy Spirit resident within them, not every Believer has the Holy Spirit flowing out of them—even if they say that they do! There are very few people who intentionally deceive others, but it is not uncommon to find people who unintentionally deceive others. They have a vivid imagination but little understanding of God and His Word. They are easily led astray by their own ideas and then they think that they are “experts” in hearing God but have not been “peer-reviewed” by other credible Believers. The antidote to deception is to stay in fellowship with God, His Word and His people. *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*^{2Tim.4:2-4}

One of the reasons why it is so important to stay balanced and true to the values of God's Kingdom, is that this life is preparation for the life to come. After we die, we become like the angels (we don't become actual angels!)—we will not be married, we won't die, we won't grow old and we won't learn. Our personality is developed now, so we should make every effort to expand our mind and our personality whilst we can! *Marriage is for people here on earth. But in the age to come, those worthy of being raised from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage. And they will never die again. In this respect they will be like angels. They are children of God and children of the resurrection.*^{Lk.20:34-36}

Because our soul and spirit are not physical, we can assume that they will outlast our physical body and that life will continue after death—and Jesus is the evidence that this assumption is true. After Jesus died and rose again, many people saw Him, touched Him and even ate with Him. *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. He appeared to Peter. Then he appeared to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 believers at the same time. Most of them are still living. But some have died. He appeared to James. Then he appeared to all the apostles. Last of all, he also appeared to me [Paul]. I was like someone who wasn't born at the right time or in a normal way.*^{1Cor.15:3-8} Jesus' death and resurrection is absolutely basic to our Christian faith and also to understanding life itself: *The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.*^{Lk.24:7} Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. *This is my gospel.*^{2Tim.2:8} And because Jesus is the proof of life after death, then we would do well to listen to what He has to say on the matter. *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who*

sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.^{Jn.6:38-40}

When Jesus rose from the dead, He enabled us to be the happiest people on earth because we have been freed from the dominion of sin and also the guilt of sin—we have peace with God. *We have preached that Christ has been raised from the dead. So how can some of you say that no one rises from the dead? If no one rises from the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 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. But he did not raise him if the dead are not raised. If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 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. He is the first of all those who will rise.*^{1Cor.15:12-20} However, there are many professing Christians who are not the happiest people on earth. They are still living under both the dominion of sin and the guilt of sin. This is either because they are not actually born-again or because they don't understand what being born-again really means. They have not taken advantage of their inheritance in Christ because they are unaware of what He has done for them. For the Believer, the old order of life has passed away and a new order has come in. The old pattern of life is out and a new pattern of life is in. The old pattern of thinking, seeing, talking, acting, behaving and reacting is out and a new pattern is in place. *If anyone is in Christ Jesus they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.*^{2Cor. 5:17} We are enriched beyond measure and loaded with untold resources. *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*^{Eph.1:3} But those who don't know what they were called into when they got saved, are not enjoying these great provisions of God. They are living far below their true rights, privileges and potential in Christ. Some are living conflict torn lives, embittered lives, struggling lives, battered lives, weak and defeated lives, greatly stressed lives, beggarly lives, obscure lives, handicapped lives, greatly burdened lives, troubled lives and compromising lives. Some are living in fear and worry, full of cares and anxieties. When a Christian doesn't really know what became theirs when they were born again, they will live far below their true potential in Christ because the realities of their new creation will not have dawned on them.

When God planned and implemented our salvation, His plan and purpose was for the born-again Believer to live at a new level of life higher than that of fallen humanity—it is called the “**Kingdom of God**”. Jesus said: *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (have it abundantly).*^{Jn.10:10} This full or abundant life of God's Kingdom is a quality of life higher than the natural human life. This abundant life flourishes in plenty while natural human life is plagued with lack, need and shortages. Abundant life is the life of God while the natural human life is the discordant existence of fallen humanity. *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*^{1Pet.2:9} Being called into the marvellous light of God implies that our lives should be wonderful and marvellous. His marvellous light should transform our lives into a marvel. His marvellous light should surround our life with His magnificence and make us magnificent. The problem of some believers is that they enter into the new life with a lot of baggage from their old life and they continue life as before, unaware of the vast changes that have taken place in them. They try to function in their new state by utilising their old patterns of thinking, their old way of seeing, their old attitudes, their narrow mindedness, self-centred tendencies, self-seeking tendencies, full of themselves and even self-willed. They do not know that these represent part of the old things that are passed away. They try to live their new life whilst still thinking in the old way: they try to put their new wine into their old wine skins. Unfortunately

this will always spell disaster. They do not know that they need to discover the new principles that govern their new realm and yield to these principles.

So let's find out from the Word of God, the truths of God's Kingdom—of God's Kingdom here on earth as well as God's Kingdom there in heaven. Let's continue to meditate on those truths by spending time thinking about them and contemplating their implications, whilst being aware of God being with us. Then as we apply those truths to our life in the atmosphere of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*.^{Gal.5:22-23}) we will be the spiritual people God intended

Is there life after death? Yes there is! But there is also life before death, so let's live it in the fullness that Jesus has intended for us—and prepared for us—so when we face that final hurdle of death, we are truly prepared and can join with Paul in saying: *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}

Questions:

1. How can we “peer-review” our ideas of God and Christianity?
2. What role does the Bible have in discerning (checking and testing) what the Holy Spirit is saying to us?
3. What role does the Church (the gathered Believers) have in discerning (checking and testing) what the Holy Spirit is saying to us?
4. Why should we pay particular attention to our character (rather than our charisma)?
5. Why is Jesus' resurrection so important to our faith and our life?
6. What do you think the “old” means in 2Cor.5:17? (*If anyone is in Christ Jesus they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.*^{2Cor. 5:17})
7. What do you think the “new” means in 2Cor.5:17?
8. How can we keep the *old* away and the *new* near?

Sunday 27th September. Ps.96:1-7 Lk.21

Hymn: Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.

Watch out that you are not misled.^{Lk.21:8}

The Jewish leaders had plotted the greatest crime humanity has ever committed and were now asking Pilate permission to crucify the Lord of glory. Jesus told Pilate: *Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*^{Jn.18:37} And because he wanted to appease his conscience rather than discover reality, Pilate replied “*What is Truth?*” His wife had warned him: *Don't have anything to do with that man. He is not guilty. I have suffered a great deal in a dream today because of him.*^{Matt.27:19} but Pilate chose to ignore her and even his own conscience as he tried to deflect the guilt of his crime by washing his hands (which is now a cliché for trying to absolve one's guilt). Although we can all see the futility of Pilate washing his hands, we are often in a similar position where political and social pressure makes it hard for us to choose truth over expediency. It was easier for Pilate to appease the religious leaders than choose right over wrong because they were a hard-headed group of religious bigots who had made up their minds to kill Jesus and had already agitated the crowds to the verge of a riot. And for us, it is sometimes easier to “*go with the flow*” than to stand up for truth. But the consequences of our choices cannot be washed away with a bowl of water and neither can our consciences be salved with a cliché. Although we are not faced with the choice of physically crucifying the Son of God and Saviour of the world by appeasing religious bigots, we are continually faced with choosing truth over error for the sake expediency.

But even when we remain firm in our faith, we still make wrong choices sometimes—through ignorance or deception! Spiritual ignorance is the result spiritual laziness because God has given

us everything we need for life and godliness in the Person of the Holy Spirit: *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*^{2Pet.1:3-4} We also have the guidance and security of God-appointed teachers (if we are part of a Bible-believing Church): *It was [Jesus] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, 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.4:11-13} However, we are still capable of being misled by the devil, by other people and even by our own minds. This is why Jesus warned against deception: *Watch out that you are not misled.*^{Lk.21:8} *Be careful that you are not deceived. Many will come using my name. They will say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near.' Don't follow them!*^{Lk.20:8} Although fancy ideas and false promises may initially seem wonderful, they are eventually shown up for what they really are. *For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.*^{2Pet.2:18-19} No one in their right mind would believe something they thought was not true—for instance, a counterfeit a £9 note would never work! Deception only works because people don't realise that they are being deceived and the devil is quite an expert at deception. He is the father of lies and has been deceiving from the beginning. *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.*^{Jn.8:44-47} *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.*^{2Cor.11:3} Jesus defeated and disarmed the devil when He died on the cross: *He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.*^{1Jn.3:8} *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*^{Col.2:15} But satan is still the deceiver and he is still very active in deceiving people: *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.12:9} *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.*^{1Tim.4:1-3} It is said that the devil will often flood your mind with truth in order to float one lie! The devil is a spirit (a created being but without a physical body) and although spirits are real, they are not normally seen—and if someone actually saw the devil, they would be terrified by him rather than deceived! The devil normally uses people to put thoughts into other people's mind to deceive them. *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.*^{2Cor.11:13-15} *I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.*^{Rom.16:17-20}

Sadly, the damage caused by deception can last a long time—even after people realise they have been deceived. That is why we need the Holy Spirit to heal us after we have been deceived and

also to lead us into truth to prevent us from being deceived in the first place. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit (also called the Spirit of Truth) would be His Substitute—the true “*Vicar of Christ*” (vicar means *substitute*, as in *vicarious*). *If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*^{Jn.14:15-18} **God is Truth:** *Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.*^{Psa.31:5} **Jesus is Truth:** *Jesus answered: I am the way and the truth and the life.*^{Jn.14:6} *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth... From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*^{Jn.1:14-17} **The Holy Spirit is Truth:** *And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.*^{1Jn.5:6} **And all Three Persons speak the same language of truth:** *But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own. He will speak only what he hears. And he will tell you what is still going to happen. He will bring me glory by receiving something from me and showing it to you. Everything that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Holy Spirit will receive something from me and show it to you.*^{Jn.16:13-15}

Not only did Jesus warn against being deceived, but He also warned about dulling our minds—especially by alcohol and anxiety: *Be on your guard, so that your minds are not dulled [Lit your hearts are not weighed down] from carousing, [or hangovers] drunkenness, and worries of life, or that day will come on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come on all who live on the face of the whole earth. But be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man.*^{Lk.21:34-36} But the antidote to a dull mind is to keep alert: *Be alert at all times. Pray so that you have the power to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand in front of the Son of Man.*^{Lk.21:36} *Be alert. Be firm in the Christian faith. Be courageous and strong. Do everything with love.*^{1Cor.16:13-14} *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} *To the messenger of the church in Sardis, write: The one who has God's seven spirits and the seven stars says: I know what you have done. You are known for being alive, but you are dead. Be alert, and strengthen the things that are left which are about to die. I have found that what you are doing has not been completed in the sight of my God. So remember what you received and heard. Obey, and change the way you think and act. If you're not alert, I'll come like a thief. You don't know when I will come. But you have a few people in Sardis who have kept their clothes clean. They will walk with me in white clothes because they deserve it. Everyone who wins the victory this way will wear white clothes. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life. I will acknowledge them in the presence of my Father and his angels. Let the person who has ears listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.*^{Rev.3:1-6} *See, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who remains alert and doesn't lose his clothes. He will not have to go naked and let others see his shame.*^{Rev.16:15}

Being part of God's family gives us the privilege of being led by the Holy Spirit: *Certainly, all who are guided by God's Spirit are God's children. You haven't received the spirit of slaves that leads you into fear again. Instead, you have received the spirit of God's adopted children by which we call out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. If we are his children, we are also God's heirs.*^{Rom.8:14-16}

So let's take care that we are not misled and keep our minds alert to the Holy Spirit's leading and especially to the truth He applies from the Scriptures. And let us also continue to make every effort to stand firm in our faith as we live up to the standards of God's Family. *By standing firm you will gain life. “By your patience possess your souls.*^{Lk.21:19} *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*^{Heb.12:14-15} Then we will be really Jesus' disciples: *Jesus spoke to the Jews who had believed him. “If you obey my teaching,” he said, “you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth. And the truth will set you free.”*^{Jn.8:31-32}

Questions:

1. How would you answer Pilate's question: "What is Truth?"
2. How can we ensure that we stand firm in the faith and don't get swept along with the current of popular opinion or appeasement?
3. How can we ensure that we don't make the wrong choices through ignorance?
4. How can we ensure that we don't make the wrong choices through deception?
5. How can we access God's healing if we discover that we have been deceived?
6. How can we keep our minds from being dulled?
7. How can we ensure that we grow in the faith?

October

Yes, LORD, walking in the way of Your laws, we wait for You; Your Name and renown are the desire of our hearts. Is.26:8

Thought for the Month:

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. R.A.Torrey

Sunday 4th October Ps.96:1-7 Lk.22:1-34

Hymn: Stand up, stand up for Jesus.

Until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. *I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.*^{Lk.22:15-16}

The true relevance of Passover is not in its origin but in its fulfilment. The Passover meal was to remind the Hebrews of when God's judgement passed over His people because a lamb had been slain and when they were delivered from slavery and formed into a nation. But the real purpose of Passover was to illustrate that God's judgement will pass over His people when the "Lamb of God" would be slain and that God's people would be delivered from slavery to sin and be formed into a holy nation. The Bible is God's record of His plan of salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament part of the Bible foretold God's plan of salvation through history, types, shadows, allegories, poetry, prose and prophecy. And when Jesus came, He fulfilled those pictures and removed the mysteries surrounding them. *God can strengthen you by the Good News and the message I tell about Jesus Christ. He can strengthen you by revealing the mystery that was kept in silence for a very long time but now is publicly known. The everlasting God ordered that what the prophets wrote must be shown to the people of every nation to bring them to the obedience that is associated with faith. God alone is wise. Glory belongs to him through Jesus Christ forever! Amen.*^{Rom.16:25-27}

The Jews were expecting the Messiah to establish a Kingdom to free them from the Romans so when John the Baptist started preaching "prepare the way for the Lord" they thought he was the coming Messiah—which he refuted: *Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."*^{Jn.1:19-20} Then Jesus began His ministry with a clear message that the Kingdom of God was about to begin: *The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*^{Mk.1:15} As Jesus continued His ministry, He explained more about the kingdom of God and eventually confirmed that He was the Messiah. *Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."*^{Mk.14:61-62} However, most of the Jews rejected both the Messiah and His message because they were expecting a political kingdom, not a spiritual kingdom. A kingdom is actually a **king's domain** and so God's kingdom is the domain of God. God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom not an earthly kingdom and Jesus is a spiritual king not a political king: *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} Although the whole world is God's domain, the Kingdom that Jesus spoke about is His dominion in people's hearts when they receive Him as Lord. *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*^{Matt.7:21-23}

Jesus described His kingdom in many ways. **A spiritual kingdom:** *I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.*^{Jn.3:5} **A classless kingdom:** *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...* **A righteous kingdom:** *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...* **An authentic kingdom:** *For I*

tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.^{Matt.5:3f} **A living kingdom:** The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field.^{Matt.13:31} And Jesus said we should pray that God's kingdom (His rule and will) would come here on earth: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* Although we will not experience God's kingdom on earth as a political kingdom, we can experience God's kingdom as a spiritual kingdom. We can experience the reality of heaven's atmosphere here on earth—and then we will be heavenly minded **and** also be of practical use on earth too!

During Jesus' ministry He explained how wonderful God's kingdom is compared to the kingdom of the world (*i.e.* how wonderful it is to be part of God's family compared to not being part of God's family): *Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart... The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*^{Matt.13:18-23} There are so many benefits to the being part of God's kingdom—a **blessed life:** *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven;*^{Matt.5:3} a **righteous, peaceful and joyous life:** *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men;*^{Rom.14:17-18} an **empowered life:** *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.*^{1Cor.4:20} an **overcoming life:** *Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.*^{Rom.12:10-11} And these benefits are not beyond us but available to every Believer because God's kingdom is within us: *Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."*^{Lk.17:1-2} With such a contrast between God's spiritual kingdom and this world's natural kingdom (being part of God's family or not being part of God's family), only a fool would refuse God's dominion over their life—but then that is what a fool is! *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."*^{Ps.14:1} *A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.*^{Prov.18:2} *But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.*^{Lk.12:20-21} God Himself qualifies us to inherit His kingdom: *Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*^{Col.1:12-14} **But that qualification only comes after repentance:** *From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*^{Matt.4:17}

Repentance means "to change your thinking" and so Christian repentance is changing our thinking—changing our thinking about God, about sin and about ourselves. Our old pattern of thinking, seeing, talking, acting, behaving and reacting must change and a new pattern must take its 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} 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, if we misunderstand what God has said, we will misrepresent God. Today there is a tendency to rename "sin" as "alternative behaviour" and then excuse that "alternative behaviour" by calling it "different" instead of "rebellion" or "wrong". 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} We have all sinned: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.^{Rom.3:23} 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 salvation 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. The Psalmist speaks of this attitude of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people and contrasts it with the gracelessness, ingratitude and aggressiveness of sinners and scoffers: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*^{Ps.1:1-2} These mockers and scoffers God and His kingdom values—especially the New Birth and its fruit of a new heart, manifesting as a love for God, His Word and His people. *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love other believers. The person who doesn’t grow in love remains in death. Everyone who hates another believer is a murderer, and you know that a murderer doesn’t have eternal life.*^{1Jn.3:14-15} Those who keep their old attitude toward God, His Word and His people, disconnect themselves from the Head which soon leads to death—death of joy and blessings, and if they don’t repent, the death of spiritual life itself! When we realise what God has done for us in qualifying us to share in His kingdom, it should cause us to overflow with gratitude and a desire to honour Him—with our whole and a holy life. We would never do or say things that are wrong or disrespectful to God—and if we were to (through deception or ignorance), we should be quick to repent because we know that true repentance gives us a clear conscience and leaves us with no regret. *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*^{2Cor.7:10} Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, *“My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.”*^{Acts.23:1} *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*^{1Pet.3:15-16}

Although our ears and eyes are the entrance to our heart, its exit is our mouth! *For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.*^{Pron.23:7} *But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean.’*^{Matt.15:18-20} That is why we must watch our language—those who still talk like the world are probably still of the world! We change the way we talk by changing the way we think—and we change the way we think 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: *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} And now it is up to us to use that sound mind and keep it renewed! The Passover has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God is here among us—and so the big question is: So what? What difference does it make to us? Hopefully we will respond by making every effort to live our lives as model citizens and as a testimony to God’s grace in our lives.

The Life Look

O God, I bless You for the happy moment when I first saw Your law fulfilled in Christ, Your wrath appeased, my death destroyed, my sin forgiven and my soul saved. Ever since, You have been faithful to me; daily have I proven the power of Jesus' blood; daily have I known the strength of Your Spirit, my Teacher, Director and Sanctifier.

I want no other Rock to build upon than that I have in You; I desire no other hope than that of gospel truth; I need no other look than that which gazes on the cross.

Forgive me if I have tried to add anything to that One Foundation; if I have unconsciously relied upon my knowledge, experience or deeds and not seen them as filthy rags; if I have attempted to complete what is perfect in Christ. May my cry be always, Only Jesus! Only Jesus! In Him is freedom from condemnation, fullness in His righteousness, eternal vitality in His given life, enduring union in fellowship with Him. In Him I have all that I can hold—but enlarge me to take in more! If I backslide, let me, like Peter weep bitterly and return to Him; if I am tempted and have no joy, give me strength enough to trust in Him; if I am weak, may I trust in His eternal love; if in extremity, let me feel that He can deliver me; if driven to the edge of hope and to the pit of despair, grant me grace to fall into His arms. O God, hear me, do for me more than I can ask, think, or dream. *(from Puritan Prayers)*

Questions:

1. What is the significance of Passover?
2. How does the Bible define a slave? (see 2Pet.2:19; Heb.2:14-15; Rom.6:16; Jn.8:34-36)
3. What is your definition of the Kingdom of God?
4. Who qualifies to be a citizen in God's kingdom?
5. What does “repentance” mean?
6. What does true repentance achieve (*see 2Cor.7:10*)
7. What are the signs of true repentance?

Sunday 11th October Ps.97:1-6 Lk.22:31-71

Hymn: Turn your eyes upon Jesus

Pray that you will not fall into temptation. ^{Lk.22:40}

Prayer is communicating with God—and like all communication it should be a dialogue not a monologue. Talking is always good and is especially good when we talk to God. Brother Andrew (Founder of *Open Doors*) said: *Our prayers can go where we cannot... there are no borders, no prison walls, no doors that are closed to us when we pray.* The Bible says that we should pray continually and never give up: *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.* ^{Lk.18:1} *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* ^{1Thes.5:16-18} And God hears the prayer of the righteous: *The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.* ^{Jas.5:16} Paul the Apostle urges us to pray for everyone—especially those in authority—and the purpose of those prayers is so we can peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness as we promote the kingdom of God: *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.* ^{1Tim.2:1-6} However, not all prayer pleases God: *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him... The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.* ^{Prov.15:8;29} *If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.* ^{Prov.28:9} And there are some situations that we should **not** pray about. God told Jeremiah **not** to pray for Israel because they had turned from God to idols (and if we cling to idols we forfeit God's grace: *Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.* ^{Jon.2:8}) *So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers light*

*the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger. But am I the one they are provoking? declares the LORD. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?^{Jer.7:16-19} Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.^{Jer.11:14} Then the LORD said to me, “Do not pray for the well-being of this people. Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.^{Jer.14:11-12} Then the LORD said to me: “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go!^{Jer.15:1} Even now, under the New Covenant, there are some situations that we should **not** pray about: *If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.*^{1Jn.5:16-17}*

Some years ago, I resolved that I would only pray Biblical, New Covenant prayers—prayers that God would answer rather than prayers that God would not answer (or could not answer). There are some prayers in the Bible that God has already answered and so we no longer need to pray them. For instance, if we are a Christian, **we no longer needed to plead for blessings provided by Christ's vicarious death.** Those blessings are accepted by faith and then appropriated by putting our faith (trust) into action. And neither do we need to ask God to do what He has commissioned us to do. Because God is sending us—and He is with us—we just need to go in the strength we have: *The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?” “But Lord,” Gideon asked, “how can I save Israel? ...The LORD answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together.”^{Jdg.6:14-16} C.H.Spurgeon, that great C19th Baptist pastor, said: *Spiritual men, in their distresses, turn at once to prayer, even as the stag when hunted takes to flight. Prayer is a never-failing resort; it is sure to bring a blessing with it. Even apart from the answer of our supplications, the very exercise of prayer is healthy to the man engaged in it. Far be it from me ever to say a word in disparagement of the holy, happy, heavenly exercise of prayer. But, beloved, there are times when prayer is not enough—when prayer itself is out of season. You will think that a hard saying, and say, “Who can hear it?...” Moses prayed that God would deliver his people; but the Lord said to him Why do you cry to me? As much as to say this is not the time for prayer, it is the time for action. Tell the people of Israel to go forward.^{Ex.15:14} When we have prayed over a matter to a certain degree, it then becomes sinful to tarry any longer; our plain duty is to carry our desires into action, and having asked God's guidance, and having received divine power from on high, to go at once to our duty without any longer deliberation or delay.**

There are two basic truths about prayer: **Jesus prayed** and **He taught us to pray.** *One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.”^{Lk.11:1f} The prayer life that Jesus taught begins by contemplating our rapport with the Father. We are created in His likeness. We are His children. 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.^{Mat.6:9-13} In prayer we express our dependence on God and ponder the honour of being at one with our Lord. In prayer we anticipate fellowship, inspiration and affinity with Almighty God, our heavenly Father. In prayer we are aware that we are communication with God the Holy Spirit, who resides with in us. In prayer we can*

absorb God's love; discuss with the Father His plans and how we are to be involved; express our confidence in Him and our gratitude for the high honour of being a partner with Him. Prayer is a hallowed season—it is never pleading and begging for divine favours or fighting demonic powers in so called spiritual warfare.

Of course we should pray for others—especially that they proclaim God's Word effectively. Paul urged believers to pray that *the **Word of the Lord** would have free course.*^{2Thes.3:1} He asked the Colossians to *pray that God would open to him a door of **utterance**, to **speak** the mystery of Christ.*^{Col.4:3} And he asked the Ephesians to *pray that **utterance** may be given me that I may **open my mouth and speak boldly** to make known the mystery of the Gospel.*^{Eph.6:18-19} But in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told His Disciples to pray for themselves: *Pray that you will not fall into temptation.* Jesus had already taught them to pray this way: *Lead us not into temptation.* The NIV translates this verse: *Keep us from falling into sin when we are tempted. Save us from the evil one.* Oscar Wild said that the best way to stop temptations is to yield to them, **but that is not God's way!** No temptation we face is unique and God has made a way out for us: *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.*^{1Cor.10:12-13}

Temptations are not sin—even Jesus was tempted—and although we will never stop them, we can render temptations powerless by using the most powerful word in our language. We can say “**no**”!!! *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.*^{Tit.2:11-14} But we must to stay alert—and we stay alert by staying focused on Jesus: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*^{Heb.12:1-3} We stay focused on Jesus through staying firm in our faith (which comes from sound doctrine), staying in step with the Spirit (by praying Biblical prayers) and Christian fellowship: *Be alert. Be firm in the Christian faith. Be courageous and strong. Do everything with love.*^{1Cor.16:13-14} *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*^{Gal.5:25} *Be alert at all times. Pray so that you have the power to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand in front of the Son of Man.*^{Lk.21:36} *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}

Jesus' Disciples were too weak to keep watch with Him: *Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”*^{Matt.26:40-41} However, we don't have to rely on our own ability or strength because the Holy Spirit intercedes for us: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.*^{Rom.8:26-27} The word intercede means: *to meet and talk with someone*—in the way that Jesus met and talked with the Disciples on their way to Emmaus: *They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them.*^{Lk.24:14-15} Reflecting on their encounter with Jesus, they said: *Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*^{Lk.24:32} That is what happens with us when the Holy Spirit intercedes for us!

As we pray that we will not fall into temptation—and especially that we won't fall into sin when we are tempted—let's take the sentiments of this prayer from A.W. Tozer and make it our own prayer: *Lord make me childlike. Deliver me from the urge to compete with another for prestige or position. I would be simple and artless as a little child. Deliver me from pose and pretence. Forgive me for thinking of myself. Help me to forget myself and find my true peace in beholding You.*

A Convert's First Prayer

My Father, I could never have sought my happiness in Your love, unless You had first loved me. Your Spirit has encouraged me by grace to seek You; has made known to me Your reconciliation in Jesus; has taught me to believe it; has helped me to take You for my God and portion.

Grant me to grow in the knowledge and experience of Your love and walk in it all the way to glory. Blessed for ever be Your fatherly affection, which chose me to be one of Your children by faith in Jesus. I thank You for giving me the desire to live as such.

In Jesus, my Elder Brother, I have my new birth, restraining power and renewing grace. It is by Your Spirit I call You Father, believe in You and love You. Strengthen me inwardly for every purpose of my Christian life. Let Your Spirit continually reveal to me my interest in Christ and open to me the riches of Your love in Him. May He abide in me that I may know my union with Jesus and enter into constant fellowship with Him. By Your Spirit may I daily live to You, rejoice in Your love, find it the same to me as to Your Son and become rooted and grounded in You as a house on rock. I know but little—increase my knowledge of Your love in Jesus. Keep me pressing forward for clearer discoveries of Your love, so that I may find its eternal fullness. Magnify Your love to me according to its greatness and not according to my deserts or prayers; and whatever increase Your give, let it draw out greater love to You. *(from Puritan Prayers)*

Questions:

How would you define Prayer?

Why should we pray?

Is there a time when we shouldn't pray?

Is it a sin to be tempted?

How can we overcome temptations?

What role does the Holy Spirit have in our prayers?

What role does the Holy Spirit have in resisting temptation?

What should we do if yield to temptation?

Sunday 18th October. Ps.97:6-16. Lk.23:1-25

Hymn: How Great Thou Art

Background: There are four Herods mentioned in the Bible. Herod the Great was the first of the his dynasty and although he had some great achievements, he was far from great! He was very affluent and influential, bailing out the cash-strapped Olympic Games in 12BC. He built Caesarea Maritima, (a brand-new city and harbour whose facilities would be a credit to any port today) and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Married 10 times, Herod was described as “*a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis*”—he was renowned for murder of his wife (uxoricide), his brothers (fratricide), his sons (filicide) and his children (infanticide)! So it not surprising that the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem^{Matt.2:16} isn't mentioned in historical books! King Herod was given the title “*king of Judea*” by Rome but he was from Edom and not even a Jew—and so he had no legal right the Jewish throne. Herod died shortly after he tried to kill the baby Jesus at Bethlehem and the Romans divided his kingdom among three of his sons and his sister. Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee (*tetrarch* means governor of one

of four divisions of a country). Herod Antipas had John the Baptist executed and was intrigued with Jesus because he thought he was John the Baptist returned from the dead: *At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him."* Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison... and had John beheaded in the prison.^{Mat.14:1-10} Herod Antipas was involved in the trials and crucifixion of Jesus. It was Herod the Great's grandson, Herod Agrippa I, who had the apostle James killed: *It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.*^{Acts 12:1-2} Herod Agrippa's daughters were Bernice and Drusilla^{Acts.24-25} and his son, Herod Agrippa II, was almost persuaded to become a Christian: *King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king... Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 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?" Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."*^{Acts 25:13-26:29}

One of our favourite songs is: *Jesus, Yours is the sweetest Name of all. Jesus, You always hear me when I call. Jesus, You lift me up each time I fall. Jesus, Sweetest Name of all.* Although we sing with enthusiasm: *You always hear me when I call*, in reality, not every prayer is answered. Sometimes it seems that God doesn't even hear our prayers and although we need a miracle, our situation looks unaltered. George Canty wrote in "*I was just thinking*" (available from our Church website): A daily newspaper ran an article entitled: "*Does Prayer Work?*" The world (and sadly many in the Church too) seem to think that prayer generates some kind of power—a measurable but mystical energy—and so the more the prayer, the higher the calibration! The only way prayer works is if God answers it—but He doesn't care for people testing Him to see if He does! The infamous King Herod had always had a fancy to see a miracle, like going to the circus. He had heard wonders were taking place and superstitiously feared the prophet John the Baptist had come back from heaven. Then he learned that Jesus was performing the healing miracles and he believed Jesus did perform wonders, which is more than some liberals and Bible critics do now. When Jesus was arrested, He was sent to Herod and the king was delighted, hoping to see a miracle as a royal command performance! There had been plenty of opportunities for Herod to meet Jesus during His three years of ministry, but when Herod wanted to see Jesus perform a miracle, his interest in Jesus was merely inquisitiveness—there was no concern about his soul or even about justice—so Jesus ignored this pompous royal nobody. *When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.*^{Lk.23:8-9}

God isn't waiting for somebody's proof to find out if He exists! God's reputation has not been handed to the BBC and ITV and He is not seeking their attention—perhaps they should seek His attention and find out what God thinks of them and their programmes! The vast quantity of modern stories, thrillers and dramas are vacuous and empty of any moral point or godliness. The formula used is one of immorality, violence, revenge, unforgiveness, worship of money, hatred and greed. This is not new—the devil tried it out on Jesus. *The devil took him (Jesus) to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the son of God' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'* Christ answered: *It is also written: 'Do not put your God to the test'.* God never tries to prove to us that He is God—He doesn't need to!

Many people pretend to try God out with "prayer" and if their "prayer" isn't answered immediately, they either profess disappointment or say that is 'proof' prayer doesn't work. When

people test God, He is under no obligation to oblige, but true faith is never disappointed—whether God answers prayer in the way we want or not. Spiritual maturity is being able to leave the answer to our prayers to God who is sovereign—and be at peace, whatever the outcome. This is not a cop-out and it is not fatalistic. Fate says: “*What will be, will be*” but **faith** says: “**What God’s will is, will be**”! Contentment with godliness is of great worth: *Teach these things, Timothy, and encourage everyone to obey them. Some people may contradict our teaching, but these are the wholesome teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. These teachings promote a godly life. Anyone who teaches something different is arrogant and lacks understanding. Such a person has an unhealthy desire to quibble over the meaning of words. This stirs up arguments ending in jealousy, division, slander, and evil suspicions. These people always cause trouble. Their minds are corrupt, and they have turned their backs on the truth. To them, a show of godliness is just a way to become wealthy. Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content.*^{1Tim.6:1-8}

A prayer meeting *per se* is no guarantee that God will answer our prayers—even if there are hundreds of people praying. Although God does answer prayer, it is the prayer of a righteous person that pleases God, not the wicked. *The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him... The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*^{Prov.15:8;29} It only takes one prayer of one righteous person to be effective—God answered Elijah’s prayer even though he was afraid of Jezebel! *The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was as human as we are, and yet when he prayed earnestly that no rain would fall, none fell for three and a half years! Then, when he prayed again, the sky sent down rain and the earth began to yield its crops.*^{Jas.5:16-18}

God is gracious and He still answers prayer when we are weak in our faith—but that is no credit to us. Those who are weak in their faith—those who believe one minute and don’t believe the next—don’t please God^{Heb.11:6} and the Bible call them double-minded and unstable: *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.*^{Jas.1:5-8}

Prayer cannot be reduced to a formula where we get answers if we say the right words—we need right motives when we pray. *What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.*^{Jas.4:1-3} Our motive must be God’s kingdom: *Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.*^{Matt.6:33} Of course we should strive to be balanced, but balance doesn't mean taking a little bit of this and a little bit of that, a little bit of faith and a little bit of unbelief; a little bit of hope and a little bit of despair—as if having a little bit of each gives us balance! Balance means understanding enough of the Scripture so that we don’t distort any particular thing. This comes with time—it doesn't happen overnight—but one of the problems with assessing balance is that we all think we're balanced! But in our pursuit of this virtue, maybe the best thing is to not think about trying to get balance, *per se*, but rather to think about having a breadth of understanding of the Scriptures and of the issues that we are dealing with. And having a breadth of understanding will help us accomplish balance. Balance is when all of the relevant factors and relevant information is taken into consideration in order to draw a conclusion about the matter in hand—people get weird when their knowledge and therefore their application gets out of balance.

Yes, God always hears our prayers—but we don’t always like the answers! Too often we are locked into our own mind-set and can only see our situation from our point of view instead of

God's perspective. That is why we need be heavenly minded and see life from above where Christ is seated: *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*^{Col.3:1-2}

Assurance

Almighty God, I am loved with everlasting love and clothed in eternal righteousness. My peace flows like a river; my comforts are many and large; my joy and triumph unutterable; my soul is lively with a knowledge of salvation; my sense of justification is unclouded. I have scarcely anything to pray for—Jesus smiles upon my soul as a ray of heaven and my supplications are swallowed up in praise! How sweet is the glorious doctrine of election when based upon Your Word and wrought inwardly within the soul! I bless You that You will keep the sinner that You have loved and have engaged—that he will not forsake You, else I would never get to heaven. I wrong the work of grace in my thought if I deny my new nature and my eternal life. If Jesus were not my Righteousness and Redemption, I would sink into the lowest hell by my misdoings, shortcomings, unbelief, unlove. If Jesus were not my Sanctification by the power of His Spirit, there is no limit to sin I might commit. O when shall I have His mind! When shall I be conformed to His image? All the good things of life are less than nothing when compared with Your love, and with one glimpse of Your electing favour. All the treasures of a million worlds could not make me richer, happier, more contented—for Your unsearchable riches are mine. One moment of communion with Your, one view of Your grace, is ineffable and inestimable. But O God, I could not long after Your presence if I did not know the sweetness of it. (*from Puritan Prayers*)

Questions

What is your definition of a “miracle”?

Does God always hear us when we pray?

Does God always respond to prayer?

What does God respond to?

How would you define “spiritual maturity”?

What is “balance”?

How can we keep balanced?

Sunday 25th October 10.30am. Ps.98. Lk.23:26-56

Hymn: Crown Him with many crowns

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.”^{Lk.23:47}

We were created to praise, to worship, to glorify, to love God. The Westminster Shorter Confession puts it like this: *Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever* and the most important commandment is this: *'Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD.' Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*^{1Mk.12:29-30} God is looking for worshipers. Jesus declared, *“Believe me, woman, 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 spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”*^{Jn.4:21-24} (the word “seek” can also mean “demand”!) So, what exactly do we actually mean by worship? Most Church meetings are advertised as “Worship Services” but the truth is that often there is little *worship* in the “worship services” and relatively few hearts are sincerely lifted up in worship during those services.

In her book, “*Glory*”, Ruth Heflin writes: *I see the difference between praising and worshiping as if I were part of the Palm Sunday procession. I join others as we take our coats off and throw them down exuberantly so the Lord can ride over them. We pluck off palm branches and wave them, even strewing them in His pathway. We shout with the whole crowd, “Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord.” That is praise. I suddenly spot a little donkey moving along the Palm Sunday route. It continues on its way until it passes directly in front of me. It stops. Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is seated on that donkey. He looks at me. He says, “I love you.” Tears stream down my cheeks, as I reply, “Lord, I love You.” Now, I’m no longer waving my palm and shouting, “Hosanna!” I’m bowing in worship and saying, “My Lord and my God.” It seems that the crowd is no longer present. In reality, the multitude is still there all around me. Others are still waving their palms. They’re still shouting, “Hosanna!” But I’m totally oblivious to what is happening around me. He looks at me, and all the love of eternity is poured into my soul. At this moment, I know how much He loves me. I know His majesty in a way I have never known it before. Nobody has to tell me He is King. I know it, and I worship Him, bowing before Him, recognizing His majesty, His regal position. Worship is you shut away with God. In the middle of the busiest street in town, in the busiest restaurant, in the midst of the greatest activity of the day, you find little moments to be alone with the Lord. Thank God there can be many moments throughout the day in which it is just you and the Lord. Even though many things are happening around you, you can close yourself in with Him.*

One of the first secrets of worship is how it differs from praise. When we praise the Lord, we **will** to praise—we choose to praise by opening our mouth and making our lips do their duty. But worship is different—we **don’t will** to worship. Worship is a spirit (or an attribute of the Holy Spirit) and we worship by yielding ourselves to the Holy Spirit in obedience to Him. Spiritual activity is an ascent to glory and it is easy—but if we are too busy thinking about other things (even words to a song) it is hard ascend. We want our spirits to ascend and when we praise and worship in simplicity, it is easy to be lost in worship. *You have been raised up with Christ. So think about things that are in heaven. That is where Christ is. He is sitting at God’s right hand. Think about things that are in heaven. Don’t think about things that are on earth. You died. Now your life is hidden with Christ in God. Christ is your life. When he appears again, you also will appear with him in heaven’s glory.*^{Col.3:1-4} This morning we sang:

Crown Him the Lord of years, the Potentate of time,
 Creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime!
 All hail, Redeemer, hail! for You have died for me;
 Your praise shall never, never fail throughout eternity.

[Ineffably means: *incapable of being expressed, indescribable or unutterable. Sublime means: *inspiring awe, worthy of adoration, not to be excelled, supreme.* Although we are incapable of accurately expressing the glory and majesty of God, we can attempt to express the glory and majesty of God in our appreciation of Him—in our wonder, our awe, our reverence of Him. That is true worship!]*

Every culture has things that are important to it—for instance, we English are renowned for talking about the weather and so we have many words to describe the different types of rain: *mist, mizzle, drizzle, shower, cloudburst, squall, downpour, deluge, torrent, etc.!* (Google lists over 50 words but some are not appropriate for the pulpit!) Israel was founded when God revealed Himself to Moses as the “*I am*”: *God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.”* God also said to Moses, “*Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.*”^{Ex.3:14-15} And worship was the very reason for Israel’s existence: *But be careful that you don’t forget the LORD. Remember that he brought you out of Egypt. That’s the land where you were slaves. Worship the LORD your God. He is the only one you should serve.*^{Deut.6:12-13} So it is not surprising that the Hebrew language has more than 30 different words and derivatives for praise and worship—and they are always active or

demonstrative (*there is a list of some of them at the end of the notes*). The English language has about a dozen words: praise, worship, honour, blessing, glory, adoration, reverence. One of the main Greek word for praise is *enlogeō* which literally means *to say a good word*—we use the English word *eulogy* at funerals when we say something nice about the person who has died. Another Greek word for praise is *doxa* (from where we get *doxology*), which means *to have a good opinion*. Luke records that Centurion praised (*doxa*) God by having of Him a good opinion of Jesus: *He praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man."*^{Lk.23:} Mark records the Centurion saying that Jesus was the Son of God because of the way He died: *And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"*^{Mk.15:39} Matthew records that an earthquake that frightened the Centurion into exclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God: *When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"*^{Matt.27:54} Although the Centurion didn't appear to have any faith, he was able to praise God by having a good opinion of Jesus when he acknowledged that Jesus was righteous and the Son of God. Anyone can have a good opinion of God—Believer or non-Believer, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or even pagan—but God is seeking people who will worship Him, not just people who have a good opinion of Him: *Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth... Those who worship Him must do it out of their very being—their spirits—in true adoration.*^{Jn.4:23-24} We must become people who worship God—and we become worshippers by submitting ourselves to God, by obeying Him and doing His will. *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..." "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you... and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, **because you have obeyed me.**"*^{Gen.22:5;18}

Although Jesus takes us into the place where God lives (salvation), we still need to experience God in our everyday life: *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise [this word praise is *tehillah*].*^{Ps.100:4} *Tehillah praise* implies that God has responded to our faith. Whilst other forms of praise involve faith, *Tehillah praise* is suggesting that God has responded to our faith to the extent that He literally inhabits our faith and is enthroned in the midst of it. *Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise [Tehillah] of Israel.*^{Ps.22:3} Praise in a Christian's life is a good indication of their distance to or from God. If someone is far off from God (even though they are still saved) you can be sure they will not be a praiser—they will not be openly speaking well of God. If they are close to God, praise is something they do continually because praise is a natural response to intimacy with God. Believers who are in fellowship with God praise Him because they have a dynamic appreciation of God, His grace and His goodness—in fact, they can't help but praise God (have a good opinion of God and say good words about Him): *The whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."*^{Lk.19:37-40} **Worship is all that we are, responding to all that He is:** *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.*^{Matt.2:10-11} To worship is to quicken the consciousness by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God and to devote the will to the purpose of God. Under the Old Covenant, the ministry (lifestyle) of the Priests was Worship (enjoying God). The Levites could praise but only the Priests could offer sacrifices in the Holy Place. Under the New Covenant, all Believers are Priests and our ministry (lifestyle) is worship (enjoying God)—we offer sacrifices of praise to Him and live our lives in dedication to Him. *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is*

pleased.^{Heb.13:15-16} Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 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.12:1-2}

God wants us to know Him—to know Him as the One Who was, Who is, and Who is to come. God wants us to know Him in such a way that we will worship Him in the beauty of holiness. God wants us to seek to be worshipers above all else and to join in the heavenly worship: *Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."*^{Rev.4:8} This place of worship is the footstool of the Lord (*footstool* means being in submission and obedience to Him). *Let us go to the sanctuary of the LORD; let us worship at the footstool of his throne. Arise, O LORD, and enter your resting place, along with the Ark, the symbol of your power. May your priests be clothed in godliness; may your loyal servants sing for joy.*^{Ps.132:7-9} We can't worship by proxy, by someone else doing our worshiping for us—we must worship God ourself. So let's do it!

Christ Alone

O God, Your main plan and the end of Your will, is to make Christ glorious and beloved in heaven—where He is now ascended and where one day, all the elect will behold His glory and love and glorify him for ever. In this world You have given us a beginning but one day it will be perfected in the realm above. You have helped us to see and know Christ, to take Him, receive Him, to possess Him, to love Him—and to bless Him in my thoughts, my words and my life. Let us study and stand for discipline and all the ways of worship, out of love for Christ; to show our thankfulness; to seek and know Your will from love; to hold Your will in love, to daily care for and keep this state of thought. You have led us to place all our nature and happiness in oneness with Christ; in having thought and mind centred only on Him; in being like Him in communicating good to others—this is our heaven on earth but we need the force, energy and impulses of Your Spirit to carry us on our way. Here, it is our duty to be as Christ in this world, to do what He would do, to live as He would live, to walk in love and meekness. Then He will be known and we will have peace in death. (*from Puritan Prayers*)

Questions

1. What is the difference between the revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God from "*flesh and blood*" and the revelation from God? (Matt.16:16-17; Gal.1:16; 1Cor.15:50; Eph.6:12; Heb.2:14—you may need to look up more than one translation to find "*flesh and blood*").
2. Although the words "*praise*" and "*worship*" are sometimes interchangeable, how does Ruth Heflin explain the difference?
3. List as many English words for *praise* and *worship* as you can.
4. The Old Covenant priests offered animals as sacrifices to God. What do we offer to God as New Covenant priests? (Heb.13:15-15; Rom.12:1-2;15:15-16; 1Pet.2:4-10)
5. Which is your favourite word for Praise from the list Praise words below?
6. Which is your favourite verse about praise?

Praise

Hallel: used approx. 160 times in OT. To shine, boast, celebrate, commend (especially beauty), sing, be clear, laud; implies unashamed use of voice in demonstration of what you think of God. (Complete abandonment of self because we are in love (with God) as in marriage; head over heels in love) *Ps.22:23*

Tehillah: used approx. 57 times. To sing or laud; derived from *hallel* and usually means the singing of *Hallels*. It is perceived as involving music, especially singing. It is the praise that God inhabits, implying that God has responded and is enthroned in the midst of *tehillah* praise *Ps.22:3, 25*

Yadah: (Judah) used approx. 120 times in OT. Thankful expression of praise from root word meaning to throw out the hand; hence to lift up hands. (hands are an extension of our personalities.) [God loves it, flesh hates it and devil is devastated by it] *Ps.9:1 Ps.52:9*

Barak: used approx. 330 times in OT. To kneel bless salute praise. Of all the words for praise, this is the only one that infers some kind of silence *Ps.96:2*. To praise God (*barak*) is to enthrone Him as Lord—to kneel before Him; thus when He no longer has pre-eminence in our lives we praise (*barak*) someone or something else. This is called a curse. *See Job 1:5*.

Zamar: used 40 times: to make music, lit to pluck the strings and sing praises accompanied by that music. (Gk *Psalms*) *Ps.47:7*

Towdah: used approx. 30 times. Thanksgiving. A sacrifice of praise or thanks before receiving the manifestation—a total agreement with the Word. It is an act of faith beyond which God moves to bring deliverance. Also implies lifting of hands; in Leviticus it is used in connection with offering of thanksgiving which has already been examined for purity. *Lev.7:12,13,15; Lev.22:29; Ps.50:23*

Shabach: used approx. 7 times. To commend, triumph, glory, shout *Ps.63:3*

Shachah: means to bow down, prostrate, to fall on knees with forehead touching the ground, to fall flat, to reverence. *Gen.22:5; Ex.34:14; Ps.95:6*

Proskuneo (Gk): means to crouch, do reverence, adore. The word is taken from a word meaning to kiss, like a dog licking his master's hand. Worship is not a distant thing but an intimate activity. *Jn.4:20-24; Lk.4:7-8* the devil asked Jesus to worship him and he craves for that but he can never receive *proskuneo* because it is only performed in mutual love.

Latreuo (Gk): means to minister to God, to serve (as a slave completely sold out to his lord and master). *Acts 24:14 (vs 11 proskuneo, vs14 latreuo)*

Eulogeō (Gk): to speak well of, praise, giving a blessing

Doxazō (Gk): to esteem glorious, to honour.

God is worthy of praise *Ps.18:3; Ps.145:3; 2Sam.22:4*

God creates praise *Is.57:18-19* God has ordained praise *Ps.8:1-2*

God is our praise *Deut.10:21*

God is the theme of our praise *Ps.22:25*

God formed us to praise Him *Is.43:21*

God is enthroned on our praises *Ps.22:3*

God the Father is to be praised *Luke10:21; Eph.1:3*

Jesus is to be praised *2Cor.11:31*

Praise is glorious *Ps.66:2*

Praise is good *Ps.92:1*

Praise honours God *Ps.50:23*

Praise is for everyone *Ps.103:21; Ps.117:1*

Praise is for everywhere *Ps.113:3*

Praise is forever *Ps.52:9; Ps.71:6; Rom.1:25; Rom.9:5*

Praise is a garment we put on *Is.61:3*

Praise is for happy people *Jas.5:13*

Praise is passionate *Ps.9:1; Ps.86:12; Ps.138:1*

Praise is personal *Ps.42:5/11; Ps.43:5*

Praise is corporate *Ps.22:22; Ps.44:8; Ps.67:3*

Praise is a sacrifice *Heb.13:15*

Praise is a free-will offering *Ps.54:6; Ps.119:108*

Praise is fitting *Ps.33:1; Ps.147:1*

Praise prepares a way for God's salvation *Ps.50:23*

Praise defeats the enemy *Ps.149:6-9; 2Chron.20:21-22*

Praise is audible *Ps.66:8; Jer.31:7;*

Praise is loud *Ps.26:7; Luke 17:15 Luke 19:37*

Praise is to be always on our lips *Heb.13:15; Ps.34:1*

Praise can be spoken *Lk.2:28*

Praise can be in tongues *Acts10:46*

Praise can be sung *Ps.9:2; 1Chron.16:9; Neb.12:46*

Praise can be with music *Ps.33:2; Ps.40:3; Ps.150:3*

Praise can be with dancing *Ps.149:3;Ps.150:4*

Praise awaits God in Zion *Ps.65:1*

November

In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength. Is.30:15a

Thought for the Month:

Spiritual maturity is not the ability to hear God's voice. Spiritual maturity is the ability to know, understand, and apply Scripture in every circumstance. *Greg Koukl*

Sunday 1st November Ps.100 Lk.24:1-27

Hymn: Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love

Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.^{Lk.24:27}

"Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love... Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in—that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin." This story of Jesus and His love and redemption is the theme of the Bible from cover to cover and was what Jesus explained to the two Disciples on their way to Emmaus. When we see Jesus in the whole of the Scriptures, it changes the Bible from a religious book to a reality book because we understand its real purpose. The Bible has been described as a jigsaw with each chapter and verse creating the picture of God's plan of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ. Some of the passages of Scripture may seem obscure and some even appear irrelevant, but when all the pieces are put together they make up the whole picture of salvation. *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **All Scripture** is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*^{2Tim3:14-17} Peter wrote that those who distort the Scripture (including the difficult parts) are *ignorant and unstable people*—that they twist the Scriptures to their own destruction: *Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother 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} It is not only the unbelievers and "liberal" Christians who distort the Scriptures but there are some "fundamentalist" Christians who also distort the Scriptures. They are so caught up with their superstitious theories that they distort the Scriptures—to their own destruction (they may not have lost their salvation but they have lost their sanity!).

The Bible is a uniquely prophetic book—there is no other religious or holy book that makes predictions of the future like the Bible does. But the Bible was written **for us not to us** and it cannot be read like tomorrow's newspaper! While it is true that the Bible does still have some unfulfilled prophecies pertaining to the return of Christ, it is a mistake to read the Bible as if it spoke like tomorrow's newspaper to every generation since its writing. Those who have been conditioned to regard the Bible as tomorrow's newspaper, see current events as fulfilling Scripture. They think that the Bible reveals the destiny of political countries (especially Europe), what will happen to the global economy and some even see the Covid-19 pandemic as a fulfilment of "*biblical prophecy*"! The Bible does not predict a one-world government, or a dictator who will rule the entire world, or a cashless society, or a Global Financial Crisis, or a yet-to-come 7-year tribulation, or a rebuilt end-times Temple in Jerusalem! Although any of those events **may** happen, they have nothing to do with the purpose of the Bible—which is God's plan of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ. And there are no hidden codes in the Bible either—what God has revealed, is plain for all to understand: *Then the LORD answered me, "Write the vision. Make it clear on tablets so that anyone can read it quickly."*^{Hab.2:2} *To preach the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery.*^{Eph.3:8-9} The Bible reveals that while we await the return of Christ, we are to be busy about the Lord's work—the Great Commission of communicating the gospel of repentance and remission of sin in Jesus' Name. We should be

sowing Gospel-seed that can be harvested for generations to come. We should be salt and light to our communities. We should be a prophetic light exposing the darkness being promoted by the world and their media outlets. However, the Scripture does present God's desire for all people to be saved—for the Gospel to be taken to every nation and for all nations to worship Him. But it also tells us that not all people will choose to surrender to Christ and that followers of Christ can expect tribulation as they take the Gospel to the world. *But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment.*^{2Pet.3:8-10} We are God's stewards and so it is required that we are faithful—faithful in our understanding of Scripture and faithful in applying the Scriptures: *Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.*^{1Cor.4:1-2} *A faithful, sensible servant is one to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his other household servants and feeding them. If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward. I tell you the truth, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns.*^{Matt.24:45-47}

The OT part of the Bible does have lots of prophecies about nations and politics but the purpose of those prophecies was to prepare the way for the Messiah to come at the right time, in the right place and to the right people. *But when the right time came, God sent his Son into the world. A woman gave birth to him, and he came under the control of God's laws. God sent him to pay for the freedom of those who were controlled by these laws so that we would be adopted as his children. Because you are God's children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into us to call out, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer slaves but God's children. Since you are God's children, God has also made you heirs.*^{Gal.4:4-7}

Now that Jesus has come, the prophecies in the Bible are about God's kingdom—about Jesus' authority, glory, reign and return—not about political or economic events. *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.*^{Heb.1:1-2} And the ministry of the Church is to preach God's kingdom—about Jesus' authority, glory, reign and return—and to make Disciples. *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, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*^{Matt.28:18-20}

Maturity comes as we take our place in the Body of Christ (the Church) and utilise God's gifts properly: *He handed out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth with his gifts. He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christians in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ. No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.*^{Eph.4:10-16}

Greg Koukl says that: *Spiritual maturity is not the ability to hear God's voice. Spiritual maturity is the ability to know, understand and apply Scripture in every circumstance.* That is why we should all strive to become Bible literate—to understand how to apply Scripture, not just quote Scripture. *Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth.*^{2Tim.2:15} Learning Scripture (such as our Monthly memory verses) and praying Scripture (such as our Offering prayer) are not a technique to get

what we want in life (*i.e.* positive confession philosophy) but rather, they are a means of building the truths of God's Word into our life and consciousness in dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The Scriptures are our spiritual food—they nourish our spirit: *Life is spiritual. Your physical existence doesn't contribute to that life. The words that I have spoken to you are spiritual. They are life. But some of you don't believe.*^{Jn.6:63-64} Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'^{Matt.4:4}

The Scriptures are our spiritual cleaning agent: *Christ gave up his life for the Church 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}

The Scriptures are to be applied to our daily lives: *My son, pay attention to what I say; turn your ear to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to one's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.*^{Prov.4:20-24} The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.^{Rom.4:23-25}

The Scriptures record historical events for us to learn from: *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*^{1Cor.10:6-13}

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

The Scriptures are written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son: *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*^{Jn.20:30-31}

The Scriptures are reliable: *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. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*^{2Pet.1:19-21}

So let's keep focused on what the Bible is really for—**which is to explain God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ, His Son and our Saviour!** Yes, *Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and His love... Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in—that wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.*

The Second Coming

O Son of God and Son of Man, You were incarnate, You suffered, rose and ascended for my sake. Your departure was not a token of separation but a pledge of return. Your Word, Your Promises and Your Emblems show Your death until You come again. That day is no horror to me, for Your death has redeemed me, Your Spirit fills me, Your love animates me and Your Word governs me.

I have trusted You and You have not betrayed my trust; I waited for You and not waited in vain. You will come to raise my body from the dust, and re-unite it to my soul, by a wonderful

work of infinite power and love, greater than that which bounds the oceans' waters, than that which ebbs and flows the tides, than that which keeps the stars in their courses and than that which gives life to all creatures.

I triumph now in Your promises as I shall do in their performance—for the head cannot live if the members are dead. Beyond the grave is resurrection, judgment, acquittal, dominion. Every event and circumstance of my life will be dealt with—the sins of my youth, my secret sins, the sins of abusing You, the sins of disobeying Your Word, the sins of neglecting admonitions, the sins of violating my conscience—all will be judged. And after judgment, peace and rest, life and service, employment and enjoyment. O God, keep me in this faith, and ever looking for Christ's return. *(from Puritan Prayers)*

Questions:

In your own words, explain the purpose of Scripture.

What is your favourite passage in the OT that clearly point to Jesus?

How does that illustration apply to your own salvation?

What should you do with the difficult parts of Scripture?

What should you not do with the difficult parts of Scripture?

What are the benefits of learning Scripture?

How can we apply Scripture to our every-day situations?

What is your favourite passage out of the whole Bible?

We are determined to come through this pandemic as swiftly and sanely as possible—so be smart and stay safe, but most of all keep blessed and be a blessing. *Make the Master proud of you by being good citizens. Respect the authorities, whatever their level; they are God's emissaries for keeping order. It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules. Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government.*^{1Pet.2:1317}

Sunday 8th November (on Zoom). Ps.101 Lk.24:25-53

Hymn: Will your anchor hold

Repentance and Remission of sins will be preached in His name to all nations.^{Lk.24:46-47}

Where have you cast your first anchor?

John Knox died on November 24th 1572. Early in the afternoon he said: 'Now for the last time, I commend my spirit, soul and body' (pointing his three fingers) 'into Thy hands, O Lord'. Thereafter, about five o'clock he said to his wife: "Go, read where I cast my first anchor!" She did not need to be told and read the seventeenth of John's evangel: *Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.* Here was a strange and striking contrast! 'Life Eternal!' 'Life Eternal!' says the Book. Now listen to the laboured breathing from the bed! The bed speaks of Death; the Book speaks of Life Everlasting! 'Life!' the dying man starts as the great cadences fall upon his ear. '**This** is eternal life that they might **know You!**' 'Life Eternal!' 'It was **there**' he declares with his last breath, 'it was **there**, that I cast my first anchor.' *(A Bunch of Everlastings, John Knox's Text, by F.W.Boreham)*

Eternal life is the result of knowing God and Jesus Christ—both personally and purposefully—because of sins forgiven through repentance. John the Baptist preached *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*^{Mk.1:4} Jesus had the same message: *The time has come and the kingdom of God is near. Change the way you think and act [repent], and believe the Good News.*^{Mk.1:15} Jesus later said that this message would be preached across the whole world: *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 and remission (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.^{Lk.24:45-49} Repentance always acknowledges the truth: *And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that **God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.***^{2Tim.2:24-26} Jesus is the truth—and He is the only way to access God's forgiveness.^{Jn.14:6}

Although God's love is unconditional, **God's forgiveness is conditional upon repentance.** Repentance and remission (forgiveness) are inseparably joined and there is no forgiveness without repentance. *God exalted Jesus to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins.*^{Acts.5:37}

True repentance will always include these five A's:

1 Acknowledgement of the wrong.

2 Apology for the wrong.

3 Action of determination to change.

4 Appreciation of God's forgiveness.

5 Attitude of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people.

Acknowledgement of the wrong.

God is perfect love, perfect holiness and perfect righteousness—and God's glory is the manifestation of His Character. Sin is falling short of God's glory: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.^{Rom.3:23} Until we confess our sin we won't receive the forgiveness of our sins^{1Jn.1:9} but our actual salvation depends on confessing Jesus as Lord: *If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved.*^{Rom.10:9-10} *Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But everyone who denies me here on earth, I will also deny before my Father in heaven.*^{Matt.10:32-33} If our salvation depended on confessing all our sins, our salvation would be dependent upon the effectiveness of our memory! Under the old Covenant, every time someone approached God, they had to confess their sin because their sin stood between them and God. In the new Covenant we confess Jesus, because Jesus as mediator, He now stands between us and God: *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.*^{1Tim2:5-6} Sin is no longer separating us from God because Jesus' work of taking away the sin of the world was a success. If sin is still there, then Jesus' work was a failure. If we must confess all our sins in order to be saved, what would happen if we forgot one sin? How could we ever be sure that we had remembered every sin? What would happen to those who died before they had a chance to confess just one last sin? If we must confess every sin or else be unforgiven, that would mean we would be lost forever and go to hell! But no! We are forgiven because of what Jesus has already done. We are the forgiven because we have placed our faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour—not because we remembered to confess every sin we ever have done.^{Eph.1:7;Col.2:13}

Apology for the wrong. Unless we acknowledge and apologise for our sin, we haven't really admitted we have done wrong against God. *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.*^{2Cor.7:10-11}

Action of determination to change. God does not require that we change completely straight away—just that we genuinely **intend to change our ways.** *Be alert. If you see your friend going wrong, correct him. If he responds, forgive him. Even if it's personal against you and repeated seven times through the day, and seven times he says, 'I'm sorry, I won't do it again,' forgive him.*^{Lk.17:3-4} Then Peter came to him and

asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven."¹ *Matt.18:21-22*

Appreciation of God's forgiveness. If we don't appreciate what God has done in forgiving our sins—and show our appreciation for our forgiveness—we are saying Jesus' death is of no consequence to us: *What do you think a person who shows no respect for the Son of God deserves? That person looks at the blood of the promise (the blood that made him holy) as no different from other people's blood, and he insults the Spirit that God gave us out of his kindness.*² *Heb.10:29*

Attitude of grace, gratitude and gentleness towards God and people. *We love because God loved us first. Whoever says, "I love God," but hates another believer is a liar. People who don't love other believers, whom they have seen, can't love God, whom they have not seen. Christ has given us this commandment: The person who loves God must also love other believers.*¹ *Jn.4:19-21* *Forgive people when they sin against you. If you do, your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*² *Matt.6:14-15*

Salvation is a free gift—it is by God's grace—but **sanctification** (maturity) is a combination of **God working in us** and **us working out our salvation**—we must make every effort to add to what God has done in our lives: *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. Therefore, brothers and sisters, use more effort to make God's calling and choosing of you secure. If you keep doing this, you will never fall away. Then you will also be given the wealth of entering into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Therefore, I will always remind you about these qualities, although you already know about them and are well-grounded in the truth that you now have. As long as I'm still alive, I think it's right to refresh your memory.*² *Pet.1:5-13* If our life contradicts our faith, we have forgotten that God has forgiven our sins and show contempt for God's grace: *Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*² *Rom.2:4*

Jesus did not restrict His preaching to a few people in one place but went throughout the land: *But Jesus replied, "We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too. That is why I came." So he travelled throughout the region of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons.*¹ *Mk.1:38-39*

This preaching was not reserved for Jesus and His 12 Disciples but is the calling of everyone who has had an encounter with Jesus: *But the man went and spread the word, proclaiming to everyone what had happened.*¹ *Mk.1:45* *I pray that you will be active in sharing what you believe. Then you will completely understand every good thing we have in Christ.*¹ *Phile.1:6* God still wants everyone to hear the Good News: *Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone. Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.*² *Mk.16:15-16* *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*² *Pet.3:9* However, this preaching of repentance is redemptive not repressive: *Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*¹ *Lk.5:31-32* Preaching repentance is compassion not condemnation—it is an **exhortation** and an **encouragement**: *There he preached that people should be baptized and turn away from their sins. Then God would forgive them... With many other encouraging words, he told the Good News to the people.*¹ *Lk.3:3;18*

Charles G Finney was a C19th preacher who saw many thousands come to salvation through his preaching on repentance and even though he was very blunt in his preaching, he showed great joy when people were convicted of their sin and came to salvation through repentance:

While I was relating these facts, I observed the people looking as if they were angry. Many of the men were in their shirt sleeves; and they looked at each other and at me, as if they were ready to fall upon me and chastise me

on the spot. I saw their strange and unaccountable looks, and could not understand what I was saying, that had offended them. However, it seemed to me that their anger rose higher and higher, as I continued the narrative. As soon as I had finished the narrative, I turned upon them and said, that I understood that they had never had a religious meeting in that place; and that therefore I had a right to take it for granted, and was compelled to take it for granted, that they were an ungodly people. I pressed that home upon them with more and more energy, with my heart full almost to bursting. I had not spoken to them in this strain of direct application, I should think, more than a quarter of an hour, when all at once an awful solemnity seemed to settle down upon them; the congregation began to fall from their seats in every direction, and cried for mercy. If I had had a sword in each hand, I could not have cut them off their seats as fast as they fell. Indeed nearly the whole congregation were either on their knees or prostrate, I should think, in less than two minutes from this first shock that fell upon them. Every one prayed for himself, who was able to speak at all. Of course, I was obliged to stop preaching; for they no longer paid any attention. I saw the old man who had invited me there to preach, sitting about in the middle of the house, and looking around with utter amazement. I raised my voice almost to a scream, to make him hear, and pointing to him said, "Can't you pray?" He instantly fell upon his knees, and with a stentorian voice poured himself out to God; but he did not at all get the attention of the people. I then spoke as loud as I could, and tried to make them attend to me. I said to them, "You are not in hell yet; and now let me direct you to Christ." For a few moments I tried to hold forth the Gospel to them; but scarcely any of them paid any attention. My heart was so overflowing with joy at such a scene that I could hardly contain myself. It was with much difficulty that I refrained from shouting, and giving glory to God. Charles G Finney 1792–1875

Both John the Baptist and Jesus preached the **Good News of Repentance** for the forgiveness of sins and it was the practice the early Church. So let's make the **Good News of Repentance** our practice and our anchor—and like Finney *overflow with joy* as well!

Union With Christ

O Father, You have made man for the glory of Yourself and when not an instrument of that glory, he is a thing of nought. No sin is greater than the sin of unbelief—for if union with Christ is the greatest good, then unbelief is the greatest sin. I see that whatever my sin is, yet no sin is like dis-union from Christ by unbelief. Lord, keep me from committing the greatest sin in departing from Him, or I can never in this life perfectly obey and cleave to Christ.

When You take away my outward blessings, it is sin to not acknowledge, that all that I have is of You; it is sin in not serving You through what I have; it is sin in making myself secure and hardened. Lawful blessings can be my secret idols and can do the most harm—the greatest injury is in the having, and the greatest good is in the taking away. In love, divest me of blessings that I may glorify You the more. In love, remove the fuel of my sin that I may prize the gain of holiness as overbalancing all my losses. The more I love You with a truly gracious love, the more I desire to love You. Keep me from all things that turn to unbelief, or lack the felt union with Christ. (*from Puritan Prayers*)

Questions:

Where did you cast your first anchor? (What specific promise from God have you based your salvation on?)

What does Repentance mean?

What does Remission of sins mean?

What is the difference between salvation and sanctification?

Sunday 15th November Ps.101 (on Zoom). Dave Smethurst

We are determined to come through this pandemic as swiftly and sanely as possible—so be smart and stay safe, but most of all keep blessed and be a blessing. *Make the Master proud of you by being good citizens. Respect the authorities, whatever their level; they are God's emissaries for keeping order. It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society.*

Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules. Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government.^{1Pet.2:1317}

As Dave is with us today, I have included an article by Andrew Corbett for our Bible Study

Holy Relevant.

"**Holy**" seems to be the most precious word used to describe God. It is the only word emphasized three times to describe God: *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*^{Is.6:3} The Hebrews used this literary device to emphasize—if a word was used twice, such as "*Truly, truly...*", what was about to be said was very true but if a word was used three times it was **absolute and ultimate**. God is described not as being "*holy, holy*" but as "**holy, holy, holy**". *And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'*^{Rev.4:8}

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

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

In the Book of Revelation, the word holy is used very strikingly. It is used in its absolute sense to describe God ("*holy, holy holy*"). But it is also used to describe the people that God had called to be holy—yet were not! Initially in the Book of Revelation, Jerusalem is described as "*the holy city*" but then God laments that it was the city which had rejected His Son and become like Sodom and Egypt: *and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.*^{Rev.11:8} So God calls a **New Jerusalem** into existence with the **New Covenant**. He then designates this **new people** (comprising of converted Jews and Gentiles) as **the holy city**. *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*^{Rev.21:2}

The people who were called to be holy under the Old Covenant failed to transition to the New Covenant. Yet they went further than just missing it—they opposed it! The Book of Revelation describes them not just as "*Sodom and Egypt*"^{Rev.11:8} but as "*Babylon*."^{Rev.14:8;16:19;17:5;18:2,10,21} Their depiction as "*Babylon*" conjures up the memory of ancient Babylon which on several occasions had significant demonstrations of God's glory (read the Book of Daniel) but still maintained their idolatry and wickedness. To be described as "*Babylon*" was to be labelled as "*unholy*". The Book of Revelation describes their backslidden state in terms drinking wine, of lusting and of immorality. *Another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.'*^{Rev.14:8} Revelation goes on to describe the people who were supposed to be holy as having "*prostituted*" themselves with the world. *And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.'*^{Rev.17:5} The modern application that we can draw from this chilling book is that **God is holy and He calls His people to be holy**.

To be called to holiness and to refuse to comply is called wickedness (which God takes a rather dim view of). But for some believers, holiness is about mere rule-keeping or looking

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

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

Dr. Andrew Corbett, Legana, Tasmania, February 2008

The All-Good

My God, You have helped me to see, that whatever good be in honour and rejoicing, how good is He who gives them—and can withdraw them! That blessedness does not lie so much in receiving good from and in You, but in holding forth Your glory and virtue: that it is an amazing thing to see Deity in a creature, speaking, acting, filling, shining through it; that nothing is good but You, that I am near good when I am near You; that to be like You is a glorious thing—this is my magnet, my attraction.

You are all my Good in times of peace, my only Support in days of trouble, my one Sufficiency when life shall end. Help me to see how good Your will is in everything—and even when Your will crosses mine, teach me to be pleased with it.

You are the bottomless fountain of all good. I give myself to You out of love, for all I have or own—goods, family, church, self—is Yours to do with as You will, to honour Yourself by me and by all that is mine. If it be consistent with Your eternal counsels, the purpose of Your grace and the great ends of Your glory, then bestow upon me the blessings of Your comforts—and if not, let me resign myself to Your wiser determinations. (*from Puritan Prayers*)

Questions

What does “holy” mean?

In what sense are we holy?

In the Book of Revelation, what names are given to the physical city of Jerusalem?

In the Book of Revelation, who is the New Jerusalem?

What should we do if we dirty our holiness?

What practical things can we do to stay holy?

Sunday 22nd November Ps.103:1-6 Ian Aldersley

As Ian is with us today, I have included an article by Andrew Corbett for our Bible Study:

A Theology of the Environment

A world without trees would be a world without bees which would become a world without birds which would become a world without natural pest control made worst by the desperately high rates of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the dangerously low levels of oxygen available which would cause a rise in the rate of global warming and an even bigger hole in the

ozone layer thus increasing the rapid demise of the few remaining forms of human life within an estimated period of about 5 years. Should we be concerned?

It's claimed that the Amazon rain forest is apparently being cut down at an equivalent rate of several football stadiums every hour! In Indonesia there are thousands of acres of old-growth forests being cut down and burned at an alarming rate. Many parts of Australia have now been turned into dust-bowls and salinity-danger-zones due to the belligerent destruction of bushland.

A Christian Response is urgently needed

The response to this worldwide concern over the state of our old growth forests has generally been shallow especially from the Evangelical and Neo-Evangelical (Pentecostals, Charismatics, Seeker-Driven) segments of the Church. (*This is Theism, the belief in the existence of one God viewed as the creative source of the human race and the world who transcends yet is immanent in the world—Mirriam-Webster Dictionary.*)

—theists. We can no longer allow theological liberals to claim to be the only reasoned response to Church's position on environmentalism. The reason for this is that these theologically liberal scholars are biased to a worldview that is at best described as deistic (God somehow initiated but did not intervene in creation), and at worst can only be described as outright nihilistic ("nothing"...there is no God). These positions are clearly not acceptable to those who have a higher regard for the authority of the Scriptures.

Understanding 'Worldviews'

We all view the world through a window which interprets for us what we see. For the Christian our "*window*" helps us to interpret life as a deliberate gift from God who actively cares for this world via intervention, the ultimate of which was when the Word became flesh. He has created all life by His fiat command and placed man (His image bearer) as the crown of that creation. God has given the earth as a gift to man whom He has commissioned to exercise management over. But for many naturalists, their window causes them to view the world through a window which causes them to interpret life as a fragile result of random, chaotic, chemical reactions which have evolved over billions of years of death and struggle filtering out the least adapted and producing what we have today. Within this worldview, life has come from natural matter and diverged into its various forms. Therefore, all life (human, animal, insect, plant) is of equal value. This worldview is clearly the philosophy behind certain segments of the animal rights and nature conservation movements. Increasingly, it is beginning to influence the worldview of Christians as well perhaps largely due to the current vacuum in Christian thinking in this area.

Modern Environmentalism's Spirituality

The worldviews of **Biblical Christianity** and **Naturalism** are **opposite**. Little wonder—on the one hand we have the belief that God gave life to man, while on the other hand we have the generally unspoken belief that man gave life to God (that is, man in his ignorance, prior to his scientific discoveries, created God as an explanation for the universe). The Bible is the inspired Word of God or it is the invented word of man. Jesus Christ was either God in the flesh or just another good man. There is either a Lawgiver who has revealed His laws to man, or the only law common to man is don't hurt anyone (or thing). Little wonder that these almost religious environmentalists are keen to dismantle what they regard as the "old" worldview of Christianity. This encompasses an agenda of Identity rights, Animal rights, Removal of Religious privileges (such as Blasphemy laws, Sunday trading regulations, and the redefining of Religious Vilification targeted at Christians) and the scathing attacks on (what they regard as) anachronistic institutions (particularly the Church). *Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man; and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.*^{Rom1:22-23} This worldview regards all forms and expression of life from an absolutely egalitarian view point. This means, animal and plant life is equal in value to human life; gender distinctions are irrelevant; and, sexual orientation is irrelevant. Ultimately it is not

God who gives life to all, it is nature (what is natural, matter) that has given life to all. Thus God is not just in nature, He is nature. That is, He is not merely in the trees, He is the trees. This is actually a theological system known as *pan-theism*. *Who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.*^{Rom.1:25} Christians should recognise that this is the driving spirit behind much of the environmental movement. It has arisen to fill the spiritual vacuum created by an abdication of Christian thought on the matter.

Biblical Environmentalism

The Biblical worldview includes God's prescription for the management of creation: animal, insect, and plant life. *Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food."*^{Gen.1:28-29} Creation was never meant to be abused by environmental vandalism. But neither was creation meant to take dominion over man. Man alone bears the image of God and as such takes a place of honour in the order of creation. This highest privilege carries with it, commensurate responsibility. To claim that man has the right to entirely destroy irreplaceable eco-systems in the name of being God's agents of dominion over the earth is unsupportable from Scripture. One could only imagine the scene of God coming down in the cool of the day to visit Adam to find that Eden had been completely felled and Adam was preparing to develop and subdivide this new land release! *When you besiege a city for a long time, while making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them; if you can eat of them, do not cut them down to use in the siege, for the tree of the field is man's food.*^{Dent.20:19}

The Scriptures teach a high regard for nature: both animals and trees. It's worth remembering that it was Christians who started the RSPCA and many other environmentally minded organisations. The Scriptures teach that we are stewards over God's creation. *A righteous man regards the life of his animal, But even the merciful acts of the wicked are cruel (toward animals).*^{Prov.12:10}

Christians should be on guard against any worldview which removes God as Creator and therefore as the Life and Law Giver. We must live out the revelation that in the beginning was the Word, by Whom all things exist, who around 2,000 years ago became flesh and dwelt among us. He calls us to be stewards of His Creation, not to worship it. *Andrew Corbett*

True Christianity

Lord of Heaven, Your goodness is ineffably sublime—in the works of Creation, You are Almighty; in the dispensations of Providence, all-wise; in the gospel of Grace, all love. In Your Son, You have provided for our deliverance from the effects of sin, the justification of our person, the sanctification of our nature, the perseverance of our soul. In the path of life, we have a refuge from the storm, a fountain for sin and a fullness that is accessible to all. Grant us always to know that to walk with Jesus makes other interests a shadow and a dream.

Keep us from intermittent attention to eternal things. Save us from the delusion of those who fail to go far in religion, who are concerned but not converted, who have another thought but not a new one, who have light, zeal, confidence, but not Christ. Let us judge our Christianity, not only by our dependence upon Jesus, but by our love to Him, our conformity to Him, our knowledge of Him. Give us a religion that is both real and progressive; that lives and works in the Spirit; that profits by every correction and is injured by no carnal indulgence. *(from Puritan Prayers)*

Questions

What is the difference between Theism, Deism, Animism, Pantheism, Naturalism, Agnosticism, Atheism and Nihilism? (*Don't worry if this seems difficult as I will give a very brief definition of these at the Bible Study*)

What is the difference between Biblical Christianity and Naturalism?

How are we humans different from the rest of Creation?

What did God mean by “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”?

How can we appreciate Creation without worshipping it?

Find something in the Old Testament about how we should view Creation.

Find something in the New Testament about how we should view Creation.

Thought: *Are you more focused on the New Creation than the Old Creation?*

Sunday 29th November Ps.103:7-14 Joy Bendoy (Philippines)

As Joy is with us today, I have included an article by Andrew Corbett for our Bible Study:

Why we need to learn to Discern.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.^{Phil.1:9}

Did you ever hear something that didn't quite sound right? The chances are that you discerned something. To discern means to judge, evaluate and distinguish. When you discern something, you are potentially protecting both yourself and others from spiritual peril. So important is the ability to discern that Christ has specifically gifted the Church with a very special gift to ensure that it happens: *Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are different ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different results, but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the benefit of all. For one person is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom... and to another discernment of spirits... It is one and the same Spirit, distributing as he decides to each person, who produces all these things.*^{1Cor.12:4-11} Yet, those who are gifted with discernment are often seen as judgmental, critical and therefore: unloving. What other gift of the Holy Spirit results in such rejection and dismissal as that of discernment? But what other gift of the Holy Spirit is needed more now than ever before?

Here's why.

1. The modern proliferation of ideas. We now live in an age when ideas are spread globally within an amazingly short period of time. Over-generally, doctrinally orthodox Christians have been too slow to harness this. All the while, New Age, Anti-Christ religions, Cultists, and Charismatic swindlers have revelled in this technological phenomenon. While the internet can enable much elegance, it can also enable massive misinformation. There is little regulation of internet content and bloggers can virtually say whatever they want. Sometimes this is helpful. Sometimes it is not. Therefore, Christians need discernment more than ever.

2. Differing expressions of Church. According to Patrick Johnson (Missiologist), there are now over 32,000 denominations of Christianity. Most of these denominations have no formal ministerial training requirements for their workers (pastors). The preachers in most of these churches are not vocationally professional in the sense that they have been trained to graduate level and do nothing other than concentrate on preaching/teaching/ministry). They are often classified as “*bi-vocational*”. These pastors often do not have the professional skill-set to expound the original intention of a Scriptural text or to discern the subtleties of doctrinal error being promoted by superstar tele-preachers. Because of the historically high number of bi-vocational pastors and the coinciding high number of tele-preachers in our times, the need for discernment among Christians is needed more than ever.

3. Christians are predisposed toward believing. Christians believe in a God they cannot see. Christians accept the testimony of a Book written thousands of years ago. Christianity is based on a subjective conversion experience and endorses the possibility of supernatural interaction

such as visions, dreams, revelations, inner healing and claims to predict the future. Often there is no apparent objective way to determine whether these claims are true or not. This is rarely seen as a problem for Christians. But it makes Christians vulnerable to being deceived. History verifies this. Down through the ages, the people who have been shown to be false teachers have been remarkably charming and winsome. That is, they are very nice people. Often when someone is accused of teaching something false someone else will defend them by saying “*But they are such a nice person.*”

For instance, Jim Jones was nice and charming but he began teaching that he was God and eventually led hundreds of people to their suicidal deaths. He had won the approval of political leaders including Vice Presidential candidate, Walter Mondale—and eventual President Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter and the Mayor of San Francisco, Willie Brown. At a 1976 Testimonial Dinner in his honour, while introducing Jones, Mayor Willie Brown stated “*Let me present to you what you should see every day when you look in the mirror in the early morning hours... Let me present to you a combination of Martin King, Angela Davis, Albert Einstein, Chairman Mao.*”

Dangerous ideas are often promoted by really nice people! It requires discernment to evaluate an idea, teaching, or doctrine without being beguiled by the teacher’s charm or winsome personality. This can be especially difficult when it actually appears that the false teacher is genuinely being used by God to evangelise the lost. But because of the increased number of winsome and charming teachers who have gained a global platform through the sale of their books, television appearances or shows, radio programs podcasts and websites, the need for the gift of discernment has never been greater for Christians. *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*^{1Jn.4:1} It seems like there are many non-Christian people who have realised there is a buck to be made from naive Christians. All they have to do is make their material sound Christian by throwing in vague quotes of Scripture or references to “*God*” or “*Jesus*” and many Christians can never tell the difference. Christ has especially gifted certain teachers with the ability to discern what is in accord with His Word and what is at variance with His Word. To do this requires forming a reasoned judgment. Yet to many Christians, any kind of judgment is wrong. After all, Jesus said *Do not judge.*^{Matt.7:1} **No He didn’t** (in the sense that many Christians claim)!

There are three types of “Judging” in Scripture:

1. Final Judgment—this is the exclusive prerogative of Almighty God where the saved are finally redeemed and the rebellious are forever damned (example: Romans 14:10; 2Corinthians 5:10).

2. Moral Judgment—this is the consideration of what constitutes right, good, and wise conduct. Christians are commanded to make this kind of judgment (example: 1Corinthians 11:13) and to live accordingly. It also involves church leadership forming a moral judgment about a member's conduct for church discipline issues (see, 1Corinthians 5:12).

3. Discerning Judgment—this is where a teaching is evaluated for its Scriptural accord. Believers are commanded to make this kind of judgment (*1Cor.14:29 Acts.17:11; 1Thess. 5:21*).

Since the last two types of judgment are actually commanded in Scripture, it must be apparent that Christ was referring to the first type of judgment when He commanded us not judge others. It is difficult though for some people to judge a person’s teaching without it seeming like they are judging the person. Even when a skilled apologist discerns that a teacher’s message is incorrect, it sounds to many of these people that the apologist is actually attacking the teacher’s character. While a false teacher may need to be exposed for their improper lifestyle or financial abuse of their audience, there is a Biblically authorised distinction to be made between a teaching and a teacher. Rejecting a person’s idea is not the same as rejecting the person.

How we express discernment therefore, requires wisdom and gentleness. *They should gently teach those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people’s hearts, and they will believe the*

truth.^{2Tim.2:25} Pastors and elders are charged to protect their flock. This demands that pastors be discerning. This task is made all the more difficult because the people of their congregations are probably exposed to less than helpful teaching through the plethora of books, cds, podcasts, TV preachers and talk-show hosts. In an already complex world, pastors now have to keep up with trends in literature, art, movies, TV and theology.

Pastors need to teach their people how to be discerning. This will sound like they are being judgmental. And they are—but in a Biblically authorised sense. They need to show their people who the Bible says God is and why Eckhart Tolle’s pantheistic ideas about God are not just wrong but dangerously wrong. Pastors need to teach their people the importance of prayer as communion with God and why neo-medieval mysticism is more akin to Hinduism or Buddhism than Biblical Christianity. Pastors need to explain to their people why it is, that God is a Trinity not merely three successive manifestations of a deity as T.D. Jakes teaches. Pastors need to teach their congregation the transcendence of the Almighty God and show why He most certainly does not live in a Shack despite what William Young claims. Pastors need to present a balanced view of giving so that the disgusting claims of certain Lear-jet flying TV evangelists are denounced. Pastors need to assure their flock that Christ is Lord of the future and nothing happens outside of His plan regardless of what Hal Lindsay said last week. Pastors need to make clear to their church family that Christianity does not need to be reinvented and that the claims of Jesus Christ are absolutely true despite what Rob Bell asserts. Pastors need to warn their people that satan hates the preaching of the Gospel, the authority of leadership, the habit of publicly assembling on Sunday to worship God and the singing of praise to God, regardless of what Frank Viola, George Barna and Brian McLaren claim.

What do you have to do to become better at discerning?

Do you have to read every book on the NY Times bestseller list to be able to make an informed opinion about the pseudo-Christian theology promoted by Eckhart Tolle or William Young? Do you have to read Richard Dawkins' books on mystical atheism to know that his assertions are not arguments and that they are irrational, contradictory and often mere speculation?

1. Good discerners look for the “big idea” first. Eckhart Tolle’s big idea is pantheism (everything is God). Although he refers to Jesus, it is not the same Jesus as the New Testament extols. The apostle Paul warned his original audience that people had already begun to do this in the first century: *For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.*^{2Cor.11:4}

2. Good discerners know the difference between an assertion (an unsupported claim which is often just an opinion) **and an argument** (a claim supported by reasons). Often times false teachers promote their ideas without any real arguments. It takes discernment to recognise that someone’s arguments are without substance.

3. Good discerners understand Falsifiability. A good argument is provable or disprovable. When someone presents an argument a good discerner knows how to evaluate that argument to determine whether it is true or false. Like the Bereans of Acts 17, they will investigate the claims to ascertain whether they are factual. For example, some false-prosperity teachers claim that when Jesus said it is easier for *“a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven”* He wasn’t stating that the pursuit of riches and the pursuit of God were incompatible, rather He was, they claim, referring to a small gate used by late night travellers to Jerusalem when the main gates of the city were closed. **Good discerners investigate such false claims and dismiss ridiculous myths like these.**

Without good discernment within the Church, more people will be taken advantage of and even abused. Improving our ability to discern will help to guard our credibility from things that have

the potential to make us look or sound stupid. May God help us to be more discerning. God knows we need it now more than ever. Amen.

2009, Dr Andrew Corbett. www.findingtruthmatters.org

Before Sleep

God of all Sovereignty, Your greatness is unsearchable, Your Name is most excellent and Your glory is magnificent. Ten thousand minister to You, ten thousand times ten thousand stand before You. We come boldly to Your throne because we will find grace to help us when we need it most—and we will receive Your mercy. Let us see Your hand in the instruments of our grief, rejoicing in Your over-ruling providence. Let not our weeping hinder sowing; nor our sorrow hinder duty. While living in a world of change let us seek the abiding City—the New Jerusalem.

Be with us to our journey's end that we may glorify You in death as we do in life. We bless You for Your preservation, Your supplies and Your mercies. To You, the keeper of souls, we commit all we are and all we have. May no evil befall us, no sickness come nigh us and no horror disturb us! May our conscience be clear, our hearts pure and our sleep sweet! Now, with the innumerable company who neither slumber nor sleep, we join in ascribing blessing, honour, glory and power to the Lamb upon the throne, for ever and ever. Amen. (*from Puritan Prayers*)

Questions

Why we need to learn to Discern.

What did Jesus mean when He said: *Do not judge.* ^{Matt.7:1}

What are the 3 types of Judgement that Corbett mentions?

What is our standard for Moral judgement?

How can we develop our discernment?

What's the difference between an **assertion** and an **argument**?

How can we guard ourself against false teaching?

December

But I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever. Psalm 52:8

Thought for the Month:

Fear knocked at the door and Faith answered—but there was no one there! Faith does not replace fear—Faith puts fear in its proper place! No one goes through life without experiencing fear, but people who fear God and trust Him, handle the threats and challenges of life much differently from those crippled by fear or filled with false confidence.

Sunday 6th December. Ps.103:15-21. Lk.1:26-56 Back at Mill Hill!

The joy of Christian Fellowship *As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears... leaped for joy.*^{Lk.1:44}

This year has been a very disjointed time where we have been trying to keep the pandemic at bay by following the Government's rules and advice but at the same time aspiring to keep a reasonably normal life as well as staying in fellowship with God, His Word and His people. *Make the Master proud of you by being good citizens. Respect the authorities, whatever their level; they are God's emissaries for keeping order. It is God's will that by doing good, you might cure the ignorance of the fools who think you're a danger to society. Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules. Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government.*^{1Pet.2:13-17} We have tried to stay smart, safe, sweet and spiritual—and I think that generally we have succeeded! One of the reasons we have more-or-less succeeded in staying smart, safe, sweet and spiritual is because we have used common sense to apply God's rules in our daily life—we have exercised discernment: *I am your servant; therefore give me common sense [discernment] to apply your rules to everything I do.*^{Ps.119:125} Another reason is that our relationship with God—our faith—is not dependant on rituals or even on human contact but on God being with us. The Good News of the Christian message is that God the Word became human in Jesus—which is why Joseph was told that Jesus would be called Emmanuel.^{Mat.1:23} God didn't just create the world and then ignore it—He made man in His image and then told him to have dominion over all of creation.^{Gen.1:28} And then when man rebelled against Him, God did not wash His hands of man but began to unravel His plan of Redemption by preparing the way for His Son to become our Redeemer: *For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. 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. Through Christ you have come to trust in God. And you have placed your faith and hope in God because he raised Christ from the dead and gave him great glory.*^{1Pet.1:18-21} Jesus, God's Son became a human being who was to be our Saviour. *Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*^{Lk.1:46-47} *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.*^{Lk.2:10-11} *They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world."*^{Jn.4:42} Jesus only lived about 30 years here on earth but when He returned to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit as His replacement: *If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.*^{Jn.14:15-21} *The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and*

Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”^{Acts.5:30-32} When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train; you received gifts from men, even from the rebellious—that you, O LORD God, might dwell there. Praise be to the Lord, to God our Saviour, who daily bears our burdens. Selah Our God is a God who saves.^{Ps.68:18-20} Just as Jesus instructed, inspired, empowered, encouraged, edified, enlivened, challenged, counselled and comforted His Disciples, so now the Holy Spirit instructs, inspires, empowers, encourages, edifies, enlivens, challenges, counsels and comforts us. And He does this predominately within the structure of gathered Believers—the Church: *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”* (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, 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.^{Phil.4:7-13}

Fellowship is communion (a common-union)—and in Christian fellowship, the common-union between us is the Holy Spirit. Whilst Mary and Elizabeth were pregnant, both their yet-to-be-born babies were filled with the Holy Spirit: *The angel replied: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.*^{Lk.1:35} Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.^{Lk.1:13-15} As the two women met, the babies within them, leapt for joy causing the mothers to praise God and to encourage one another prophetically: *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”*^{Lk.1:39-45} God is Spirit and only people with the Holy Spirit can accept the things that come from God—or even worship God: *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.4:23-24} We have not received the spirit of the world. We have received the Spirit who is from God. The Spirit helps us understand what God has freely given us. That is what we speak about. We don't use words taught to us by people. We use words taught to us by the Holy Spirit. We use the words of the Spirit to teach the truths of the Spirit. Some people don't have the Holy Spirit. They don't accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. Things like that are foolish to them. They can't understand them. In fact, such things can't be understood without the Spirit's help.^{1Cor.2:12-14} When anyone is born-again, they are spiritually re-born from above and spiritually united with God: *I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. [born from above]*^{Jn.3:3} But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.^{1Cor.6:17} This means that every true Believer in Jesus Christ has the Holy Spirit residing within them: *This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.*^{1Jn.4:13-16} God wants us to use our intelligence, to seek to understand as well as we can. For instance, by using your heads, you know perfectly well that the Spirit of God would never prompt anyone to say “Jesus be damned!” Nor would anyone be inclined to say “Jesus is Master!” without the insight of the Holy Spirit. God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are

carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people!^{1Cor.12:2-7} They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. The spirit that God caused to live in us wants us to belong only to God. Do you think this passage means nothing? It says, "The Spirit that lives in us wants us to be his own." Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace.^{Jas.4:5-6} And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.^{1Jn.3:23-24} God the Holy Spirit has the same characteristics as God the Father and God the Son—we call this the "fruit of the Spirit": But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.^{Gal.5:22-23}

So when a Believer meets another Believer they both have the common-union of the Holy Spirit and, like Mary and Elizabeth, the natural response is a release of joy, peace and hope—a "leaping for joy": As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the [Holy Spirit within me] leaped for joy. Blessed are those who have believed that what the Lord has said to them will be accomplished! May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.^{Rom.15:13} That is why fellowship has such a feel-good factor. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.^{1Jn.1:3-7}

So let's continue to walk in the truth, keeping a good conscience towards God and maintaining a good reputation towards outsiders: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.^{2Cor.13:14}

O God, our exceeding joy, singing Your praises uplifts our hearts for You are a fountain of delight and You bless the soul that joys in You. You are in Jesus, the object of inexpressible joy. We take exceeding pleasure in the thought of You and we will at all times rest ourselves in Your excellences, goodness, and loving-kindness. Give us the sweet results of faith in our secret character and in our public life. Cast cords of love around our thoughts for You hold us and will never let us go. May the Saviour's wounds sway us more than the sceptre of princes. Let us love You in a love that covers and swallows up all, so that we will not violate our chaste union with the Beloved. (from Puritan Prayers)

Questions

What is God's plan of Redemption?

What is "fellowship"?

What role does the Holy Spirit have in our redeemed life (our life after we have been born-again)?

What is the Fruit of the Spirit?^{Gal.5:22-23}

Is there a difference between joy and gladness?

Sunday 13th December 10.30am Ps.104:1-15. Lk.2:1-20

The terror and awe of fear! An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly

a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."^{Lk.2:9-14}

Fear is the feeling of dread, disquiet or apprehension caused by the presence or imminence of danger. In the Old Testament, when people had an encounter with God, fear (this feeling of dread, disquiet and apprehension) overwhelmed them—with good reason because whenever people saw God, they thought they would die. God is holy and only those who are holy may encounter Him. *Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*^{1Pet.1:13-16}

God spoke to Moses face to face: *As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent. The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.*^{Ex.33:9-11} But Moses was not able to see God's face:

*And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, **for no one may see me and live.**" Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."*^{Ex.33:19-23} God is invisible and can't be seen: *To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.*^{1Tim.1:17}

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.^{1Jn.4:11-12} But Jesus is visible and exactly represents God the Father to us *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*^{Jn.1:16-18} *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.*^{Col.1:15-16} So, in the OT, when people saw God, they actually saw the 2nd Person of the Trinity—the Word of God—who later became human and was called Jesus.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.^{Jn.1:1-48}

Jacob saw the Word of God (not God the Father) and was afraid: *So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."*^{Gen32:30} Samson's parents saw the Angel of God and were afraid: *As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame.*

Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. When the angel of the LORD did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD. "We are doomed to die!" he said to his wife. "We have seen God!"^{Judg.13:20-22}

Isaiah saw God and was afraid: *And [the Seraphs] were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.*

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."^{Is.6:3-5}

For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them." Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.^{Jn.12:39-41}

Although the story of Moses hiding in a rock to be able to see God's glory is a true story, it is also a wonderful illustration—an allegory—to explain how we too can see God's glory. Jesus is the Rock and if we hide in its cleft (signifying Jesus death) we may see God's glory.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."^{Ps.91:1-2} "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."^{1Pet.2:6-8}

Another time Moses hit the Rock just once and water flowed out, giving the Israelites life. Again, this true story is an allegory that portrays Jesus who would be hit (killed) just once to release the Holy Spirit who will give life to all who drink from it. *They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.^{1Cor.10:2-4} Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.^{Heb.9:27-}*

²⁸*On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.^{In.7:37-39}*

Jacob's encounter God left him with a limp: *He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favour. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there—the LORD God Almighty, the LORD is his name.^{Hos.12:4-5} Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel [Israel means he struggles with God], because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel [Peniel means face of God], saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.^{Gen.32:28-32} When we have a personal encounter with God, our life is also changed forever. After they found out that Peter and John had no education or special training, they were surprised to see how boldly they spoke. They realized that these men had been with Jesus.^{Acts.4:13} I turned toward the voice which was talking to me, and when I turned, I saw seven gold lamp stands. There was someone like the Son of Man among the lamp stands. He was wearing a robe that reached his feet. He wore a gold belt around his waist. His head and his hair were white like wool—like snow. His eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like glowing bronze refined in a furnace. His voice was like the sound of raging waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword. His face was like the sun when it shines in all its brightness. When I saw him, I fell down at his feet like a dead man. Then he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the first and the last, the living one. I was dead, but now I am alive forever. I have the keys of death and hell."^{Rev.1:12-18}*

God is inseparable from His Name and His Word—He is exalted and wonderful: *I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted.^{Ps.138:2-}*

³*When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."^{Gen.28:16-17} Samson's father asked the Angel's name, he was told that it was wonderful and beyond comprehension—ineffably sublime! *And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honour you?" And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful [beyond understanding; because you cannot comprehend it; It's a name that works miracles; since it is incomprehensible]?"^{Judg.13:17-18} Obviously, this Angel was not**

a created messenger from God but the visible Person of God Himself, i.e. Jesus before His incarnation. God's holiness has not changed, but Jesus has made the way for us to come to God—not only to see God's glory but also to share in that glory too. *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before*

the creation of the world.^{Jn.17:24} But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.^{2Thess.2:13-15} That is the story of Christmas—how the Word became flesh (incarnated) and was born as a human being. so for the first time since Adam sinned, human beings could see and touch God: *Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.*^{Lk.24:39} God showed His love in Jesus and so now there is no terror-fear between us and God: *And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*^{1Jn.4:14-18} Because Jesus became our Peace He brought us near to 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.*^{Eph.2:13-14} And when we draw near to God, He draws near to us: *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.*^{Jas.4:7-8} So we come to God with the fear of awe and amazement not with the fear of terror: *But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*^{Heb.12:22-24} And we come with boldness and confidence: *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."*^{Jn.14:6-7} Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.^{Heb.4:14-16}

Because we fear God with a holy awe and amazement, we no longer have any to be afraid of what people think or say: *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* So we say with confidence, *"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*^{Heb.13:5-6} *When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?*^{Psa.56:3-4} **Thank God for Christmas!** *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. . . . So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they 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.2:10-18}

Future Blessing:

O Lord God, there is no blessing that we can implore but that You are able to give, have promised to give and have given already to countless multitudes like ourselves. May we be willing to receive the supply of our need from Your bounty—to this end, convince us of sin and soften our hard hearts so that we may look with wonder, submission and delight to the provision You have made for the glory of Your Name in the salvation of sinners. You give us a hope that makes us not ashamed, a love that excites to holy obedience, a joy in You that is our strength and a faith in Your Son who loved us and died for us. Even when we are not fully conscious of You, may we persevere in our duty, waiting upon You and keeping Your ways—living continually as on the brink of eternity. We are at Your disposal for the duties and events

of life. As we submit our preferences to Your wisdom and will, may we know the blessedness of being a people whose strength is in You and in whose heart is the highway to heaven. (from *Puritan Prayers*)

Questions

What does Christmas celebrate?

Do you believe God came to Earth at Christmas?

What is the Holy Spirit to you?

Who is Jesus and how is He part of the Trinity?

How do your beliefs make a difference in your life and to your life in your church?

What do you do because of your beliefs?

Sunday 20th December Ps.104:16-35. Matt.2

We have come to worship Him. ^{Matt.2:2}

Like most Churches, we have looked again at the Nativity story throughout December and we saw the **Joy of Christian Fellowship** when Mary and Elizabeth greeted each other. When we meet another Believer, there is a leaping of Holy Spirit joy within us because our communion is the Holy Spirit. We discussed how this joy is not dependant upon circumstances and so we can be joyful even when we are sad or have a heavy heart because our joy is the joy of the Lord—which is our strength. ^{Neb.8:10} God's joy always comes with love and peace—as well as patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This is the fruit of the Spirit, or the personality of the Person of the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit resides within Believers, we *are united with the Lord and are one with Him in spirit.* ^{1Cor.6:17} This results in Believers having the same fruit/personality as the Holy Spirit. Of course, we are not yet perfect and so we often miss this standard of godliness (which is what sin is), but we are made righteous. *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, the personality of the Holy Spirit is now the default personality of Believers. You can't make people holy by rules or laws and you can't stop people from being holy by rules or laws—*against such things there is no law.* Godly change has to come from the Holy Spirit changing us on the inside: *But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.*

That is why it is so important for us to understand the New Covenant. The Old Covenant was a set of rules imposed from the outside and didn't work because it didn't change people's heart—but the New Covenant does work because the Holy Spirit changes people's hearts from the inside. *Jesus has been given a greater work to do for God. He is the go-between for the new covenant. That covenant is better than the old one. It is based on better promises. Suppose nothing had been wrong with that first covenant. Then no one would have looked for another covenant. But God found fault with the people. He said, "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. That was when I took them by the hand. I led them out of Egypt. My new covenant will be different because they didn't remain faithful to my old covenant. So I turned away from them, says the Lord. 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. A man will not teach his neighbour anymore. And he will not teach his friend anymore. He will not say, 'Know the Lord.' Everyone will know me. From the least important*

of them to the most important, all of them will know me. I will forgive their evil ways. I will not remember their sins anymore.” 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.8:6-13}

We also saw that the fear of God is awe not terror: *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*^{Lk.2:9-11}

Perfect love casts out fear: *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*^{1Jn.5:18}

So now, our fear of God is one of awe and wonder: LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in the whole earth!^{Psa.8:1} *When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. Then he put his right hand on me and said, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. I was dead. But look! I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys to Death and Hell.*^{Rev.1:17-18}

Samson’s father was told that God’s name was wonderful and beyond comprehension—ineffably sublime! *And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honour you?” And the angel of the LORD said to him, “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful [beyond understanding; because you cannot comprehend it; It’s a name that works miracles; since it is incomprehensible]?”*^{Judg.13:17-18}

It was this awe of God that caused the Wise Men to seek God and worship Him: *Where is the child who has been born to be king of the Jews? When we were in the east, we saw his star. Now we have come to worship him.*^{Matt.2:2}

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}

And so when we worship Jesus, we are expressing His “worth-ship” to us—the value and honour we give to Jesus. Herod also said that he wanted to worship Jesus: *Then Herod called for the Wise Men secretly. He found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem. He said, “Go! Make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, bring me a report. Then I can go and worship him too.”*^{Matt.2:7-8}

But Herod had no fear of God—neither awe-fear or terror-fear! Although Herod tried to endear himself to the Jews by rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem (he employed over 1000 priests as builders and carpenters), he did not endear himself to God! Herod 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) and sons (filicide)—some when they were still children (infanticide). Emperor Augustus said, ‘It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son’ because Herod wouldn’t kill pigs, but had three of his sons killed. Herod eventually died from a very painful and putrefying illness (referred to as “Herod’s Evil”) in 4B.C. aged 59—leaving a sobering epitaph: “a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis”!

The Wise Men were different very different from Herod and Matthew’s description of them coming to Jesus is a beautiful explanation of worship: *when 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}

1. **filled with joy** (no fear or unbelief because there is joy in God’s presence for the reconciled).

2. **come to Jesus** (Jesus is the focus of our worship and we must draw near in child-like trust).

3. **bow down and worship** (expressing Jesus’ worth in humility and submission).

4. **open treasures** (worship requires an open heart—which is where your treasure is^{Matt.6:21}).

5. **present gifts** (worship is giving to God from our treasure, i.e. our heart).

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 have the same response as the Magi: *We have come to worship Him.*^{Mat.2:2}

The God of all creation humbled Himself to become a human being—our Saviour, Christ the Lord. Because Jesus was born, He could die, bringing the abundance of life we enjoy through Him. May each of you rest in the security of the Babe whose birth we celebrate this day. *Greg Koukl*

I'm always in awe of the nativity season because it represents a historically unprecedented event. Throughout the ages, there have been many men who sought to be god. But there's only been one God who sought to be man. *Alan Shlemon*

We've all heard it, 'Jesus is the reason for the season.' But how exactly is Jesus the reason for Christmas? Why did He come? Jesus tells us. He came to give His life as a ransom for sinners. He came to call those sinners to repentance. He came to give eternal life to anyone who would believe in Him. This Christmas season, meditate on these precious theological truths. Allow the purpose of His coming to fill your heart with inexpressible and glorious joy. Joy to the world. The Lord is come. *Tim Barnett*

The birth of Christ is the timeless event that invites us to believe that the cries of a broken world have actually been heard—a Saviour was born, the vault of heaven has truly been opened. You've heard the famous words, '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 newborn King!"' This Christmas I'll be singing these words with a better understanding of their true meaning and finding hope in the only True King. Believing in Christ the Saviour. Will you join me? *Jonathan Noyes*

God's Good Pleasure

Sovereign Lord, Your will is supreme in heaven and earth, and all beings are creatures of Your power. You are the Father of our spirits; Your inspiration gives us understanding, Your providence governs our lives. But, Lord, we were sinners in Your sight; You judged us so, and if we deny it we make You a liar. Yet in Christ You are reconciled to us, Your subjects; give us the ear of faith to hear Him, the eye of faith to see Him, the hand of faith to receive Him, the appetite of faith to feed upon Him; that we might find in Him light, riches, honour, eternal life. You are the inviting One, may we hearken to You. You are the Almighty Instructor, teach us to live to You. Possess our minds with the grandeur of Your perfections. Your love to us in Jesus is firm and changeless, nothing can separate us from it, and in the enjoyment of it nothing can make us miserable. Preserve us from hypocrisy and formality in religion; Enable us to remember what You are and what we are, to recall Your holiness and our unworthiness; Help us to approach You clothed with humility. Let us never forget Your patience, wisdom, power, faithfulness, care, and never cease to respond to Your invitations. (*From Puritan Prayers*)

Sunday 27th December Ps.105:1-9. Lk2:21-40 ([ON ZOOM](#))

Revealed by the Holy Spirit.^{Lk.2:26}

In the Book of Revelation, it was God the Father who gave Jesus the revelation and Jesus gave the revelation to an angel to give to John—and no mention of the Holy Spirit! *The revelation of 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.*^{Rev.1:1-2} But the normal way God reveals His purposes to us is by the Holy Spirit: *However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us*

by his Spirit.^{1Cor.2:9-10} And the Holy Spirit uses Scripture—usually directly through the words of Scripture, but always in agreement with the doctrine and purpose of Scripture. This is because ALL Scripture is God inspired^{2Tim.3:16} (you could call the Scriptures “Holy Spirit impregnated”): *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*^{2Pet.1:20-21} Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.^{Rom.16:25-27} God's purpose for mankind is that they come to repentance—and thus reconciliation to God: *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*^{2Pet.3:9} God our Saviour wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.^{1Tim.2:3-6} God expects us to honour His Son Jesus, as God: *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. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.*^{Jn.5:19-23} When the Jews rejected God's Son Jesus, God divorced them and took a new “wife” called “the Bride of Christ” which is made up of Believers from every nation: *A man planted a vineyard, rented it to some farmers and went away for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants so they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. He sent another servant... Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 'What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.' ...The teachers of the law and the chief priests looked for a way to arrest him immediately, because they knew he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people.*^{Lk.20:9-19} I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery.^{Jer.3:8} With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again. The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again. No workman of any trade will ever be found in you again. The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again. The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again... Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants. ...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.18:21-19:7} The Bride of Christ is also the Body of Christ and consists of all those who have received Jesus and have been given the right to be called the children of God.^{Jn.1:12} Jesus is our Mediator—the One who stands before us and God—and it is through Jesus that God speaks to us: *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 so when God communicates to us through the Holy Spirit, it is to make Jesus known: *I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all 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 bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is*

mine and make it known to you.^{Jn.16:12-15} Thus true Prophecy is revealing Jesus: *Then the angel said to me, "Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God." At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." [For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus; For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus]^{Ren.19:9-10}*

Simeon's revelation by the Holy Spirit was about Jesus: *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*^{Lk.2:26} Although God may occasionally reveal certain personal things to us, the only important revelation from God is about our relationship with Jesus and how to keep our trust in Him strong, sweet and spiritual.

Simeon's revelation by the Holy Spirit prompted him to do something—to move: *Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.*^{Lk.2:27} Waiting on God means action—but this does not mean erratic or frenzied action. God expects us to work hard: *We work hard with our own hands.*^{1Cor.4:12} *I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.*^{Ren.2:2} But wearisome work and sweat is the result of Adam's sin^{Gen.3:19} and Jesus has redeemed us from that curse.^{Gal.3:13} A fool's work wearies him,^{Ecc.10:15} but Jesus gives us rest: *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*^{Matt.11:28-30}

When the Holy Spirit gave revelation to Simeon about Jesus, he acted and people were blessed: *Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them.*^{Lk.2:28-33} The Holy Spirit's revelation to us about Jesus will always bring blessing—blessing to us and blessing to others as we edify, exhort and encourage: *But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.*^{1Cor.14:3} So let's be obedient to the Holy Spirit's prompting, act on it and bless others by sharing Jesus, the Light of the World: *Everything came into existence through him. Not one thing that exists was made without him. He was the source of life, and that life was the light for humanity. The light shines in the dark, and the dark has never extinguished it.*^{Jn.1:3-5} May God answer this prayer for all of us: *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.1:17-19}

Earth and Heaven

O Lord, we live here as fish in a vessel of water with only enough to keep us alive—but in heaven we shall swim in the ocean. Here we have a little air in me to keep us breathing—but in heaven we shall have sweet and fresh gales. Here we have a beam of sun to lighten our darkness, a warm ray to keep us from freezing—but in heaven we shall live in light and warmth for ever. Our natural desires are corrupt and misguided and it is Your mercy to destroy them. Our spiritual longings are of Your planting and You will water and increase them. Quicken our hunger and thirst after the realm above. Here we can have the world—but in heaven we shall have You in Christ. Here is a life of longing and prayer— but in heaven there is assurance without suspicion, asking without refusal. Here are gross comforts, more burden than benefit—but in heaven there is joy without sorrow, comfort without suffering, love without inconstancy, rest without weariness. Give me to know that heaven is all love, where the continual viewing of Your beauty keeps the soul in continual transports of delight. Give me to know that heaven is all peace, where error, pride, rebellion and passion raise no head. Give me to know that heaven is all joy, the end of believing, fasting, praying, mourning, humbling, watching, fearing, repining; And lead me to it soon.

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' " <i>The Mystery of the Last Supper</i> ")
A.D.33 April Fri. 3 rd	Crucifixion of Jesus
c A.D.35	Conversion of Paul <i>Acts 9</i>
<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 <i>Acts.15</i>
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 Cæsarea
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.63-64	Hebrews (possibly Barnabas)
<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.65	Paul's 2 nd imprisonment at Rome
A.D.65	2 Timothy from Rome
A.D.65	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 *gematria* (assigning numerical values to letters of the alphabet and thus determining the numerical value of words). Nero Caesar written in Hebrew letters has the numerical value of 666. That explanation becomes all the more probable when you realize that in Hebrew, *Nero* can also be spelled *Neron*. With the second "n" the numerical value is 666. Without it, 616 (a well-attested reading in some New Testament manuscripts)." J. Stewart Russell, *The Parousia*

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

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

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 2020—Trust

January: The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a Stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know Your name will trust in You, for You, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek You. Psalm 9:9-10

February: Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart. Psalm 37:3-4

March: But I trust in Your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for He has been good to me. Psalm 13:5-6

April: Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the Name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm. Psalm 20:7-8

May: But I trust in You, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in Your hands. Psalm 31:14-15

June: Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in Him. Psalm 32:10

July: O Sovereign LORD, You are God! Your words are trustworthy, and You have promised these good things to Your servant. 2Sam.7:28

August: You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD Himself, is the Rock Eternal. Is.26:3-4

September: But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 1Tim.6:6-8

October: Yes, LORD, walking in the way of Your laws, we wait for You; Your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. Is.26:8

November: In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength. Is.30:15a

December: But I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever. Psalm 52:8

Sunday 5th July. Ps.67 **We are back at Mill Hill!** Hymn: I will be there
Sunday 12th July. Ps.87. Lk.12:1-34 Hymn: I have decided to follow Jesus
Sunday 19th July. Ps.89:1-8 Lk.12:35-59 Hymn: What a Friend we have in Jesus
Sunday 26th July. Ps.89:8-18 Lk.13. Hymn: His eye is on the sparrow
Sunday 2nd August. Ps.89:8-18 Lk.13 Hymn: Abide with me
Sunday 9th August Ps.91:1-8 Lk.15 Hymn: Amazing Grace
Sunday 16th August. Ps.91:9-16 Lk.16 Hymn: And can it be
Sunday 23rd August. Ps.46 Lk.17 Hymn: A mighty Fortress is our God
Sunday 30th August. Ps.92:1-8 Lk.18 Hymn: Blessed Assurance Jesus is mine
Sunday 6th September. Ps.92:8-15 Lk.19 Hymn: It is well with my soul
Sunday 13th September. Ps.93 Lk.20:1-26 Hymn: Just as I am without one plea
Sunday 20th September. Ps.95:1-6 Lk.20:27f Hymn: I then shall live as one who's been forgiven
Sunday 27th September. Ps.96:1-7 Lk.21 Hymn: Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.
Sunday 4th October Ps.96:7-13 Lk.22:1-34 Hymn: Stand up, stand up for Jesus.
Sunday 11th October Ps.97:1-6 Lk.22:31-71 Hymn: Turn your eyes upon Jesus
Sunday 18th October Ps.97:6-16. Lk.23:1-25 Hymn: How great Thou art
Sunday 25th October Ps.98. Lk.23:26f Hymn: Crown Him with many crowns
Sunday 1st November Ps.99. Lk.24 Hymn: Tell me the old, old story of Jesus...
Sunday 8th November (on Zoom). Ps.101 Lk.24:25-53 Hymn: Will your anchor hold
Sunday 15th November
Sunday 22nd November

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.



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